Marsh Richard

The Twickenham Peerage

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Marsh R.

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Содержание

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BOOK I. – THE SLEEPING MAN
THE STORY IS BEGUN BY THE HON. DOUGLAS HOWARTH

CHAPTER I
A SIDE SHOW

'You and I can never marry.'

Edith's words had been in my thoughts ever since she had uttered them. All night; all the morning; now that in the afternoon I had come out to take the air. I was strolling from the club to George Douglas's rooms in Ashley Gardens. More for the sake of the exercise than in the desire of seeing him. As I was passing the Abbey I glanced at the Aquarium on my right. My eye was caught by the words on a board which ran right across the front of the building, 'At No Place In The World Can So Many Sights Be Seen.' I hesitated. It was years since I had been in the place. One might as well spend half an hour beneath its roof as with George Douglas. I crossed the road and entered.

The first thing which struck me was the general grimness of everything. A winter garden it was called. Anything less garden-like one could hardly fancy. Coming from the clear sunshine of the autumn afternoon, the effect was curious. There was a larger audience than I had expected. The people were gathered, for the most part, round the central stage, on which a performance was taking place. Three girls in tights were displaying themselves on a trapeze. A moment's glance was enough. It was the sort of thing one has seen a thousand times. I passed on.

There were numerous side shows. There was a Harem; a Giant Lady; a Miraculous Dwarf; a Working Gold Mine; a Palace of Mirrors; the old familiar things. On the extreme left a huge placard was displayed:

THE MARVELLOUS SLEEPING MAN

THIS IS THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF MONTAGU BABBACOMBE'S THIRTY-DAYS' SLEEP, WITHOUT EATING OR DRINKING

COME AND SEE THE MOST WONDERFUL SIGHT IN THE WORLD

I am not consciously attracted by such spectacles, even granting their genuineness-which is to grant a good deal. But, at the moment, I had nothing to do, and the idea of a man being able to forget, at will, for thirty consecutive days, the worries and troubles of life appealed to me with singular force. I went to see the sleeping man.

In the centre of a good-sized apartment stood a table. It was entirely covered by a large glass case. Under the case was a mattress. On the mattress lay a man. He had no pillows or bolster; no

bedclothes with which to cover himself; and the fact that he was clad, so far as one could see, only in a suit of white linen pyjamas lent him, as one first caught sight of him on coming in, an appearance of peculiar uncanniness. One's first impression was that under the glass case was an effigy, not a man.

If it was a trick, it was certainly well done. He lay on his back, his legs stretched out, his arms gathered to his sides. In his attitude there was a starkness, a rigidity, which suggested death. It seemed incredible that a man could lie like that for twenty-eight days and be alive. This was borne in upon me so soon as I saw the peculiar position of his body. Then I saw his face.

It was Twickenham!

The shock was so overwhelming, that in a moment my whole physical organisation seemed at a standstill. I lost my balance. The whole place swam before me. I felt myself swaying to and fro. If I had not leaned against the glass case, I believe I should have fallen. In my whole life I had never before behaved so stupidly. A voice recalled me to myself.

'Take care there, sir! Do you want to break the glass? – or to knock the whole thing over?'

A person who seemed to have charge of the place addressed to me this, under the circumstances, not unnatural inquiry. I steadied myself as best I could. After a second or two I began to see things with something approaching to clearness. By degrees I got the man inside the case, as it were, in focus.

Was it Twickenham? I could not decide. It was fifteen years since I had seen him. As regards certain details my memory had possibly become a trifle blurred. Yet it was absurd to suppose that I could by any possibility fail to recognise him if we met. If it was not he, then it was his double. His very self, reproduced in another form.

Fifteen years make a difference in a man's appearance-especially fifteen such years as it might be taken for granted that Twickenham had lived. Allowing, in my mind's eye, for that difference, I became more and more at a loss to determine whether this was or was not the absentee. Never before had I been conscious of such a condition of mental bewilderment. I lost my presence of mind; was unable to arrange my thoughts; became incapable of deciding what to say or do. The situation was the very last I had expected. Coming at such a moment it found me wholly unprepared.

If this was Twickenham, this uncanny-looking mountebank in the guise of death, then the entire edifice we had been laboriously constructing for fifteen years crumbled at a touch. Edith's words, 'You and I can never marry,' would be indeed proved true. And Reggie and Vi-what of them? Where would Reggie be if his brother turned up at this hour of the day? And I? Reggie was my debtor to the extent of nearly every penny I had ever had. If he was not the Marquis, because Leonard still was in the flesh, then he and Vi, and I, were ruined. And Edith could never marry a pauper.

Down toppled our whole card edifice, never again to be rebuilt by us.

But the question was-was the man under the glass case, lying on the mattress, in the white pyjamas, Leonard Sherrington, third Marquis of Twickenham? The Twickenham peerage carried with it rather over than under a hundred thousand pounds a year. It might, therefore, on the face of it, seem absurd to suppose that its present holder could be found posing as the Marvellous Sleeping Man in a side show at the Westminster Aquarium. But that was only seeming. To those who had the honour of the present peer's acquaintance, such a state of affairs seemed about as likely as any other. Twickenham was born mad, and continued as he was born. His father was, if anything, madder than he was. They consistently, and persistently quarrelled. Some of the capers Leonard cut were a trifle high. The old man resented any one's cutting higher capers than he did. As Leonard spent money like water, his sire let him have as little to spend as he could help. The result was disastrous. Leonard got money in ways which suggested congenital insanity. Then there came the crash. When Leonard was thirty-one, it became known that Morris Acrodato held a bill for five and twenty thousand pounds to which he had forged his father's name. Leonard vanished. The old man declined to pay. Six months after he was dead. His wife had predeceased him. He left two sons-Leonard, and a second son, born seventeen years later, Reginald. Oddly enough, considering the terms on which he had lived with him, a will was found in which he left everything to his firstborn. Under these circumstances one

wondered why he had not handed over that five and twenty thousand without a fuss. But both father and son were men who were, in all things, superior to the ordinary rules of common sense. The thing which every reasonable creature did, was the one thing they never did.

Nothing had been seen of Leonard since the day of his flight. Although it was not generally known, something had, however, been heard. On seven different occasions his lawyers, Foster, Charter, and Baynes, had received intimations that he was alive. He had dropped these hints, it would seem, in a spirit of pure 'cussedness.' They had come at varying intervals, from different parts of the world. They all took the form of holograph notes, in which the writer curtly observed that he was alive and in good health, and trusted that the firm was giving to his interests all the attention they required. They bore no address, and it proved impossible to trace by whom they had been posted; but that they were bona-fide emanations from Twickenham himself seemed undoubted.

The last of these notes had come to hand more than seven years back. Since then he had given no sign. As, previously, no two years had elapsed without advice being received of his existence, the continued silence seemed to suggest that, at last, he might be dead. That he was so, I, for one, devoutly hoped. All that I required was proof of his decease.

When the old man died, all that his second son, Reginald, had he inherited from his mother. It was barely enough to keep him alive. He was fourteen years of age. Soon after he was in the twenties he was as good as penniless. By this time I had become mixed up with his fortunes in rather a curious fashion. I had a sister, Violet, who was a year younger than he was. He had a cousin, Edith Desmond, who was four younger than myself. Violet and he, and Edith and I, belonged, as it were, to two different generations. I had a tiny place on the borders of Hants, which adjoined his aunt's. He lived with her when his father died; she was Lady Desmond, the baronet's widow. Edith and I always had a liking for one another. If my father had left me a little better off, or if Violet had been older, we should have been married years ago. But she was an only child; the most beautiful I ever saw. Her mother hoped, by her help, to restore the faded glories of the Desmonds. That meant that she was to marry money.

I was hardly in a position to marry at all, with Vi on my hands, regarding me as a sort of father. When Reggie came to live at the Moat House Vi and he became acquainted. In course of time I was informed that they were engaged. Almost in the same breath he told me that he was practically without a penny piece. I lent him something to go on with. Later I lent him more. Then again. And again. I did not like the business, but, partly for Edith's sake, partly for Vi's, partly for his own, by degrees I was practically financing him. Until it came to this-that I had invested in him, on the strength of Twickenham's death, nearly everything I had. As time went on he became convinced that his brother was dead. The brothers were practically strangers; Reggie had scarcely seen his senior a dozen times. There were enormous accumulations, amounting to over a million. If Reggie succeeded I should do well. Edith and I could be married to-morrow. If, on the other hand, Reggie did not succeed, and that soon, so far as I could see, he and I were ruined together.

And here, at the crucial moment, if I could trust my eyes, ruin was. It was not surprising that, momentarily, I became a trifle giddy.

Had the man stepped into a room in which I was, I should unhesitatingly have recognised him as Leonard, Marquis of Twickenham. There would have been no necessity for him to announce his name and title. I should have known him then and there. But, as matters stood, the case was altered. There was room for doubt. Or I tried to persuade myself there was. To begin with, a man with practically unlimited resources at his command, would hardly be likely to masquerade in such a fashion. That was what I told myself. At the bottom of my heart I was aware that it would be quite in keeping with what I myself knew of Leonard's character. He had never lost an opportunity of making an exhibition of himself, but always had an insane leaning in the direction of the esoteric and the bizarre.

I was on safer ground when I came to the questions of the likeness. There were points of difference between the two. This man looked a little shorter and thinner; smaller altogether; too old

for Twickenham. Twickenham was only forty-six; his double looked sixty. Then he had a scar on his right cheek, which Twickenham had never had.

Still these things, I had perforce to admit, were quite reconcilable with the fact that the man was Twickenham. What alterations might not have taken place in such a fifteen years!

The exhibition was not liberally patronised. There had been two or three other spectators when I came in, but they had gone, and no others had taken their place. The duration of my visit, and the unmistakable interest which I took in the figure on the mattress, probably, also, the peculiar quality of my interest, attracted the attention of the individual in charge. This was the gentleman who had requested me not to lean against the glass case. He was a short, slight person, with red hair and moustache. He wore a frock coat and a hat which had seen better days, and had a trick of stroking his moustache with one of the dirtiest right hands I had ever seen; which, however, matched the voluminous shirt-cuff which protruded from the sleeve of his coat. I was conscious that for some seconds he had been eyeing me askance. Now he came sidling up-his dirty hand on his moustache.

'Wonderful man, sir.'

He alluded to the figure on the mattress.

'I suppose he really is asleep?'

'What do you think he is-dead?'

'He looks to me as if he were dead.'

'That's not surprising, considering that for eight-and-twenty days he's tasted neither bite nor sup.'

'Is that really the case?'

'Certainly. He hasn't had so much as a drop of water. The case is locked; the key is in possession of the manager of the Aquarium. Doctors are constantly in and out to see there's no collusion. You'll find their reports outside. It's will-power does it. He wills that he shall go to sleep for thirty days, and he goes to sleep for thirty days. To try to wake him up before the end of the thirty days, to give him, say, a glass of water, would probably cause his death.'

'That's very curious.'

'It's more than curious; it's the greatest marvel of the age.'

'And when does he wake?'

'At ten o'clock on Saturday evening next-in the presence of the manager and staff of the Aquarium, and a large representative body of distinguished medical gentlemen. It will be the sensation of the hour. Though we shall charge double prices for admission, the room won't hold the people.'

I wondered. At present there seemed a good deal of space to spare.

'What is his name?'

'Montagu Babbacombe-a name known all over the world.'

The little man eyed me sharply.

'I meant, what is his real name?'

'His real name? What do you mean? That is his real name.'

'How long have you known him?'

'May I ask, sir, what prompts you to put that inquiry to me?'

'I merely thought that Mr. Babbacombe resembles a person with whom I was once acquainted, and I wondered if he might be any relation of his; that is all.'

'Ah, as to that, I know nothing. I am only here to testify to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's bona-fides as a sleeping man, and that I unhesitatingly do.'

I held out a sovereign between my finger and thumb.

'Can you give me Mr. Babbacombe's private address?'

'If my becoming the possessor of that coin is contingent on my doing what you require, then it can't be done. There's an etiquette in my profession which on me is binding.'

'Your sentiments do you credit, Mr. – '

'FitzHoward; Augustus FitzHoward is my name, sir. But I tell you what might be managed. If you're here on Saturday night when Mr. Babbacombe wakes, I might arrange to introduce you to him. But you will have to remember, sir, that Mr. Babbacombe is a public man, and that to him, as to me, time is money.'

'If I do come I shall not fail to bear it well in mind.' The coin changed hands. 'You will not forget me?'

'No, sir, I shall not. What name?'

'What name? You say yours is FitzHoward. Well, mine is Smith; John Smith.'

There was a twinkle in Mr. FitzHoward's eye which suggested that he was more of a humorist than might at first appear.

'Smith? An unusual name like that, sir, is not likely to escape my recollection. You may rely on me.'

