Weyman Stanley John

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LADY BETTY'S INDISCRETION

"Horry! I am sick to death of it!"

There was a servant in the room collecting the tea-cups; but Lady Betty Stafford, having been reared in the purple, was not to be deterred from speaking her mind by a servant. Her cousin was either more prudent or less vivacious. He did not answer on the instant, but stood gazing through one of the windows at the leafless trees and slow-dropping rain in the Mall. He only turned when Lady Betty pettishly repeated her statement.

"Had a bad time?" he vouchsafed, dropping into a chair near her, and looking first at her, in a good-natured way, and then at his boots, which he seemed to approve.

"Horrid!" she replied.

"Many people here?"

"Hordes of them! Whole tribes!" she exclaimed. She was a little woman, plump and pretty, with a pale, clear complexion, and bright eyes. "I am bored beyond belief. And-and I have not seen Stafford since morning," she added.

"Cabinet council?"

"Yes!" she answered viciously. "A cabinet council, and a privy

council, and a board of trade, and a board of green cloth, and all the other boards! Horry, I am sick to death of it! What is the use of it all?"

"Don't do it," he said oracularly, still admiring his boots. "Country go to the dogs!"

"Let it!" she retorted, not relenting a whit. "I wish it would. I wish the dogs joy of it!"

He made an extraordinary effort at diffuseness. "I thought," he said, "that you were becoming political, Betty. Going to write something, and all that."

"Rubbish! But here is Mr. Atlay. Mr. Atlay, will you have a cup of tea?" she continued, addressing the new-comer. "There will be some here presently. Where is Mr. Stafford?"

"Mr. Stafford will take a cup of tea in the library, Lady Betty," the secretary replied. "He asked, me to bring it to him. He is copying an important paper."

Sir Horace forsook his boots, and in a fit of momentary interest asked, "They have come to terms?"

The secretary nodded. Lady Betty said "Pshaw!" A man brought in the fresh teapot. The next moment Mr. Stafford himself came into the room, an open telegram in his hand.

He nodded pleasantly to his wife and her cousin. But his thin, dark face wore-it generally did-a preoccupied look. Country people to whom he was pointed out in the street called him, according to their political leanings, either insignificant, or a prig, or a "dry sort"; or sometimes said, "How young he is!" But

those whose fate it was to face the Minister in the House knew that there was something in him more to be feared even than his imperturbability, his honesty, or his precision-and that was a sudden fiery heat, which was apt to carry away the House at unexpected times. On one of these occasions, it was rumored, Lady Betty Champion had seen him, and fallen in love with him. Why he had thrown the handkerchief to her-that was another matter; and whether the apparently incongruous match would answer-that, too, remained to be seen.

"More telegrams?" she cried. "It rains telegrams! how I hate them!"

"Why?" he said. "Why should you?" He really wondered.

She made a face at him. "Here is your tea," she said abruptly.

"Thank you; you are very good," he replied. He took the cup and set it down absently. "Atlay," he said, speaking to the secretary, "you have not corrected the report of my speech at the Club, have you? No, I know you have had no time. Will you run your eye over it, and see if it is all right, and send it to the *Times*- I do not think I need to see it-by eleven o'clock at latest? The editor," he continued, tapping the pink paper in his hand, "seems to doubt us. I have to go to Fitzgerald's now; so you must also copy Lord Pilgrimstone's terms, if you please. I proposed to do it myself, but I shall be with you before you have finished."

"What are the terms?" Lady Betty asked. "Lord Pilgrimstone has not agreed to-"

"To permit me to communicate them?" he replied, with a

grave smile. "No. So you must pardon me, my dear. I have passed my word for absolute secrecy. Indeed, it is as important to me as to Pilgrimstone that they should not be divulged."

"They are sure to leak out," she retorted. "They always do."

"Well, it will not be through me, I hope."

She stamped her foot on the carpet. "I should like to get them, and send them to the *Times!*" she cried, her eyes flashing-he was so provoking! "And let all the world know them! I vow I should!"