Some other people entered, two women and two men. They were followed by still more. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward and I parted. I went out into the main building. One thing seemed tolerably certain: 'Montagu Babbacombe,' unless appearances were even more deceptive than usual, could hardly have been conscious of my recognition, if recognition it really was. On that point I had until Saturday night to think things over. Practically two clear days.

CHAPTER II
LADY DESMOND GIVES A DINNER PARTY

That Thursday evening I dined with Lady Desmond. The old lady had been in town since Monday; staying at some rooms which she favoured in Clarges Street. She had issued her commands to me to attend on her at dinner. Had it not been for the conversation which I had had with Edith the night before, I should have still been wondering what it meant. Edith, however, had made matters perfectly clear.

Reggie and I were both to be in attendance. We were both of us to receive our dismissal. I was to be finally informed that I could not marry Edith, he that he could not marry Vi. The dowager had made other arrangements of her own. I looked forward to their announcement with feelings which were a little mixed.

Vi came to me just as I was starting. I had made no secret of my engagement. She had not commented on it till then. I thought I had seldom seen her look better. She is a willowy slip of a girl, with about her that air of the thoroughbred which, nowadays, is as great a distinction as a woman can have. She was born to be a great lady; the Howarth women always have been: yet, with it all, she is just a girl. Her chief fault is a proneness to impetuous speech. But that is a quality of youth. She let fly at me at once.

'Douglas, why hasn't Lady Desmond invited me?'

'My dear Vi, how can I tell you?'

'I know. And so do you.'

'I assure you that I do not know why Lady Desmond has not invited you.'

'Then I'll tell you. She has not invited me because it is quite likely that she never means to invite me again. She intends to wash her hands of me entirely. I shouldn't be surprised if she cuts me dead. She wants Reggie to marry Mary Magruder.' I said nothing. This was clearly a case in which silence was golden. 'I have told him he may.'

'I should have expected you to do no less.'

'He says he won't.'

'As matters are likely to turn out, that is a pity.'

'Douglas! – What do you mean?'

'Reggie is in a bad way. I'm afraid that before long he'll be in a worse.'

'How about you? Don't you stand or fall together?'

'Just so. That is it. It's because my hours are numbered that I say it's a pity. If he were to marry Mary Magruder then you might marry her masculine equivalent. You know as well as I do that he is to be found.'

I was thinking of George Charteris. An extra shade of colour came into her cheeks, just to show she knew it.

'Douglas, are you trying to be humorous?'

'Not at all. My dear Vi, I'll be plain with you. I've reason to believe that before very long both Reggie and I may come a cropper. My very earnest advice to both of you is that you agree to treat the past as past, and try to retrieve your positions while there still is time.'

She eyed me; reading on my face that I meant what I said.

'You can tell Reggie from me that I think it would be better that he should marry Mary Magruder as soon as he possibly can. We all know that she's willing enough. You may add, if you like, that I will never marry him, if things are going to be as you say they are.'

'And you?'

'I shall never marry any one but him. Please, Douglas, don't worry me to do so. You know that is so. But then I'm not one of those girls to whom marriage is all in all.'

I knew that, if that was not a falsehood, it was at least an evasion of the truth; for I was aware that, to her, happiness meant being Reggie Sherrington's wife. She asked, as I was leaving the room.

'How about Edith?'

I was still, pretending that I had not heard. She had spoken softly, so that the pretence seemed plausible; though I was conscious that it was but seeming, for Vi reads me as if I were an open book. But I had not the courage to reply. Indeed, it was a question to which I had not yet found an answer. In that lay the sting. How about Edith? was what I kept asking myself all the time. Nor had I found a solution to the problem when I reached the door of Milady's lodgings.

Lady Desmond's taste is not in all things mine; particularly is that the case with her taste in lodgings. The rooms in Clarges Street are kept by an ancient man and woman who are, no doubt, worthy folk enough, but who are also stupid, slow, and behind the times. I was shown into what is called the drawing-room-a fusty apartment, the very atmosphere of which was synonymous with depression. My hostess rose to receive me; a little stiff, bony figure, dressed in old clothes, which were ill-fitting and old-fashioned when she first had them. It was an extraordinary thing, but I have never seen that woman in what looked like a new dress yet. I believe that when she buys things she stores them away, never putting them on till they are old-and rumpled. In her left hand she had a stick; she extended two fingers of her right to me by way of greeting.

Edith came towards me from the struggling fire in the dingy fireplace. God knows she is past her first beauty; but she will always be young to me. As I took her hand in mine I told myself, for the thousandth time, what a coward I was not to have made her my wife long ago. This is not a sentimental age, and I am not a sentimental man; but for her I would go through the fires of hell. Yet there we were, I an old bachelor, she a spinster yet. Marriage, nowadays, is surrounded with so many complications.

'Hollo, Douglas! Going strong? Isn't this place enough to give you the horrors?'

This was Reggie, who had preceded me. The final portion of his remark was whispered.

The dinner was in keeping with the rooms; badly chosen, badly cooked, badly served. No one ate anything; no one talked. One couldn't even drink; the wine was frightful. We sat there like mutes at our own funerals. For my part I was glad when the cloth was cleared; though I knew that a bad quarter of an hour was coming. It could scarcely be worse than what had gone before. The old lady fired the first shot.

'Edith, had you not better withdraw?'

'No, mother. I know what you are going to say, and, as I am as much interested in it as any one else, I should prefer to stop.'

My hostess wasted no time in argument or preamble; she came straight to the point.

'Mr. Howarth, I have asked you to come here in order to tell you that any sentimental understanding which may have existed between Edith and yourself is, henceforward, at an end.' I essayed to speak; she stopped me. 'I know what you are going to say. I've heard it over and over again. What I say is this. Edith is getting on. You certainly are no longer young; you are going both bald and grey. Financially, you are worse off than when I first knew you. Isn't that the case?'

'It is.'

'You have absolutely no prospects.'

Reggie struck in.

'O aunt, come! If he's hard up it's only because I owe him such a heap. There's no doubt whatever that Twickenham's dead. We only have to prove it to be both of us in clover.'

'Twickenham is not dead. During the last few nights I've seen him several times.'

'You've seen Twickenham?'

'In dreams. I could not quite make out where he was, but he was in some extraordinary situation, from which you will find that he will presently emerge. It is no use your counting on his death. He's alive. Twickenham is not the kind of man who dies easily.'

'I thought dreams went by contraries.'

'Not such dreams as I have had.' She turned to me with a question which took me aback. 'Don't you know that he's alive?'

'My dear Lady Desmond!'

'You do know that he's alive; and I know you know. I don't want any discussion; you will only fence and quibble. But I appeal to you as a man of honour not to stand in the way of Edith's happiness.'

'That I undertake at once not to do.'

'Mother, hadn't you better tell Douglas that you wish me to marry Colonel Foljambe, and that's your idea of my happiness?'

'Colonel Foljambe is a very worthy gentleman.'

'If he isn't now,' I said,' he never will be.'

'He's not much older than you are.'

That was monstrous. Foljambe had turned seventy. But I let her go on.

'Then there's Reggie and that sister of yours. Violet Howarth's a sensible girl. She can do very well for herself if she likes, and she knows that she never will do anything at all with Reggie. The probabilities are that when Twickenham does return, it will be with a wife and family at his heels.'

'Leaving that eventuality out of the question, I am instructed by Violet to say that Reggie is at perfect liberty to do as he likes. So far as she is concerned she is quite willing to consider the engagement at an end.'

'That's Vi all over. She'd cut off her hand and throw it into the fire if she thought it would do me good. But I don't happen to be taking any; and I'll go straight from here and tell her so. It's all nonsense about Twickenham's being alive; he's as dead as that is.'

He rapped his knuckle against the table. His aunt leant over the board.

'Reggie, he's alive. Miss Sandford is right.'

'Miss Sandford?'

'Miss Sandford sees things which we don't see, and she knows things which we don't know. But now I've seen things, and I know. And what's more, Mr. Howarth knows too.'

'Douglas, what does my aunt mean by saying that you know Twickenham's alive?'

'I have not the least conception.'

'Do you know?'

'I do not.'

'Have you any reason to suppose that he's alive?'

I hesitated. Whether it was or was not a lie which I told, I could not say.

'None whatever.'

'You see, aunt: there's his answer for you.'

'For reasons of his own, Mr. Howarth has chosen to conceal the truth. But he does know; and he knows I know.'

The old lady's persistence roused me.

'May I ask, Lady Desmond, on what grounds you base your assertion?'

'I am unable to tell you; on no grounds, if you like to put it that way. But you do know; and you know I know you know.'

I rose from my chair.

'In that case discussion would be fruitless. Since Lady Desmond's reasons are of such an extremely recondite nature it would be useless for me to attempt to probe for them. Let us understand each other before I go. Edith, is it to be with us as your mother desires?'

'Not with my goodwill. I certainly will never marry Colonel Foljambe.'

'Then you never shall be asked to. I will not give you up, nor shall you give me up; but you shall be my wife before the year is out.'

'Douglas!'

'I don't know how it is to come about, but it shall come about; I do know so much. All these years have been wasted, but they shall be made up for you before long. You shall be as happy a wife as a man can make you.'

'Douglas!'

She had her elbows on the table, and her face upon her hands.

'What nonsense is this?' demanded Lady Desmond. 'Haven't I said that I brought you here to tell you that I would have no more of it?'

'My dear Lady Desmond, I think you will admit that Edith and I have arrived at years of discretion?'

'You'll never do that if you live to be a hundred. You've ruined my life, and you've ruined hers. You've made her prematurely old. Look at her! Who would think, to see her now, that not long ago she was the most beautiful girl in England, and that she had only to lift her finger to have any man in England at her feet? She has no father or brother to protect her, or she'd have been rid of you long ago. But you've promised that you'll stand no longer in her way, and if you've a shred of manhood in you, you'll keep your word.'

I went round to where she sat.

'Edith, what am I to do?'

Getting up, she put her hands upon my shoulders.

'Marry me in what I stand up in; and take me to live with you in country lodgings.'

'You hear, Lady Desmond. Edith is going to be my wife.'

'Then she'll be no daughter of mine.'

'Excuse me,' cried Reggie, 'but it strikes me that I ought to have a word in this. You seem to forget, aunt, that if Douglas is in a hole, it's because of what he's done for me.'

'I forget nothing. If you choose to behave like a sensible person, you will be able to repay Mr. Howarth any moneys he may have advanced you, together with sufficient interest, within three months.'

'In other words, if I choose to behave like a blackguard, perjure myself all round, make myself and every one connected with me unhappy, I may be able to wheedle enough money out of the woman I've lied to to enable me to treat the best friend a man had as if he were a sixty per center. Then, when it does turn out that Twickenham's dead, where shall I be? Saddled with a wife I hate; more in love than ever with the girl I've treated badly; in the bad books of the man who has stuck to me closer than any brother I ever heard of. Thank you; I'm obliged. If Vi won't marry me, it won't be because I'm not willing. Do you know, aunt, I believe that you're a bad lot.'

'How dare you speak to me like that, sir?'

'I use the term in a Parliamentary sense only. Of course I know that as a matter of fact your goodness is established beyond all question. But you don't seem to realise what Vi is to me. If it weren't that I've been living on her brother I'd have made her marry me long ago; for, hang me if I wouldn't marry her on nothing rather than not marry her at all. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to bring it off the same day Douglas brings off his little event; especially if he can manage to make the date an early one.'

Reggie winked at me. I am afraid that his aunt perceived the movement of his eyelid. She rose with an air of extreme dudgeon.

'I will not say what I think of you all. It would only be a waste of good words. You have heard me give expression to my wishes. If you choose to act in opposition to them, you must do so. You have all arrived at what Mr. Howarth was pleased to call, I presume ironically, the age of discretion. Some of you got there a good many years ago. It only remains for me to wash my hands of any responsibility for what you may do, and, if I think it necessary, to decline your further acquaintance. Edith, are you coming with me?'

'Good-night,' I said to Edith as she turned to accompany her mother. 'I shall not see you again.'

'I shall hear from you?'

'You shall hear from me very soon. I will lose no time in making arrangements for our joint occupation of those country lodgings.'

She smiled. I held the door open for her mother and herself to leave the room. As she passed she whispered:

'I mean it.'

Reggie and I went away together. In the street he asked:

'Can I come in and see Violet?'

'Better not. At least not to-night. Just as well that you should sleep on it.'

'What do you mean by that?'

I considered a moment before I answered.

'You see, Reggie, we're all four of us playing the part of Don Quixote; Violet and you, Edith and I. I'm beginning to fear that we've been playing the part for years. It's all very well for us to talk of marrying the women of our hearts; but there are things to be considered. There are the women.'

'Would you have me throw Vi over?'

'The word's ill chosen. It ill becomes me to play the part of mentor after the way in which I've just behaved, but-suppose Twickenham were to turn up?'

'It would be pretty bad.'

'If that were all! I doubt if he'd give you a penny: as for me, he'd laugh me to scorn. You and I'd be beggars. Would it be chivalrous to drag the women into the ditch with us?'

'But Twickenham's dead.'

We've no proof of it. We've been looking for proof for some time. A pretty penny the search has cost us.'

'What makes you talk like this? You've seemed convinced enough about his being dead. You've gone Nap on it.'

'Precisely. And I'm now inclined to wonder if I haven't gone Nap on a pretty bad hand.'

'Surely you don't believe any of that stuff about my aunt's dreams?'

'Your aunt's dreams are neither here nor there. But between ourselves, I tell you candidly that I think it's quite possible that Twickenham's alive.'

'Good God! What have you heard?'

'I have heard nothing. By the purest accident I have chanced on what may turn out to be a clue. If it does, you shall hear more next week. At present I can tell you nothing.'

'Douglas, where is he?'

'You move too fast. I believe that it's still even betting that Twickenham's as dead as a coffin nail. But you will see for yourself why you and I should not pose as being too chivalrous, and especially why you should sleep upon the matter before having another interview with Vi. Good-night.'

I left him staring after me in Piccadilly. I was afraid of his asking inconvenient questions, just as I had been afraid of not saying anything at all. I might have lighted on a mare's nest, but in case I had not, it only seemed fair that he should have some sort of warning, so that the bolt might not descend on him altogether out of the blue.

Violet met me as soon as I entered the hall.

'Well, what has happened?'

I led the way back into the drawing-room, feeling indisposed to discuss delicate matters within quite such obvious sound of the servants' ears.

'I don't know that anything has happened.'

'Is Reggie going to marry Mary Magruder?'

'He says not.'

'Who is he going to marry?'

'He says he's going to marry you.'

'Douglas! In spite of Lady Desmond's prohibition? I suppose she did prohibit it?'

'Oh, yes, she did that right enough. But he did not seem disposed to lay much stress upon Lady Desmond's prohibition; as you probably expected.' I was convinced that she would have been a surprised young woman if he had paid attention to anything his aunt might have had to say on such a matter. 'At the same time, if you will take my advice, you won't attach weight to anything Reggie may have said, either one way or the other. I, for instance, have promised to marry Edith-again in the face of Lady Desmond's prohibition. But I think it possible that, before very long, neither he nor I may be in a position to marry any one.'

'Do you think that want of money will make any difference to Edith or to me?'

'I do not. But I am sure that neither of you would feel disposed to be a clog upon your husband.'

'A clog! I a clog on Reggie? Rather than I'd be that I'd die!'

I looked at her. As I did so there rose before me a vision of a man lying on a bare mattress, clad in a suit of white pyjamas, inside a glass case. It entirely prevented my seeing Violet. I had to close my eyes to shut it out.

CHAPTER III
CROSS QUESTIONS AND CROOKED ANSWERS

The next day I paid a second visit to the Royal Aquarium. I was conscious that it might not be the wisest possible thing to do, but I could not keep away.

There was a larger attendance of the public at Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's side show. I attributed that to the fact that the period during which he had undertaken to continue asleep was drawing to a close. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward recognised me at once. He greeted me with an affable smile, as an old acquaintance.

'Ah, Mr. Smith! Glad to see you. I thought you'd come.'

I wondered what he meant; if he meant anything at all. For the second time the exhibition did not appear to me to be an agreeable one. Again I experienced a sense of shock when my glance first fell on the seemingly dead man, lying stark and rigid, covered only with those hideous white pyjamas, prisoned under the huge glass case. He resembled an exhibit in a medical museum; a gruesome one at that. I found it difficult to believe that he really lived. I could not detect the slightest sign of respiration. The face just looked as if it had been touched by the hand of Death. I have seen dead men in my time. If that was not death, then it was an awful imitation.

I caught myself hoping that he was dead. For it was Twickenham; there was not the slightest doubt of it. And yet the moment after doubts recurred. Twickenham had always been clean shaven; but I remembered that he used to tell me how he had to wrestle with his beard. In particular I had a faint recollection that if he left off shaving for a week he would have a beard three inches long. This man's chin was bristly; it did not add to the charm of his appearance. But presuming that his chin had remained untouched, it did not suggest anything like such a growth of hair as that of which Twickenham had spoken. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward was standing behind me. I put to him a question.

'Has Mr. Babbacombe been shaved since he fell asleep?'

'Shaved! Good gracious no, sir! He has not been touched; except by the medical gentlemen. Didn't I tell you yesterday that if he were prematurely roused it might be the death of him? Shaved-the idea!'

A sudden impulse actuated me to smash the glass case, by accident-to do something which might bring about the premature restoration of which Mr. Augustus FitzHoward spoke; the awaking which might result in death. For it was borne in on me again that it was Twickenham I saw. A wave of memory swept over me. I saw him in the habit in which he used to be; and was convinced that this was what he would have become after an interval of fifteen years. It was impossible, out of the stories, that two men could be so much alike. The madness which was in his blood when he was young was in it now. This was exactly the sort of insane freak in which he would have delighted. According to Mr. Augustus FitzHoward I had only accidentally to smash the case in front of me, and I should there and then be furnished with ample proof of Twickenham's death.

While I hesitated, the adroit Mr. FitzHoward improved the occasion by addressing to the assembled spectators, who now numbered perhaps twenty or thirty, some eloquent remarks.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, – It is a wonderful sight you see before you; life in the likeness of death. Death in life! Mr. Montagu Babbacombe looks dead; if you were able to touch him you would say that he feels dead. He is stiff as a corpse; there is no pulse, no action of the heart; his temperature is that of a man who has long since died. I am prepared to wager that if he were lying in your bed, or mine, instead of being on exhibition here in this glass case, the most eminent physicians called in for purposes of examination would unhesitatingly testify that he was dead. Even the surgeon's blade would disclose nothing suggesting life. And, for the last four weeks, to all intents and purposes he has been dead. To-morrow he will come back to us as a man out of the tomb. He will find that the world has moved; that great events have happened of which he knows nothing. It will be a kind of

resurrection. To-morrow will be to him to-morrow; but since his yesterday a month will have elapsed; a month of complete oblivion. If he keeps a diary, during that month each page of it will of necessity be blank.

'Ladies and gentlemen, – To-morrow, Saturday, evening, at ten o'clock to the minute, in the presence of the manager and staff of this building, and a large representative body of eminent medical gentlemen, Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will return from out of the tomb. It will be an awe-inspiring spectacle; truly the miracle of the age. You will see, before your eyes, the dead gradually put on life, and return to the form and habits of our common humanity. The price of admission will, on this occasion, be half-a-crown. Tickets, of which only a few remain, the number being necessarily limited, may be obtained at the door on going out. If you are wise, you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to purchase while there are still any to be had. May I offer you a ticket, sir?'

Mr. Augustus FitzHoward produced a bundle of tickets from his pocket there and then. I bought one, as did others-though not in such numbers as the eloquence of his remarks perhaps merited. I may safely say that had I been actuated by nothing but a desire to be the witness of what Mr. FitzHoward called an 'awe-inspiring spectacle,' I should have been no patron. It occurred to me, as it probably did to others, that the proceedings might take a form which might quite possibly prove the reverse of agreeable. As it was, I endeavoured to evade the necessity of being present.

Waiting till the almost too eloquent orator had disposed of all the tickets which his auditors could be induced to buy, I accosted him.

'Look here, Mr. FitzHoward, can't you arrange an interview for me with Mr. Babbacombe?'

'I told you that if you're here to-morrow night I'll try to manage an introduction. So I will. I can't do more than that.'

'But I don't want to be here to-morrow night; at least, not in here. Can't I see him somewhere else?'

'Does he know you?'

'That is more than I can tell you.'

'Perhaps he won't want to see you if he knows who you are.'

There was a twinkle in the speaker's eye. I realised the truth of his words. It was extremely probable, if it was Twickenham, and he had an inkling of who I was, that he would decline the pleasure of an interview. 'You see Mr. Babbacombe won't be altogether himself; after such an experience as he has had it's not to be expected. For reasons of health, if for no other, he won't be disposed to run the risk of more physical strain than he can possibly help.'

I understood the innuendo-or thought I did. If I wished to see and speak to him, I should have to be present when he returned, in his agile associate's phrase, 'from out of the tomb.' Otherwise, before I knew it, he might vanish for another period of fifteen years.

I found, at home, that something like a heated discussion was taking place. Edith and Reggie were both with Violet. What Lady Desmond would have thought of the proceedings is more than I can say. They all began at me at once.

'Douglas, what did you mean by saying last night-'

Reggie had got so far when Violet cut him short.

'Reggie, let me speak. I'll get an answer out of him. Douglas, is the Marquis of Twickenham really alive?'

As I might have expected, Reggie had scarcely been five minutes in Violet's society before he blurted out all that I had said to him. She certainly is an insinuating young woman, and shrewd to boot. It would not take her long to perceive that there was something at the back of the young gentleman's mind. Having surmised so much, almost before he knew it, she would have ascertained what it was. Apparently Edith had come in at the very moment when explanations were taking place. So that now I had all three of them against me.

'Will you please tell me at once, Douglas, if the Marquis of Twickenham is alive?'

This she said with something very like the stamp of her foot. She can be imperious when she chooses; as, one of these days, her husband will learn.

'I tell you what I will do; if you don't mind, I'll take a cup of tea.'

'Douglas, how can you be so frivolous, when, for all we know, we may be standing on the brink of a volcano?'

'If I were standing in the very heart of a volcano-if I could get it, I should like a cup of tea.'

'I'll give you one.'

This was Edith. I took the cup she offered. Before I had a chance to sip it, Violet began at me again.

'Now, Douglas, perhaps you'll tell us.'

'Tell you what?'

'If the Marquis of Twickenham is alive.'

I turned to Reggie.

'I suppose I'm indebted to you for this. Next time I have a confidential remark to make, which I wish to have shouted in the market-place, I shall know whom to address.'

'You never told me not to tell. And I haven't shouted it in the market-place; whatever you mean by that. I only told Vi.'

'Only!'

Violet answered for him.

'It's no use your attacking Reggie; I made him tell. Situated as we are, there ought to be no secrets between us; between any of us. Do you mean to say that you consider that the knowledge that the Marquis of Twickenham is alive is knowledge which you are entitled to keep to yourself?'

'My dear Vi, there is no doubt that animation suits you; but I shouldn't on that account be always in a condition of explosiveness.'

Her cheeks flamed. Nothing annoys her so much as being told that she's excitable. Edith laid her hand upon my arm.

'Douglas, tell me; is it true?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you mean that you don't know, or that you won't say? Have you any reason to believe that he's alive; any tangible reason?'

'As I told Reggie, and as I presume he has told you, I shall be in a better position to answer that question next week.'

'But why not now? What is it you do know? Why keep us in suspense? Is it fair? Think of what it means to all of us; of what it means to me. It has come to this-that to me it is almost a question of life or death.'

I understood the allusion; it cut me to the heart.

'I tell you that I know nothing.'

'Then why did you say that last night to Reggie?'

'Because I supposed him to be possessed of a few grains of common sense.'

'But you must have had some grounds to go upon. You surely wouldn't have said a thing like that without a cause-you, of all men. Miss Sandford has never doubted that he's alive; now mother seems equally convinced; now there's you, throwing out mysterious hints. Be fair to us; make us sharers even of your suspicions.'

'Very good; I'll tell you all there is to tell, though it will only unsettle you as it unsettled me.'

'We can't be more unsettled than we are already. Anything to get out of the darkness into the light.'

'You'll still be in the darkness when you've heard all I have to say; I promise you that. I know I'm fogged enough.'

I cast about in my mind how best to tell a part of the truth without revealing all. It was very far from my desire to send them all scampering off to the Aquarium, as they undoubtedly would do if they learned everything. Edith guessed what I was after.

'Are you thinking how much you can keep back? Be fair.'

'I will be fair; what's more, I'll be open too.' Always begin like that when you intend to be as much the other kind of thing as possible. 'I'll put you in possession of all the information I have in a single sentence. The other day I saw a man who was Twickenham's living image.'

They had gathered round me. I had a dim consciousness that their faces changed colour. With their eyes they seemed to be trying to search me through and through. My statement was followed by a perceptible pause. Then Edith began to question me.

'The other day? When?'

'Yesterday.'

'Yesterday? Then you knew last evening. Mother was right.'

'I did not know. I don't know now. It seems incredible that two men could be so much alike, but, on the other hand, it seems equally incredible that, under the circumstances, it could have been he.'

'Under the circumstances? What were the circumstances?'

'That I decline to say. I must ask you to take my word for it that the circumstances under which I saw this man make it practically impossible that it could have been he.'

'Did he see you?'

'He did not.'

'Did you try to speak to him?'

'I had no chance.'

'Did you find out where he lives, or anything at all about him?'

'I did this: I found a man who knows him, and who, I have reason to believe, will bring me face to face with him at a very early date.'