He looked his astonishment, while the other two laughed, partly to avoid embarrassment, perhaps. She often said these things, and no one took them seriously.

"You had better play the secretary for once, Lady Betty," said Atlay, who was related to his chief. "You will then be able to satisfy your curiosity. Shall I resign *pro tem.?*"

She looked eagerly at her husband for the third part of a second-for assent, perhaps. But she read no playfulness in his face, and her own fell. He was thinking about other things. "No," she said, almost sullenly, dropping her eyes to the carpet. "I should not spell well enough."

Soon after that they dispersed; this being Wednesday, Mr. Stafford's day for dining out. At that time Ministers dined only twice a week in session-on Wednesday and Sunday; and Sunday was often sacred to the children where there were any, lest they should grow up and not know their father by sight. At a quarter to eight Lady Betty came into the library, and found her husband still at his desk, a pile of papers before him awaiting his signature.

As a fact, he had only just sat down, displacing his secretary, who had gone upstairs to dress.

"Stafford!" she said.

She did not seem quite at her ease; but his mind was troubled, and he failed to notice this. "Yes, my dear," he answered politely, shuffling the papers before him into a heap. He knew that he was late, and he could see that she was dressed. "Yes, I am going upstairs this minute. I have not forgotten."

"It is not that," she said, leaning with one hand on the table, "I want to ask you-"

"My dear, you really must tell it me in the carriage." He was on his feet now, making some hasty preparations. "Where are we to dine? At the Duke's? Then we shall have a mile to drive. Will not that do for you?" He was working hard while he spoke. There was an oak post-box within reach, and another box for letters which were to be delivered by hand, and he was thrusting a handful of notes into each of these. Other packets he swept into different drawers of the table. Still standing, he stooped and signed his name to half a dozen letters, which he left open on the blotting-pad. "Atlay will see to these when he is dressed," he murmured. "Would you oblige me by locking the drawers, my dear-it will save me a minute-and giving me the keys when I come down?"

He went off then, two or three papers in his hand, and almost ran upstairs. Lady Betty stood a while on the spot on which he had left her, looking in an odd way-just as if it were new to her-round the grave, spacious room, with its sombre Spanish-leather-

covered furniture, its ponderous writing-tables and shelves of books, its three lofty curtained windows. When her eyes at last came back to the lamp, and dwelt on it, they were very bright, and her face was flushed. Her foot could be heard tapping on the carpet. Presently she remembered herself and fell to work, vehemently slamming such drawers as were open, and locking them.

The private secretary found her doing this when he came in. She muttered something-stooping with her face over the drawers-and almost immediately went out. He looked after her, partly because there was something odd in her manner-she kept her face averted; and partly because she was wearing a new and striking gown, and he admired her. He noticed, as she passed through the doorway, that she had some papers held down by her side. But, of course, he thought nothing of this.

He was hopelessly late for his own dinner-party, and only stayed a moment to slip the letters last signed into envelopes prepared for them. Then he made for the door, opened it, and came into collision with Sir Horace, who was strolling in.

"Beg pardon!" said that gentleman, with irritating placidity. "Late for dinner?"

"Rather!" the secretary cried, trying to get round him.

"Well," drawled the other, "which is the hand-box, old fellow?"

"It has been cleared. Here, give it me. The messenger is in the hall now."

Atlay snatched the letter from his companion, the two going into the hall together. Marcus, the butler, a couple of tall footmen, and the messenger were sorting letters at the table. "Here, Marcus," said the secretary, pitching his letter on the slab, "let that go with the others. And is my hansom here?"

In another minute he was speeding one way, and the Staffords in their brougham another; while Sir Horace walked at his leisure down to his club. The Minister and his wife drove in silence; he forgot to ask her what she wanted. And, strange to say, Lady Betty forgot to tell him. At the party she made quite a sensation; never had she seemed more gay, more piquant, more audaciously witty, than she showed herself this evening. There were illustrious personages present, but they paled beside her. The Duke, with whom she was a favorite, laughed at her sallies until he could laugh no more; and even her husband, her very husband, forgot for a time the country and the crisis, and listened, half-proud and half-afraid. But she was not aware of this; she could not see his face where she sat. To all seeming she never looked that way. She was quite a model society wife.