'When?'

'I hope that the question of identity will be settled by Tuesday morning.'

'Hope? Is that quite the appropriate word? Because I perceive that it is Twickenham. You see, Douglas, I know you so well.'

'It is because I expected you to take that point of view that I was reluctant to speak: because I'm more than doubtful if the man I saw was Twickenham.'

'I'm not. If it had been any one but you it would have been a different case. But, you know, Douglas, your royal gift of remembering faces. You never confuse one person with another, even if it is a person you only saw for five minutes twenty years ago. If you have seen a man who was so like Twickenham that you would not like to say it was not Twickenham, it was. Reggie won't be Marquis yet.'

She leant against the mantel, looking pale. There was something in her attitude which seemed to me condemnatory. I felt ashamed. Reggie threw himself into an arm-chair.

'If it was Twickenham I shall be in a pretty tight fix.'

'We all shall. I shall have to instal Edith in those country lodgings. You will have to marry Mary Magruder. Violet will be Mrs. George Charteris.'

'I shall be nothing of the kind. I wish you wouldn't settle my future in quite such an off-handed fashion. It's not in the best of taste.'

'I certainly shall not marry Mary Magruder.'

'You might do worse.'

Vi turned on me.

'You mean that he might marry me. Douglas, you are at times so sweet. You needn't be afraid; I'll be no clog on him.'

'I'll make you marry me. You promised that you would; I imagine you are not prepared to deny it. I'll make you keep your word.'

'You'll make me! Indeed! My dear Reggie, it's news to me to learn that I'm the kind of person who can be made to do anything.'

'Good children, pray don't argue. In anticipating the very worst, we may be destined to suffer disappointment. In the first place, I am extremely doubtful if it was Twickenham; though Edith isn't. But then she didn't see him, and I did; so, of course, she knows. Even granting it was Twickenham, during fifteen years he may have altered. He may have become the most generous and delightful soul alive. In any case, he will have plenty. He can hardly refuse assistance to his only brother.'

'He won't dare to give me nothing. Especially when he knows the hole I'm in.'

'Dare!' Edith smiled. 'Twickenham dare do anything. Particularly in the way of making himself disagreeable.'

'O Lord! Don't talk like that. As Douglas says, during fifteen years he may have altered.'

'Can the Ethiopian change his skin?'

That was what I had myself been wondering.

CHAPTER IV
MR. MONTAGU BABBACOMBE AWAKES

Something of the crowd which Mr. Augustus FitzHoward foretold did assemble. It was half-past nine when I entered that part of the building in which Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was on exhibition, and already it was quite sufficiently filled. Mr. FitzHoward stood at the receipt of custom, wearing an air of triumph, and what seemed the same dirty pair of cuffs. He beamed at me as I tendered my ticket.

'All right?' I asked.

'All perfectly right, sir. In half an hour from now Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will come back from the land of the dead to the land of the living, after a thirty days' sojourn among the shadows. It may be that he will be the bearer of important news from Shadowland. Walk in, ladies and gentlemen, while there still is time.'

The major part of his remarks was addressed to folks in general. I wanted him to say something on a subject which was of interest only to myself.

'I suppose it can be arranged for me to speak to Mr. Babbacombe after the close of his entertainment.'

'Entertainment, sir! I would have you know that this is not an entertainment; a mere commonplace show. It's a modern miracle; the miracle of the age-as those who witness it will with one voice proclaim. Admission, half-a-crown!' This was said at the top of his voice. A postscript was uttered in milder tones. 'I can't make any promise. I expect it'll be pretty lively after ten, and perhaps Mr. Babbacombe mayn't feel up to much. But if you'll keep yourself handy, if I can manage an introduction I will. The rest you must manage yourself.'

'Very good. You understand that I must see him alone.'

'Alone? I didn't understand that.'

'I must see him alone. If you arrange for me to do that it will be a five-pound note in your pocket.

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

'Then you hang about as the people are going, and I'll pass you accidental-like into his dressing-room. As you go in you give me the fiver.'

'I will.'

'No kid?'

'None whatever. You do as you say and I will give you a five-pound note as certainly as I gave you a sovereign on Thursday.'

'You place yourself where I can keep an eye on you, and I'll earn that fiver.' He raised his voice to trumpet tones. 'Ladies and gentlemen. The greatest feat of modern times is now drawing to a close. The critical moment is at hand. In less than half an hour the boasted miracles of the Indian fakirs will be more than paralleled. Out of the silence Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will come; back from the misty plains. After being dead for thirty days he will resume existence. Already the dews of life are forming on his brow. The few remaining tickets admitting to this wonderful spectacle only two-and-sixpence each.'

I did not know what Mr. FitzHoward meant by 'the dews of life,' but so far as I could see, no change whatever had taken place in the appearance of the sleeping man. He retained the same rigidity of attitude, and bore, to the full, the same uncomfortable resemblance to a corpse.

We were a curious crowd. I fancy that, before the proceedings closed, there were several there who rather wished that they had stayed away. I noticed about the people an odd air of repression; a tendency to speak in whispers; or not to speak at all. A good many seemed doubtful whether they were not standing in the actual presence of Death. I confess to some feeling of the kind myself. The man

in the white pyjamas, lying on the mattress under the glass case, exercised a not altogether agreeable fascination over all of us. We had to look at him, whether we would or would not. Two young men by me were betting in undertones as to whether he was or was not dead. It seemed to me a fantastically droll idea that the subject of their wager was quite possibly Leonard, Marquis of Twickenham.

I remembered how Leonard had once told me of some fellow or other he had seen somewhere in Cashmere. I expect Mr. FitzHoward's allusion to Indian fakirs had recalled the conversation to my mind. This fellow had pretended to go to sleep, and had then been put in a hole in the ground, and covered with earth-regularly buried, in fact. Some time afterwards-I forget how long-he had been dug up again, and his friends had tried to waken him up. They tried all sorts of things; beat him with sticks, even cut him with knives. In vain. He would not be roused. So they concluded he was dead. They placed the body in the hut, or house, or whatever it was, in which Leonard was staying; in the very apartment, in fact, in which he slept. In the middle of the night Leonard woke up and saw the dead man coming to life. He stole towards Leonard's bed with a knife in his hand. Leonard lay perfectly still. In another second or two he would have himself been dead; and this time really. But, just as the fellow was leaning over, in the very act of striking, Leonard shot him with a revolver. The man fell on to him a corpse. About his being a corpse there was, on this occasion, no shadow of doubt whatever.

Twickenham's inference was that the whole thing, sleeping, burying, and digging up again, had been a trick. I wondered if the show at which we were assisting was a trick. One never knows. Though it was difficult to see where the deceit came in. There was the man; there he was two days ago. That he appeared then as he appeared now I, for one, was prepared to testify. The only question was-was he released each night, after the departure of the public, to enjoy a supper, say, of pork and beans, and a hand of cards with Mr. FitzHoward? It seemed hardly likely that the management would be a party to so egregious a swindle on the British public. It would mean ruin if discovered. Since large interests were at stake, the game would surely not be worth the candle. And without active managerial participation the thing could not be done.

Suppose, on the other hand, the man was dead, as he seemed-that he had died to make an Aquarium side show? It occurred to me that, both legally and morally, we spectators would be in rather an uncomfortable position.

Possibly it was my recollection of Twickenham's story which served to emphasise, to my thinking, the sleeper's resemblance to its narrator. As I looked I became more and more convinced that it was he I saw. Indeed, all doubt was at an end. I felt that he had only to open his eyes, and speak, for me to realise that the thing had been certain from the first. That being the case, only one of two things could save us all from ruin.

The one was death. If he was what he looked, there, at hand, was the proof for which we had been searching. Reggie was Marquis. The other was-. To be frank, it is difficult to put into words in what the other chance of salvation lay. I deemed it just within the range of possibility that in that interview which I was to have with him, and in those other interviews which I would take care should follow, I might succeed in putting the screw on him to such an extent that-well, that, comparatively speaking, all would be right. At the same time I clearly realised that my chance of doing this was something of a minus quantity; and that, for us, it would be best that he should be what he seemed, even though the whole body of spectators might have to suffer.

At a quarter to ten the place was uncomfortably full. There must have been a good harvest of half-crowns for some one. At ten minutes to, several persons appeared who entered a roped-in space immediately surrounding the glass case. I concluded that they were 'the manager and staff of the building and a large representative body of eminent medical gentlemen.' At five minutes to, Mr. FitzHoward joined them, having probably concluded that it would be difficult, if not dangerous, to attempt to pack any more people into the place, even if more could be induced to enter.

He lost no time, now that he had arrived, but instantly commenced to treat us to examples of his eloquence.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, – In less than another five minutes Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will crown his miraculous feat. It only remains for me, during the short time left at my disposal, to prove to you its bona-fideness; that there has been no deception here. Allow me to introduce you to the manager of the building.'

He singled out for our inspection a smiling, yet dignified, gentleman in evening dress; who was, apparently, a very different sort of individual to himself. By way of acknowledging the introduction this gentleman removed his hat.

'Mr. Manager, you hold in your possession the key of this glass case?'

'I do.'

'It was locked in your presence thirty days ago?'

'It was.'

'Since then the key has remained in your possession?'

'It has.'

'To the best of your knowledge and belief no other key to the case is in existence?'

'That is so.'

'The case has not been opened by your orders, or to your knowledge?'

'It has not.'

'You have examined it every day to see that it has not been tampered with?'

'Several times a day.'

'It has been watched day and night by some person or persons appointed by you, in whose trustworthiness you have faith?'

'It has.'

'Therefore, in your opinion, since Mr. Montagu Babbacombe, thirty days ago, fell asleep, and was locked in this case in your presence, no one has had access to him of any sort or kind?'

'That is my opinion.'

'I have now to ask you to hand me the key of the case.'

It was handed over. Mr. FitzHoward held it up for us to see.

'There are four locks to the case, one at each side. This key opens them all. The locks are of very peculiar construction; as, also, is the key. I will now proceed to unlock the case.'

He did unlock it. Four men came forward, lifted the case-it seemed as much as they could do-and, with considerable difficulty, because of the crowd, bore it from the room.

Mr. Montagu Babbacombe remained uncovered.

It was then ten. The fact was announced by a clock in the building; and Mr. FitzHoward stood with his watch in his hand.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will now awake.'

The doctors, if they were doctors, pressed forward. We all craned our necks.

It seemed inconceivable that after a slumber of thirty days-and one so very much like death-the man could wake to an appointed minute. But he did. Scarcely had Mr. FitzHoward ceased to speak than, with the most natural air in the world, raising his hand, he passed it over his face, as one is sometimes apt to do when awaking. He opened his eyes. He sat up.

To be greeted by a storm of cheers. Which, however, presently died away, as it was realised that there was that in his appearance which was hardly in harmony with such a demonstration. He gazed about him with, on his pallid features, a look of dazed inquiry; as if he wondered where he was. Mr. FitzHoward spoke to him.

'I'm glad to see you, Mr. Babbacombe. I hope you're comfortable, sir. Here is Mr. Manager.'

The manager extended his hand.

'Feeling rested after your sound sleep?'

Mr. Babbacombe apparently did not notice the held-out hand. He answered in a curious monotone, still about him that air of vacancy. The sound of his voice set me all of a twitter.

'Rested? – Oh, yes, I'm rested. – Rested!'

Mr. FitzHoward motioned to the spectators.

'All these ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Babbacombe, are here to see you put the crown and summit on the most marvellous feat of modern times. They're here to see you wake, sir.'

'Wake? – To see me wake?'

A voice cried out from the crowd: -

'Have you been troubled by any bad dreams, sir?'

There was a tendency to titter; which was subdued when it was seen how the inquiry was taken.

'Dreams! – My dear life! – Dreams!'

There was something in the awakened sleeper's tone which was not altogether agreeable. It was too suggestive of things on which one did not care to dwell. He addressed FitzHoward.

'Give me something to eat. I want something to eat.'

He sounded as if he did; and looked it too. Putting his hand up to his head with the gesture of a tired child, he sank back upon the mattress.

'I want to rest,' he said.

We were still. He looked as if he had fallen asleep again, for good. Mr. FitzHoward dismissed the audience.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure in thanking you, on Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's behalf, for your attendance here, and I now wish you goodnight.'

The people began to file out. Men leaned over the mattress, and there was a whispered consultation. They spoke to him. He continued still-too still. A flask was produced and placed to his lips. He seemed to pay no attention to it whatever. The crowd showed a disposition to linger. The mattress was lifted from its place with him still on it, and borne through the departing spectators out of the room. When it had gone the audience dispersed more rapidly. I stayed on. Presently, when the place had grown comparatively empty, Mr. FitzHoward reappeared. He was buttonholed by half a dozen people at once. It seemed that they were making inquiries as to the awakened sleeper's condition. He answered them collectively, for our common benefit, in a loud voice.

'Mr. Montagu Babbacombe feels a little exhausted-as was only to be expected, having had nothing to eat or drink for thirty days, but he wishes me to say to any kind inquirer that he's all right, and that he confidently expects to feel very shortly as fit as ever he did. Now, gentlemen, I'm sorry to have to hurry you, but I must really ask you all to go.'

They went-he driving them in front of him, like a flock of sheep. I still stayed.

'How is he?' I asked.

As he looked at me there was something in his eyes which I did not understand.

'He'll be as right as rain in a minute or two.'

'Can I see him?'

He jingled some money in his trousers pocket.

'I hardly know what to say. It seems kind of going back on him. It's not professional; and I'm professional or nothing. Is it trouble?'

'Do you mean, will an interview with me be the cause to him of trouble? Not at all. If anything, I'm the bearer of good tidings.'

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

He eyed me; with a long-continued and penetrating glance.

'You shall see him inside of five minutes. The money's right?'

'It is.'

I showed him a five-pound note.

'We'll have first to get rid of those doctors. I understand him, and he understands himself, better than all the doctors put together. Doctors only mess a man about, they're thinking more of

themselves than of you; I never knew a doctor yet who was worth the money you had to pay him. You wait; I'll shift them.'

He was gone more than five minutes; possibly finding the 'eminent medical gentlemen,' of whom, in private life, he apparently had so poor an opinion, more difficult to 'shift' than he had expected. When he returned he beckoned with his finger.

'Now then!' I advanced to the door at which he stood. 'Money, please.' The five-pound note changed hands. 'In you go. I've got to go to the manager's office on business. You'll have him to yourself till I come back.'

I found Mr. – Montagu Babbacombe alone, attired in a pair of tweed trousers and a coloured shirt. He was seated by a table, and embraced with his hand a glass containing what looked like whisky and water. In spite of which facts he looked almost as much like a corpse as ever. Without looking up as I entered, he asked: -

'Who's that?'

'Don't you know me?'

'Know you?' He glanced at me, with lack-lustre eyes, in which was not the faintest gleam of recognition. 'Do you owe me money? If you've come to pay me I'll know you.'

The voice was not right; he spoke with a faint American accent, which I had not previously noticed. But, in spite of its corpse-like pallor, the face was Twickenham's.

'Look at me well. Think.'

'I've quit thinking.'

'Twickenham!' He continued to stare. 'You are Twickenham?'

'I am. If there's money in it, you bet I am. Is it a place, or a thing? Sounds like a sort of password.'

'Leonard!'

'Am I him, too? I've been lots of people in my time, Lord knows. What's one more?'

'Why should you think it necessary to play this farce with me?'

'I'm asking. Excuse me, but are you-?' He touched his forehead with his forefinger. 'I am.'

I am generally tolerably clear-headed. Never before had I been conscious of such mental confusion. It was a peculiar sensation. As he made that gesture with his forefinger it was all at once borne in on me that, after all, I had made a common or garden fool of myself, and that this was actually not the man. As I observed him, closely a dozen minute points of difference forced themselves upon my notice. I so clearly realised my own asininity that, for the instant, I was speechless. Then I stammered out-

'You must excuse, sir, what probably appears to you my very singular behaviour, but, the fact is, you have the most amazing resemblance to a person with whom I was once very intimate.'

'Poor devil!'

'He was a poor devil.'

'You lay on it. If he was like me.'

A shadow of doubt returned.

'May I ask you to be serious, sir, and tell me, on your word of honour, if you have ever seen me before?'

'I have. As a child. Many a time we've played together in my mother's backyard. Let me see, your name's- Smith? – Ah. – Mine's Brown. I mean Babbacombe. It's all the same. See small bills.'

I hesitated. On a sudden an idea came to me, as it were, on a flash of lightning. The language seems exaggerated, yet I doubt if any other would adequately portray the fact. It did come to me in a single illuminating second. Not in embryo, but wholly formed. I saw the whole thing in its entirety. There, on the instant, was the complete scheme ready to my hand.

The suddenness of the thing unhinged me. I was not that night in the finest fettle. I scarcely saw how, then and there, to broach to him the subject. Attacked brusquely, it might be ruined. He was, probably, in worse condition even than myself; he might be affected even more disagreeably

than I had been. Procrastination would probably be best, though in procrastination there was risk. Still-I saw no other way.

I moistened my lips. They had all at once gone dry.

'Mr. Babbacombe, where can I see you, to-morrow, on a matter of importance?'

'What's the matter?'

'It is one which will probably result in my being able to place a considerable sum of money at your disposal.'

'You're seeing me now.'

'This is a matter on which I can hardly enter, here, and now. I should prefer, with your permission, to see you again to-morrow.

'To-morrow's Sunday.'

'That makes no difference to me.'

'Oh! you don't honour the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.' He emptied his glass. 'Give me some more.' A bottle of whisky was standing at his elbow. I poured some out. When I was proceeding to dilute it with water, he stopped me. 'None of that. Neat.' He swallowed what I had given him. 'Thank God for alcohol. There's nothing like it, when you've got where I am. – What's that you were saying about wanting to see me to-morrow?'

'Where can I see you-and when?'

'Where? In the grave; if I keep on feeling like I'm feeling now. I've slept too much. – Give me some more.'

He tilted his glass.

'You've had enough.'

'D-n you, man, what the devil do you mean by telling me I've had enough? I never have enough. If I had all that's in the world I wouldn't have enough. It's my stuff, not yours. Give me some more.' I poured him out a little. 'Don't stint, you're not paying.' Again he swallowed at a gulp what I had given him. It seemed, instead of stupefying, to clear his head. 'That's more like it. Now I'm feeling better. After half a bottle I'm pretty well, and after a bottle I'm nearly right. Listen to me. I'll see you tomorrow, Sunday morning, at the York Hotel, in Stamford Street. After twelve o'clock. Say half-past. Make a note of it.'

'I will.'

'And mind you're there.'

'I will be there. Mind you also are there.'

'If I'm alive I'll be there. You ask for Mr. Montagu Babbacombe-that's me. Let me see, your name's-'

'Smith.'

'Smith. Oh, yes, Smith. You look a Smith. I knew a Smith once who was just like you; one of the nicest fellows that ever breathed. Only an awful thief! And such a liar! Perhaps you knew him too. Might have been a brother. Did you ever have a brother who was hung? He was. What's the other name?'

'My name's John Smith, sir, to you.'

'Very well, Mr. John Smith to me, I shall expect to see you to-morrow, Sunday morning, at the York Hotel in Stamford Street, at half-past twelve. And you be there! If you're not there, I hope that you'll be hung; like your brother. You understand?

'Perfectly.'

There was a noise at the back. Turning, I perceived that it was caused by the entrance of Mr. Augustus FitzHoward. I understood that it was time for me to take my leave. I thought it possible that the newcomer might find it difficult to induce Mr. Babbacombe to leave the chair on which he was seated, before finishing the bottle of whisky-which was still half full. I had no wish to witness any discussion of the kind.

CHAPTER V
AT THE YORK HOTEL

I cannot recall spending a more cheerful night than that one. I hasten to add, as a professional humorist might do, that that remark is meant to be satirical. All night-I cannot say 'I lay in agony'-but I wrestled with various problems. Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was with me all the time. Had he been there in the actual flesh his presence could not have been more obvious.

Now that he was physically absent, the original impression recurred with its former force. I told myself, over and over again, that the man was really and truly Twickenham. His denial of the fact I accounted nothing. He always had been fond, with or without apparent cause, of denying his own identity. That game was old. When detected in an invidious position, as he was apt to be, he would swear, using all manner of oaths and with a face of brass, that he was somebody altogether different. He had been known to do it repeatedly. The thing was notorious.

If he was Twickenham, nothing was more probable than that he should assert the contrary. It was part of his crack-brainedness. I ought to have taken that for granted from the first. His voice and manner were the two chief points on which he differed from my recollections of Leonard. They could be simulated. The man had always been an actor. Still, I could scarcely force the man to claim his peerage. Little would be gained by my proclaiming, 'Behold, the Marquis of Twickenham!' if he himself declared that he was nothing of the kind. The onus of proof would rest on me. The cost of it! And what profit would accrue even from success?

However, I was not altogether at the end of my resources. I was too near drowning not to clutch at every straw which offered. I believed I saw something very like a plank. If the man was not available in one way he might be in another. Even if he was Twickenham, I fancied that I had hit upon just the sort of devil's trick which would appeal to his madman's sense of humour. If he would only keep his appointment in the morning. There was the rub. That night I blamed myself a hundred times for allowing him to pass out of my sight. It was long odds against my seeing him again.

Yet if there had been a taker, and I had laid the odds, I should have lost. The man was on the spot to time.

It was before the appointed time when I alighted from a hansom outside the York Hotel. The place seemed more of a tavern than an hotel, but there was an hotel entrance. Into this I walked. Behind the swing doors stood a person apparently in authority.

'Can I see Mr. Montagu Babbacombe?'

I expected him to say that no such person was known in that establishment. Instead of that he answered my question with another.

'What name?'

'John Smith?'

He addressed a waiter.

'Show this gentleman in to Mr. Babbacombe.'

I was shown in to Mr. Babbacombe. The 'Sleeping Man' was taking his ease in what I took to be a private sitting-room. That is, he reclined on a couch. On a small table at his side was a bottle of whisky and a tumbler. On a larger table, where it was well out of his reach, was a bottle of water-full. He was smoking what I knew by its perfume to be a good cigar. He was dressed in a suit of dark grey, which not only seemed to be a good fit, but to be well cut. He wore a high collar, and a white Jarvey tie, in which was thrust a diamond pin. He looked as if he had something to do with horses. He also looked as if he was Twickenham. If he was not-then, as the phrase goes, I was prepared to eat my hat.

He paid not the slightest heed to my entrance, but, without even a movement of his head, continued in the enjoyment of his cigar. I was angered by his air of perfect calmness. The impudence of the thing!

'May I ask what you mean by your extraordinary behaviour-extraordinary even for you? Do you take me for an utter fool?'

'Name of Smith?'

'Name be hanged! Do you suppose that I don't know you? – that I couldn't bring a hundred persons into this room who'd know you on the instant?'

'Bring two.'

'What do you propose to gain?'

'That's it.'

'Why do you conceal your identity?'

'I'm wondering.'

'If I bring the landlord into this room and tell him who you are, will you venture to deny it?'

'Depends on who I am.'

'I believe you're a criminal lunatic.'

'The same to you. And many of 'em.'

He sipped at his glass. He filled me with such rage-which was, after all, unreasonable rage-that I was unwilling to trust myself to speak. My impulse was to seize him by the scuff of his neck and drag him home with me, and show him to them all; when the question of his identity would be settled on the spot. However, I remembered in time that that was not the purpose which had brought me there. My intention was a very different one; and I proposed to carry it out. That is, if his humour fitted mine.

'Have you ever heard of the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'The Marquis of Twickenham?' Leaning back, he stroked his chin with a gesture which so vividly recalled a favourite trick of Leonard's that I could have struck him for thinking that I could be fooled so easily. 'Might.'

'Are you aware that in appearance you resemble him?'

'Good-looking chap.'

'He was a poor devil last night.'

'Extremes meet.'

'I am actuated in what I am going to say by your own eccentric behaviour. I need not tell you that I should not say anything of the kind were you to act like a reasonable being. But since, beyond the shadow of a doubt, you are partly mad, I am going to take it for granted that you are wholly mad. I make this preliminary observation because I want us to understand each other.'

'You take some understanding.'

'So do you. Are we private here?'

'You might look under the couch. I don't know that there's a cupboard.'

'I won't ask if I can trust you, because I know I can't.'

'Let's begin as we mean to go on.'

'Therefore, I will tell you at once that you can make what use you like of what I am about to say to you. Things have reached a point which finds me indifferent. Besides, talking's a game at which two can play.'

'That's so.'

'I said to you last night that I wished to see you this morning on a matter of importance.'

'Doesn't it strike you, Mr. – Smith, that you take some time in getting there?'

'I take my own time.'

'You do. And mine. Perhaps you're engaging a room in this hotel.'

'You've done some curious things, Mr. – Babbacombe.'

'That's my name. The same as yours is Smith.'

'Perhaps you're willing to do another.'

'For money.'

'Are you willing to die?'

'My hair?'

'I'll put the question in another way.'

'I would. It might sound better.'

'From what I have seen of you during the last few days I believe that you are capable of feigning death.'

'I'm capable of feigning a good many things?'

'I believe it. Among them you are capable of feigning this particular thing.'

'Explain.'

'You can so simulate death that no one can tell you from a dead man.'

'I can.'

'Not even a doctor?'

'Nary one.'

'I presume, therefore, that you can simulate the act of dying.'

'It's no presumption.'

'You can, that is, in the presence of other persons, and even of a medical man, pretend to die with such fidelity to nature that a doctor in attendance would not hesitate to grant a certificate of death.'

'You bet.'

'Will you do it?'

'Kid to die?'

'Exactly.'

'What for?'

'A thousand pounds.'

'A thousand pounds!'

He repeated my words in such a tone that again doubts passed through my mind. If he was Twickenham it was impossible that such an amount could have the attraction for him which his tone suggested. It was a drop in the ocean compared to the sums which were waiting ready to his hand. Somehow, although not a muscle of his countenance moved, I felt convinced that the figures did appeal to him; and that strongly. If such was the case, then the thing was beyond my comprehension.

'A thousand pounds is not a trifle.'

My trite observation went unanswered. He continued to puff at his cigar, as if reflecting. I, on my part, stood and watched. Presently he spoke, examining, as he did so, the ash of his cigar with every appearance of interest.

'I'm to ask no question?'

'Of what kind?'

'As, for instance, what's the lay?'

'I don't altogether follow.'

'I dare say you get near enough. Who'll I be when I'm dying-and dead?'

'Don't you know?'

'I'm asking.'

I hesitated.

'The Marquis of Twickenham.'

I kept my eyes upon his face; as, indeed, I had done since I came into the room. He did not change countenance in the least.

'It's a bold game you're playing.'

'Your part of it'll require courage.'

'But the risk'll be yours. Suppose, in the middle of the show I quit dying, and make a little remark to the effect that my name's Babbacombe; that I'm no Marquis, and that I was put up to this by a man named Smith. You'd look funny.'

'We should both of us be in rather an amusing situation.'

'You've-face.'

'You also.'

'Will I be supposed to make any remark when I'm dying-any last farewells, or any of that kind of thing?'

'You might express contrition for a wasted life.'

'Yours? – or mine? A bit of yours has been wasted; especially lately-eh? A lot of time seems to waste when you're waiting for dead men's shoes.'

'It's for you to see that I don't have to wait much longer.'

He was silent again. Again he regarded his cigar. A curious smile parted his thin, colourless lips. 'I'm to be the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'You are.'

'Because I'm so like him?'

'Exactly.'

'As the Marquis of Twickenham I'm to die?'

'That's the idea.'

'And be buried?'

'Doesn't that follow?'

'I'm to be buried?'

'Can you see any way out of it?'

'Several.'

'For instance?'

'Sitting up while they're settling me in the coffin, and remarking that I think I'd like a larger size. That would be one way.'

'Which would render the whole thing null and void.'

'Then are you suggesting that I should be buried-regular, downright buried? – nailed up, put in a hole, and all?'

'You would not be put in a hole, but in the family vault.'

'And how long would I stay there?'

I smiled. He perceived my amusement.

'Mr. Smith, you're the kind of man I admire.'

'I hope to continue to merit your admiration.'

'That dying's off.'

'Why? What I said about the family vault was but a jest.'

'A sepulchral one.'

'It might be necessary, perhaps, to put you in a coffin, but, before the arrival of the undertaker's men, I would come; you would get out, and between us we'd fasten down the lid upon the empty box.'

'A kind of sort of game of cut it fine. And what do you suppose I'd be thinking of, while I was waiting inside that handsome piece of funeral furniture for you to come?'

'Of the thousand pounds which would so soon be yours.'

He seemed to reflect once more; the smile returning to the attenuated, cruel, shifty lips which had always been one of Twickenham's most unpleasant features.

'That dying will come off. As you observed, a thousand pounds is not a trifle. I've given a show for less. I suppose the money's safe?'

'It is. When will you-die?'

'That's it. I'm engaged almost right along. It'll have to be soon. What do you say to to-morrow?'

'To-morrow?'

The imminence of the thing startled me. I had not expected to be taken up so readily. Nor had I been prepared for the appointment of so early a date. And yet, why not? It was just one of those things of which one might truly say that "twere well done if 'twere done quickly.'

He put my thoughts into words.

'What's wrong with to-morrow? Haven't you about done wasting time enough? Why not then as soon as next week?'

'Let me understand. Would you propose to die to-morrow?'

'I'd propose to begin. This show's got to be worked artistic. I can't drop down dead as if I'd had a fit. Maybe some keen-nosed relative might start sniffing. Might want a coroner's inquest or something of that. Holy Paul! Where'd I be if they started a post mortem? I'd have to quit being dead so that I could start explaining. This job'll have to be done in a workmanlike manner; my professional reputation is at stake. To-morrow I begin by sending you a message.'

'A message? – of what nature?'

'Why, I go to an hotel, just well enough not to be refused admission, and ill enough to take to my bed directly I'm inside. If they turn shirty, and remark that that hotel is not a hospital, I'll tell them that I'm the Marquis of Twickenham. I shan't choose too swell a place, so that they may be proud of having the Marquis of Twickenham on the premises, if it's only to die there. There'll be a pretty bill for the estate to pay: because a funeral at an hotel comes dear. Then I send you a message: a note, say-"Dear Smith" – '

'Don't call me Smith.'

'No? Then what'll I call you? Brown?'

'I suppose this introducing myself is part of the farce. If you do write such a note, call me Douglas.'

'That's all?'

'My name is Douglas Howarth. You are sure you have never heard that name before?'

'Might have. I'll say, "Dear Douglas Howarth, I have returned to die. Come and smooth my pillow at the end. So that I may die grasping friendship's hand. Your long lost Twickenham."'

'A note of that kind would hardly be in keeping with the supposed writer's well-known character.'

'No? Then what price this? "Dear Doug, I'm dying. If you have a moment to spare you might look in. Twick."'

'That's better. Oddly enough he used to call me "Doug," and sign himself "Twick."'

'That's so? Why shouldn't he have done? You hurry to my suffering side, bringing with you five hundred pounds in notes, which you slip into my clammy palm.'

'I should prefer to give you the thousand pounds afterwards.'

'I shouldn't. Half first, then the rest. If you don't bring five hundred when you come-I'll recover.'

This was spoken with an accent which suggested varied possibilities.

Before I left the York Hotel the whole business was cut and dried. From one point of view my success was altogether beyond my anticipations. Yet I was not feeling quite at my ease. There was a diabolical fertility of invention about the man which recalled Twickenham each moment more and more. The whole spirit with which the idea was taken up reminded me of him. He planned everything; filled in all the details, arranged, so far as I could see, for every eventuality. I was conscious, all the while, that the scheme was entirely after the man's heart. Its daring; the brazen impudence which would be required to successfully carry it out; entire absence of anything approaching nervousness; complete callousness; – these were the requisites which Mr. Montagu Babbacombe possessed in a degree which would have seemed unique had they not reminded me forcibly of somebody else. The whimsical character of the feat he was about to attempt just fitted in with his humour, as I had foreseen.

'You know, Mr. Smith-I beg your pardon-Mr. Howarth-I shall play this game for all I'm worth: right to the limit. All I'm wondering is if it shall be a lingering death-bed, punctuated with bursts of agony, or a foreshadowing of the perfect peace that'll soon be coming. How long will I take in dying?'

'I should suggest not too long.'

'You would suggest that. Am I to do much talking?'

'As little as you possibly can.'

'Then it's not to be a story-book death-bed, with me shedding forgiveness on all those I've parted from?'

'I think not.'

'That's hard on me. I suppose I may draw a few tears from those who, in silence, stand sorrowing round?'

'Not too many.'

'Perhaps you're right. I'm a whale on tears. If I once started on the handle I might pump the well right dry. There's one remark I'd like to make, Mr. Howarth, before we part.'

'That is?'

'It's this. That I'm calculating on agitating your bosom, sir. When you see me lying there, stricken down in the prime of my life and manly beauty, you'll think of the days, so near and yet so far, when we used to play together in my mother's old backyard. Naturally your feelings will be moved, and you'll do a howl; no silent weep, but a regular screech; to the extent of damping at least two pocket-handkerchiefs. If you don't, I'll be hurt: and when I'm hurt I've an unfortunate habit of saying so. How'll you like it if, just as I'm running down for ever, and yours is the only dry eye in the room, I look up with the observation, "Mr. Howarth, how about that grief of yours?"'

It was remarks of this kind which filled me with a vague sense of disquiet as to the kind of proceedings which Mr. Babbacombe might be meditating. However I comforted myself with the reflection-if comfort it could be called-that whatever happened, or in what spirit soever he might choose to comport himself, things could hardly be worse than they were.

CHAPTER VI
A MESSAGE FROM THE MARQUIS

The 'message' came on the Monday as I was at lunch. Violet and I were alone together. I had spent the morning in doing two things-getting the five hundred pounds which would keep Mr. Montagu Babbacombe from a premature recovery, and putting my papers in order. I hardly know which I found the more difficult.

I had to lie to get the money. I had reached such a stage in my resources that to have told the truth would have been a fatal bar. I could hardly say that I shortly expected to receive news of the Marquis of Twickenham's death. That would have been to occasion inquiries of, under the circumstances, a highly inconvenient nature. Besides, after all, Mr. Babbacombe might play me false. That was always more than possible. So I manufactured another tale instead. By dint of it, I succeeded, with great difficulty, and on the most outrageous terms, in extracting another five hundred out of Abrams. I wanted him to make it six; for this was likely to be an occasion on which a little spare cash might come in useful: but the brute declined.

There was not much time, when I returned from Abrams, to look into my papers. Yet it was essential that, at the earliest possible moment, I should have some notion of how I stood. To be frank, for some time past I had shirked inquiry; having only too good reason to feel convinced that if a statement of my financial position was made out it would be clearly shown that I had been insolvent for longer than I cared to think. In such a case it had seemed to me that at any rate partial ignorance was bliss. That this was cowardice, and, possibly, something worse, I was aware. In desperate positions one does curious things. I was just able to arrive at a glimmering of the fact that unless, in Mr. Micawber's phrase, something 'turned up' soon, worse than pecuniary ruin was in store for me, when lunch was served. At lunch the news that something was likely to 'turn up' came.

Violet was not in the best of spirits. I learned that Lady Desmond, on her part, had not been allowing the grass to grow under her feet. She had been paying the child a visit. Vi did not admit it at once, but when I taxed her with her obvious discomposure-having reasons of my own for wishing to know what was at the back of it-she let it out. It seemed that the old lady had said some very frank things-in the way old ladies can. Vi had suffered; was suffering still. She had arrived at a decision, with which she had sped the parting guest.

'I am quite resolved that-unless something happens which will not happen-all shall be over between Reggie and myself. I will not have such things said to me. I am going to write a formal note to say that I will not see him again: and you must take me away somewhere so that he cannot see me.'

'Take you away?'

I perceived that Lady Desmond had been very plain.

'Abroad; to some place as far off as you possibly can. She says that the Marquis of Twickenham is alive; and as you say so too-'

'Violet!'

'I say that the best thing you can do is to emigrate, at once. I'll keep house for you until you are in a position to offer Edith a home.'

'You march.'

'If you had heard Lady Desmond you would be of opinion that it is necessary I should. It seems to me that both Reggie and you are wasting your lives-not in pursuit of a chimera, but waiting till a chimera comes to you.'

'Is that Lady Desmond?'

'Lady Desmond said nothing half so civil; either of you or me. She is-she's a nice old lady.'

Vi pressed her lips together. There was a red spot on either cheek. Unless I err she had been crying. The reflection that that ancient female had been castigating the child with her vitriolic tongue

made me tingle. While I was considering if it was advisable to say anything, and, if so, what, Bartlett entered with a note.

'The messenger doesn't know if there's an answer, sir.'

I knew from whom it came before I touched the envelope; though I had not expected that it would arrive so soon. It reached me when I was just in the mood for such an adventure.

It was addressed 'The Hon. Douglas Howarth. – If not at home please forward at once.' On the flap was stamped in red letters, 'Cortin's Hotel. Norfolk Street, Strand.' I opened it with fingers which were perhaps a little tremulous. The crisis in my life had come; the tide which might land me-where? The note was written in a hand which I did not recognise as Twickenham's, possibly because it straggled up and down in an erratic fashion, which was not out of keeping with the character of an invalid; but then, unfortunately for himself, Leonard had always been an adept with the pen. The wording was altogether dissimilar to anything which Mr. Babbacombe had suggested yesterday.

'Dear Doug. -

'The Devil's got me by the throat, and if you want to enjoy my struggles before he's dragged me down, you'll have to look in soon. I'll be dead before this time to-morrow. D- all the lot of you! This is a filthy pen. Twick.' I felt my heart stop beating. Because, although it was not the kind of intimation I had expected to receive, it was the man himself who spoke to me from off the sheet of paper. The last time I saw Twickenham, more than fifteen years ago, when it was known that he had done the thing for which the law could-and would-make him pay heavy toll, as he was about to fly from its pursuit, he had said to me, on my hazarding an inquiry as to when we might meet once more.

'You'll never see me again before the Devil has me by the throat, and you come to enjoy my struggles before he drags me down. D- all the lot of you!'

That was the very last thing he did-to curse his friends. Then he slammed out of the room, while his words were still ringing in my ears. I made a note of them before he had been gone ten minutes. I had offered to give him a helping hand, though he had deserved from me nothing of the kind; and I felt that it was only due to myself that I should set on record the fashion in which he had received my advances. I had that memorandum in my possession still. I had only referred to it on returning home after my first encounter with Mr. Babbacombe. And now here were almost the identical words staring up at me from the written sheet. It settled, once and for all, the question as to the identity of the person from whom that note had come, though it opened a still wider question as to what was the game which the man was playing, into whose toils I was being allured by labyrinthine yet seemingly inevitable ways.

Vi perceived by my demeanour that something unusual had happened.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Bartlett, you can go. Tell the messenger to wait.'

The man went. I could not have attempted an explanation while he was in the room. When he was gone my tongue still faltered. I re-read the words which, while they convinced me utterly, set me doubting all the more. Vi, watching me, repeated her inquiry.

'What is wrong, Douglas? Why do you look so strange?'

I handed her the note. Rapid consideration seemed to show that was the shortest and the safest way. She read it with an obvious want of comprehension.

'What an extraordinary communication. What does it mean? From whom has it come?'

'It's from Twickenham.'

'Douglas!'

She dropped her hands, note and all, on to her knee.

'To me it's like a voice from the grave. The words with which he bade me farewell are almost the identical ones with which he bids me come to him again.'

'Then it was he you saw?'

'Apparently.'

'And what does this mean?'

'It seems that he is ill.'

'Ill?' She referred to the note. 'He says that the Devil's got him by the throat. I shouldn't wonder. I believe, for my part, that there always is a time when that person comes to claim his own. You can't go on being wicked with impunity for ever. And that-he'll be dead to-morrow. Douglas, he says that he'll be dead before this time to-morrow.'

'So he says.'

'But-if he should be?'

I knew the thought which was in her mind; though I kept my eyes from off her face. I was conscious of an unusual contraction of the muscles about the region of the heart. What was this evil with which I was trafficking? She turned herself inside out, with a sublime unconsciousness of the troubled waters which I felt that I was entering.

'I'll be able to marry Reggie; and you may marry Edith. So that I needn't write to him. Why, Douglas, this bad man's death will usher in a peal of wedding bells. It ought to ease his final moments to know that he'll do so much good by dying.'

It galled me to hear her talk in such a strain. True, she had learnt it from me; but, just then, that made it none the better.

'Don't you think you're a trifle premature in marrying, and giving in marriage? He's not dead yet.'

'No, but he will be. I feel that he will be soon. You'll find that for once he's told the truth.'

'However that may be, I wish you wouldn't speak like that. It sounds a little inhuman. As if you anxiously anticipated his entering the fires of hell to enable you to enjoy the bliss of heaven.'

She looked up at me with a naïve surprise.

'Douglas, what ever do you mean by that? Haven't you always counted on his death? And isn't he a wicked man?'

'Decency suggests that we should feign some sorrow even if we feel it not.'

'It suggests to me nothing of the kind. The moment the Marquis of Twickenham's death is announced I shall rejoice-for Reggie's sake, and yours.'

'I see. And not at all for your own?'

'Also a little for my own. And Edith. For all our sakes, indeed.' I had taken up my position before the fireplace: she planted herself in front of me. 'Douglas, what has come to you upon a sudden? Here's the news for which you have been waiting arrived at last, and you look as black as black can be, and speak so crossly that I hardly know you for yourself.'

'You arrive too rapidly at your conclusions. I have grown so weary of expecting what never comes that my sense of anticipation's dulled. The man's not died these fifteen years; why should he die now?'

'Because he says he's going to: and I tell you that, this time, what he says he means.'

Turning aside, I looked down at the flaming coals. Her words and manner jarred on me alike.

'I don't like to think, and I don't like to know you think that, for us, the only hope of life is-death.'

'Douglas, what is the mood that's on you? Don't you want the man to die?'

Asked thus bluntly, I found myself hard put to it for an answer. After all, it was doubtful if I was not sorry that I had set out on this adventure. Never before had I felt myself so out of harmony with what was in my sister's heart. Obviously the riddle of my mood was beyond her finding out. She gave a little twirl of her skirts, as if dismissing from her mind all efforts to understand me.

'My dear Douglas, you are so mysterious, and so unexpectedly-shall I say, didactic! You do intend to be didactic, don't you, dear? – that you must excuse my calling your attention to the fact that the person who brought this note still waits.'

I rang the bell. Bartlett appeared.

'Tell the person who brought this letter that the answer is: "I am coming at once."'

When the servant had vanished, Violet eyed me with a quizzical smile.

'So you are going. I hope that the Marquis of Twickenham has exaggerated the gravity of his condition, and that on your arrival you will find him in the enjoyment of perfect health. Is that the kind of observation you think I ought to make?'

'It's quite possible,' I retorted, 'that I shan't find the Marquis of Twickenham at all.'

With that I left her. As I journeyed Strandwards I discussed within myself the possibility. Such was the conflict of my emotions that when the cab was about to turn off the Embankment into Norfolk Street I bade the driver go a little farther on before taking me to my destination. I knew that from the moment in which I set foot in the building, which Mr. Babbacombe had chosen for the exhibition of his uncanny gifts, I was committed to a course of action which, I was beginning to realise more clearly every moment, might lead I knew not whither. I might have been the first to pull the strings, but the figure once set in motion, if I was not careful, might have me at its mercy for ever and a day.

'I'll put a stop to the gruesome farce at its very opening. I'll tell the fellow that I'll have nothing to do with his hideous deception. If I become the accomplice of such a fiend as he is, my latter state will be worse than my first.'

With the determination strong upon me to be quit of the man and his misdeeds, I alighted at the door of Cortin's Hotel.

'Is the Marquis of Twickenham here?'

I put the question to a female who advanced towards me as I crossed the threshold. Apparently the establishment had not attained to the dignity of a hall porter.

'The Honourable Douglas Howarth?' I admitted that I was known by that name. 'His lordship expected to see you before, sir?'

The woman's tone conveyed a reproach which I resented. Evidently to her the Marquis of Twickenham was a person in authority before whom all men should bow. Besides, I could hardly have come more quickly than I had done. As I was being conducted to his apartment I told myself that I would address his lordship in a fashion for which he probably was unprepared.

The surprise, however, was on my side. I had expected to find the man alone. No one had breathed so much as a hint that any one was with him. When I entered the room, however, I found a person bending over the bed, whom it did not require much discernment to infer was a doctor. A voice, which I did not recognise as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's, issued from beneath the sheets.

'Who's that? – Who's that come in?'

The waiter announced my name and style, as if introducing me to an assembled company.

'The Honourable Douglas Howarth.'

'Doug-! Is that you, Doug? D-n you! I thought you'd come!'

I advanced towards the bed. The doctor bowed. He was a young man, probably not much over thirty, with a frank, open face, which suggested rather a pleasant disposition than commanding talents. In the bed was Babbacombe-or Twickenham-whichever he chose to call himself. But what a change had taken place in his appearance since yesterday! So complete was the alteration that I was half inclined to suspect that a trick was being played on me, rather than on the rest of the world.

If this was not a sick man then surely I had never seen one. On his face there was the-I was about to write-unmistakable look of the being from whom the sands of life are slipping fast. This was a complete wreck; the husk of a man; a creature for whom, so far as this life was concerned, all things were at an end. The cheeks were hollow; the eyes dim; the jaw had an uncomfortable trick of gaping open, as if the mechanism which controlled it was a little out of order. One arm was out of bed. The hand was attenuated, so as to seem nothing but skin and bone. It had that clammy look, which one would suppose incapable of imitation, which suggests physical decay. If this man was not in the last stage of a mortal illness, then he was a master of arts which are not accounted holy. Entirely without intention I stood before him, oppressed by a feeling of half reverence, half awe, of which, I take it, most of us are conscious when we find ourselves in the presence of the coming king.

He spoke in a croaking, hoarse voice, which I certainly did not recognise as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's.

'Doug, he's got me by the throat, and I'm fighting him; but he'll win, he'll win. The doctor'll tell you he'll win.'

I was at a loss what to say or do. The reality of the sham, if it was a sham, affected me in a way for which I was unprepared. The doctor, perceiving something of my dilemma, whispered in my ear:

'He's in a bad way. Are you a friend of his?'

The sick man's ears were keener than the speaker had supposed. He answered for me.

'A friend? Oh, yes, he's a friend of mine, Doug's a friend. Doctor, take yourself away. I want to speak to my friend.'

Whether he was influenced by the bluntness of the dismissal, I could not say; but the doctor prepared to go.

'I will send you some medicine which will ease those pains of which you speak.'

'Curse your medicine!'

'You mustn't talk too much. Rest and composure are what you principally need.'

'Confound your composure!' With a violent effort the man in the bed raised himself to a sitting posture. 'What do I want to be composed for when there's so little time to talk? There'll be all eternity to be silent in.'

As he gripped the coverlet with his cadaverous hands, blinking at us with his sightless eyes, he did not offer an agreeable spectacle. He trembled so from the exertion of the effort he had made that it was not surprising to see him, collapsing like a pack of cards, fall in a heap half in, half out of bed. With quick professional hands the doctor straightened him out. He eyed him when he had finished. The figure in the bed lay perfectly still.

'He's exhausted himself; but he'll be all right when he recovers. Can I speak to you outside before I go?' I went with him outside the bedroom door. 'Are you a relative of his?'

'I am not.'

'If he has any relatives they should be sent for at once, if they wish to see him alive. It is quite possible that he will not live over to-day.'

'What is the matter with him?'

'It's a case of general collapse; all the vital organs are weak. He seems to have lived a hard and irregular life on top of an originally poor constitution. I hope you don't mind my speaking frankly.'

'Not at all. I believe you are right. I have not seen him myself for fifteen years. We all thought he was dead.'

'He will be soon. He's consumed by fever; his lungs are affected; there's practically no pulse, and scarcely any motion of the heart. The whole machine's run down. As you see for yourself, he's nothing but skin and bone. But it's from the heart we have most to fear. If you allow him to excite himself there may be an instant stoppage.'

'Do you think we'd better have further advice?'

'That's as you please. I myself should welcome it. And it might be more satisfactory to every one concerned. But I don't think you'll find that anything can be done. Here's my card.' He handed me one; from which it appeared that he was Mr. Robert White, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., of 93 Craven Street, W.C. 'I'll look in again as soon as I can; and then, perhaps, a consultation may be arranged. But if any of his relatives wish to see him, if I were you I should lose no time in letting them know the state that he is in.'

He went. As I examined his card I said to myself.

'There seems no doubt that it will not be difficult to obtain a certificate of the Marquis of Twickenham's death from him. I wonder if Mr. Robert White is a friend of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

Opening the door, I re-entered the room.

CHAPTER VII
MR. FOSTER INTERRUPTS

All was still. The figure in the bed continued motionless. I walked up to the bed. Whether conscious or not of my presence, he gave no sign of movement.

'Mr. Babbacombe,' I spoke a little louder. 'Mr. Babbacombe.' No answer. 'Don't you think this acting is a little overdone? Your friend Dr. White has gone. I'm all alone.'

Still not an indication to show that the man yet lived. Against my better judgment I began to feel uneasy. He lay so very motionless.

'Mr. Babbacombe! – Twickenham! – What are you afraid of? Don't you hear me, man?'

I touched him with my hand. He made no movement in response. For a second I was in danger of making an ass of myself. Could the man have carried the farce too far, and was he really dead? I all but rushed from the room, or to the bell, or somewhere, to give the alarm. Then I felt him shiver beneath my touch. I do not think that I was ever more conscious of relief than when I felt his quivering flesh. For the moment I actually imagined that I had murdered him.

The movement was but a quiver, dying away as soon as it came. I expected him, at the very least, to turn and open his eyes. But he did nothing of the kind. My impatience returned.

'Twickenham!' I thought it safer to address him by that name. Walls have ears; especially, I fancy, in hotels. 'Twickenham! Confound it, man, are you playing the fool with me again?'

No response. Concluding that this was a game which the gentleman before me intended to play in his own fashion, I awaited the issue of events. If he thought it necessary to keep up his character of dying man, and practise the lights and shadows of the rôle with me as audience, it was out of my power to prevent him. Yet as I watched how, bit by bit, he seemed to return to life; how long the process lasted; and how small the amount of vitality which he returned to seemed to be; I found myself in the curious position of being unable to decide where the sham began and the reality ended. Turning on to his back, apparently with difficulty, he gazed up with what was an astonishingly good imitation of an unseeing gaze.

'Well? As the street boys have it, I hope you'll know me when you see me again. You do it uncommonly well. The only comment I have to make, if you'll excuse my making it, is that you do it too well.'

What seemed a glimmer of consciousness stole over his skeleton countenance. It lighted up.

'Doug!' he said.

Mr. Babbacombe had not struck me as being corpulent, but it mystified me to think what he had done with the balance of his flesh within the twenty-four hours since I had seen him last. He looked as if he had lost stones; suggesting the possession of a secret for which certain jockeys of my acquaintance would give him all they possess. The voice was excellent: cracked and broken, like that of a man whose physical force is nearly spent.

'Would you mind calling me Mr. Howarth when we are alone?'

'Call you-what? See you-. Might as well ask you-call me-Marquis of Twickenham.'

'I am quite willing, when we are in private, to call you Mr. Babbacombe.'

'Call me-what? Mr. – Doug, you're drunk.'

'As usual, you credit me with a condition of mental imbecility for which no degree of drunkenness of which I ever heard could adequately account.'

'What-you talking about? Doug, I'm pretty bad.'

'You seem to be. I've brought the five hundred pounds which you stipulated I should bring if you were not to recover.'

'Five hundred pounds? Doug, I haven't seen that amount of money-Lord knows when.'

'No? Then you shall see it now. Here it is-fifty tens. I thought you would prefer to have the notes all small.'

I placed them between the wasted fingers, which still remained outside the coverlet. They just closed on them, but that was all. His eyes closed too.

'Too late.'

'Too late? What do you mean?'

'What's the use-money to me now.'

'You can have it buried with you.'

'Yes-I can. Doug, why do you speak like that?'

'Mr. Babbacombe, might I ask you not to be so thorough?'

An expression of surprise lighted up his features.

'He's wandering.'

'I did not gather, from our conversation yesterday, that it was part of your scheme to pretend to be dying even when we were alone.'

The expression of surprise had grown in intensity.

'Doug!'

'My good man, please don't look at me like that. And do not call me "Doug." Even if you were the person, and in the condition, you pretend to be, I should resent hearing the word come from your lips each second.'

'He's mad!'

It was said with a little gasp, in the most natural way in the world. Reclosing his eyes, if I could believe the evidence of my senses-which, in his case, I doubted if I was entitled to-he dozed.

I began to understand that Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was even more of an artist than I had given him credit for. As I stood watching, with curious interest, the perfection with which he simulated a sick man's slumber, I asked myself if, after all, he might not be right, and I wrong. If he chose to continue the performance even when the necessity for acting was removed, why should he not? It might tend to simplify the situation. At least, it would do no harm. If he declined to allow even me to see the mask slipped a little from his face, I had certainly no reason to complain. Later on I could say, with perfect truth, that, so far as I was able to see, he never rallied from the moment I saw him first. Situated as I was likely to be, it would be a comfort to be able to say something that was true.

The misfortune was, that I was not, myself, by any means such an artist as Mr. Babbacombe. I might be able, when in the public eye, to deceive with an air of passable candour, but in private I fell short. I had heard of men who lied with such consistency that, in the end, they deceived themselves. I had not got so far as that. Mr. Babbacombe, it seemed, could play a part so well that he actually was, for the time, the character he feigned to be. With me it was otherwise. I had not yet grown to love deception for deception's sake, as the man in front of me-whether he was Babbacombe or Twickenham-seemed to do. It filled me with an illogical sense of rage to perceive how, in this matter, he took it for granted that his point of view would-or should-necessarily be mine. He liked to keep on stealing all the time; I preferred, in private, to pretend that I was an honest man.

However, it certainly was true that the strain of the impersonation lay on him. If he did not choose to allow himself a moment's relaxation, I had no cause to grumble. I had agreed with him that he should carry out a certain piece of deception. I could hardly complain if he carried out his part of the bargain so well that he was actually in danger of deceiving me.

Only I did wish that he would own up, for a moment, what a rogue he was. Such was my state of nervous tension that, to me, such an admission would have come as a positive relief. I was willing to admit that I was a humbug-between ourselves. Why should he not be willing to do the same? It would have come as a sort of salve to my sense of self-esteem.

Instead, he persisted in that doze-which I was convinced was make-believe. As one might watch a conjuror perform his tricks in the privacy of one's own apartment, with a feeling of resentment

that he should allow no hint to escape him as to how they're done, so I observed the man in the bed pretend-even to me! – to do the things which I had the best of reasons for knowing he was not really doing. I should like to have constrained him to confession, to have taken him by the shoulders and treated him to a good shaking, so that both the sleep and sickness might have been shaken clean out of him, and he would have had to admit his mummery.

I believe that if I had remained alone with him much longer I should have done it. My fingers itched to handle him. Just, however, as I was about to take him in my grip, the door opened and some one else came in. It was perhaps just as well, if the game was to be played out, that I was not detected in the act of committing an apparently brutal and unprovoked assault upon the seeming sufferer. Some sort of explanation would have had to be made: I should have had to compel the patient to admit his fraud to save my character. Otherwise my action might have been construed as an attempt to murder at the very least.

The new comer was Reggie. His appearance on the scene I had not expected so soon: nor desired. It had been my intention to coach the patient in certain details of his family history-supposing such coaching to be necessary. It would hardly do for him to be visited by relatives of whom he had never heard. This he had prevented my doing by his determination to act the rôle of dying man up to the hilt.

Reggie explained what had brought him. He held out the note which had brought me; which I now remembered I had left with Violet.

'Vi has sent me this? what does it mean?'

I moved towards him, glancing towards the sick man, who still feigned slumber. I had hoped to give him a warning look; but the persistence with which he kept his eyes closed rendered my effort futile.

'It means what it says.' I spoke in a tolerably loud tone of voice, hoping that the sleeper would have sense enough to pick up such cues as I might give him. 'Your brother, my dear Reggie, is here-ill in bed.'

'Good gracious!' Reggie's face expressed a variety of emotions. He glanced from me to the bed; from the bed to me. He dropped his voice. 'Is he-is he really bad?'

'About as bad as he can be. The doctor is of opinion that he may expire at any moment.'

The tone in which I said this-for Mr. Babbacombe's instruction-seemed to strike Reggie as peculiar.

'Is he-asleep?'

'He seems to have just dropped off.' Reggie moved closer to the bed. I went with him. He regarded the sleeper with looks of curiosity.

'He looks frightfully queer.'

'He can hardly look queerer, and live.'

'I suppose it is Twickenham?'

'Don't you recognise him?'

He shook his head.

'I was only a kid when he went. I've told you lots of times that I don't seem to have the least recollection of what he was like. I didn't think he was so old.'

'He's crowded threescore years and ten into the life he's lived, and more. Besides, sickness has aged him.'

'Is he conscious?'

'Now? He's asleep.'

'I mean when he's awake.

'He was conscious when I saw him first; that is, after a fashion of his own.'

'Is he-' He stopped. I saw that a thought was passing through his mind to which he hesitated to give utterance. Presently it came. 'Is he conscious enough to make a will?'

The question took me aback. It suggested an eventuality for which I had made no sort of preparation. If Mr. Montagu Babbacombe took it into his head to let himself go in a 'last will and testament,' I should be in a fix. I arrived at an instant determination.

'I should say not. Any will he might make in his present condition would not be worth the paper it was written on. Of that I am sure.'

I meant Mr. Babbacombe to take the hint. I hoped he would, though I had rather Reggie had not put the question. The young gentleman startled me with another remark which was equally unexpected and undesired.

'I sent in word to old Foster as I came along.'

'You did what?'

My tone expressed not only unmitigated surprise, but also something so closely approaching to dismay, that in turn I startled him.

'What's wrong? Didn't you want me to tell him? He'll have to know.'

'That's true.' A moment's consideration showed me that it was. 'At the same time, I would rather you had consulted me before communicating with him. What did you say?'

'That Twickenham was dying at Cortin's Hotel, and that I was hurrying to him.'

'Then if you told him that, it won't be long before he's here too.'

'I don't suppose it will.'

I did not relish the prospect at all. Things were moving more rapidly than I had intended. I perceived, too late, that there were complications ahead which I ought to have foreseen, but which, owing to my having my vision fixed on one thing, and one thing only, had escaped my notice. It was of the first importance that I should say a few words in private to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe before Mr. Foster appeared, or the bubble might be pricked in a second.

Mr. Stephen Foster was the senior partner of Foster, Charter, and Baynes; who had been lawyers, agents, and doers-of-all-work for the Sherringtons even before they had been peers. He was an old man now, but keen as the youngest. I had more than a suspicion that he did not like me. He had certainly treated the various applications I had made to him on Reggie's behalf with a curtness I did not relish. It was he who had shut the family purse against the lad. Left by the terms of the late Marquis's will, in default of the appearance of the heir-at-law, in practically absolute control of the entire estate, he had administered it with a zeal and judgment which did him the greatest credit. Its value had, in all respects, immensely increased while in his charge. If only he had shown even some slight consideration for Reggie's position there would have been nothing in his conduct of which to complain. But he had persistently refused to let him have so much as a five-pound note out of the family revenues, although he well knew the straits he was in, and how he was living at my expense. For this neither Reggie nor I bore him any love. It would not be our fault if one day he was not made to smart for his pedantic adherence to what he held to be the letter of the law.

'My position,' as he stated it, 'is this. The Marquis of Twickenham is alive, until you prove him dead. I am responsible to him for every farthing of his income; just as your banker is responsible to you for every penny which stands to the credit of your account. And just as your banker is powerless, without your express authorisation, to use your money, say, to save your mother from starvation, so I am powerless to apply his lordship's money to the assistance of his impecunious brother. Besides, you know what kind of man he is. You know, as well as I know, that, unless his disposition has wholly changed-which, from my knowledge of the family character, I deem in the highest degree improbable-he would not present a single sixpence to Lord Reginald. Whether I do or do not admire what I know would be his wishes, I am bound to observe them, or throw up my charge. I prefer to observe his wishes. Show me that My Lord Marquis is dead, and my charge is at an end. Or produce his instructions, authorising me to make his brother an allowance, or to hand him over a certain sum, and those instructions shall be duly carried out. In their absence, I can do nothing. To me, so far as the Twickenham estate is concerned, Lord Reginald Sherrington does not exist.'

And this was the man who, in all probability, was hastening to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's bedside! If he caught him unprepared he would turn the dying man inside out before the sufferer even guessed at the process to which he was being subjected. At all hazards I must get Reggie out of the room, and prepare, as best I could in the few moments at my disposal, the too conscientious Mr. Babbacombe for the legal onslaught. I hit on a device.

'My dear Reggie, although I don't wish to suggest for a moment that the doctor who is already in attendance is not perfectly competent, I do think we ought to have another man-don't you?'

'Certainly; if you consider it necessary, we'll have a dozen.'

'I don't think we need go so far as that, but we might have one. What do you say to Hancock? He saw Twickenham into the world; so it seems only fitting that he should usher him out.' My opinion of Sir Gregory Hancock's medical attainments is perhaps not so high as his popularity might seem to warrant; but that is by the way. Reggie signified his approval of my suggestion. 'Then, my dear chap, would you mind running round to fetch him, while I stay here, to watch? If you ask him personally he'll come without a moment's delay.'

Reggie, swallowing the bait, hied in search of Sir Gregory Hancock. I turned my attention to the bed. The rogue still slumbered. The time for ceremony, however, had passed. He would have to cease pretending.

'Babbacombe!' He paid not the slightest heed. 'Confound you! Will you put a stop to this tomfoolery? A man is coming who'll see through you in less than no time if you don't let me put you up to a thing or two. Babbacombe!'

No, he would not reply. My patience was becoming exhausted. I did not propose that my whole ingenious scheme should be wrecked because he chose to play the game in his own fashion instead of mine.

'Babbacombe! If you won't wake up, upon my honour I'll make you. I tell you I want to speak to you about something which is of vital importance to both of us; something which you must hear and understand. Will you attend?'

Apparently he would not. If he was really so opinionated I was prepared, forced by the exigencies of my position, to try another method. I did. I took him by the shoulder and I shook him. At first gently, then, as no result ensued, with greater violence. Then I treated him to a really vigorous shaking, only stopping because, in my heat, I began to fear that I might be going farther than I intended. He evinced not the slightest symptom of any intention to comply with my request and listen to what I had to say. Instead, when I looked at him again, a very curious something seemed to have happened to his face. His jaw had dropped open; and, if I may so express it, all his features seemed to have twisted out of the straight. His appearance, now that I realised its peculiarity, gave me quite a shock.

'What on earth is the matter with you, man?'

'You seem, Mr. Howarth, to have rather drastic methods of attaining to the information which you seek.'

The voice was Mr. Foster's. He had entered-when? When I had been shaking Mr. Babbacombe? What a fool I had been not to turn the key. I might have expected him to sneak in without warning me of his approach. How much had he heard-and seen? I should have to find out, soon.

CHAPTER VIII
DYING

While these thoughts flashed through my brain I remained perfectly still, with my face averted. It was desirable that I should have my countenance under perfect control, before I let him see it. I spoke to him from where I stood.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.