Mr. Stafford himself was an early riser. It was his habit to be up by six; to make his own coffee over a spirit lamp, and then not only to get through much work in his dressing-room, but to take his daily ride before breakfast. On the morning after the Duke's party, however, he lay later than usual; and as there was much business to be done-owing to the crisis-the canter in the park had to be omitted. He was still among his papers-though expecting

the breakfast-gong with every minute, when a hansom cab driven at full speed stopped at the door. He glanced up wearily as he heard the doors of the cab flung open with a crash. There had been a time when the stir and bustle of such arrivals had been sweet to him-not so sweet as to some, for he had never been deeply in love with the parade of office; but sweeter than to-day, when they were no more to him than the creaking of the mill to the camel that turns it blindfold and in darkness.

Naturally he was thinking of Lord Pilgrimstone this morning, and guessed, before he opened the note which the servant brought him, who was its writer. But its contents had, nonetheless, an electrical effect upon him. His brow reddened. With a most unusual display of emotion he sprang to his feet, crushing the fragment of paper in his fingers. "Who brought that?" he cried sharply. "Who brought it?" he repeated in a louder tone, before the servant could explain.

The man had never seen him so moved. "Mr. Scratchley, sir," he answered.

"Ha! Then, show him into the library," was the quick reply. And while the servant went to do his bidding, the Minister hastily changed his dressing-gown for a coat, and ran down a private staircase, reaching the room he had mentioned by one door as Mr. Scratchley, Lord Pilgrimstone's secretary, entered it through another.

By that time he had regained his composure, and looked much as usual. Still, when he held up the crumpled note, there was

a brusqueness in the gesture which would have surprised his ordinary acquaintances, and did remind Mr. Scratchley of certain "warm nights" in the House.

"You know the contents of this?" he said without prelude, and in a tone which matched his gesture.

The visitor bowed. He was a grave middle-aged man, who seemed oppressed and burdened by the load of cares and responsibilities which his smiling chief carried jauntily. People said that he was the proper complement of Lord Pilgrimstone, as the more volatile Atlay was of his leader.

"And you are aware," continued Mr. Stafford, almost harshly, "that Lord Pilgrimstone gives yesterday's agreement to the winds?"

"I have never seen his lordship so deeply moved," replied the discreet one.

"He says: 'Our former negotiation was ruined by premature talk. But this disclosure can only be referred to treachery or the grossest carelessness.' What does it mean? I know of no disclosure, Mr. Scratchley. I must have an explanation. And you, I presume, are here to give me one."

For a moment the other seemed taken aback. "You have not seen the *Times*, sir?" he murmured.

"This morning's? No. But it is here."

He took it, as he spoke, from a table at his elbow, and unfolded it. The secretary approached and pointed to the head of a column-the most conspicuous, the column most readily to

be found in the paper. "They are crying it at the street corners I passed," he added with deference. "There is nothing to be heard in St. James's Street and Pall Mall but 'Detailed Programme of the Coalition.' The other dailies are striking off second editions to include it!"

Mr. Stafford's eyes were riveted to the paper. There was a long pause, a pause on his part of dismay and consternation. He could scarcely-to repeat a common phrase-believe his eyes. "It seems," he muttered at length, – "it seems accurate-a tolerably precise account, at least."

"It is a verbatim copy," the secretary said dryly. "The question is, who furnished it. Lord Pilgrimstone, I am authorised to say, has not permitted his note of the agreement to pass out of his possession-even to the present moment."

"And so he concludes" – the Minister said thoughtfully-"it is a fair inference enough, perhaps-that the *Times* must have procured its information from my note?"

With deference the secretary objected. "It is not a matter of inference, Mr. Stafford. I am directed to say that. I have inquired, early as it is, at the *Times* office, and learned that the copy came directly from the hands of your messenger."

"Of my messenger!" Mr. Stafford cried, thunderstruck. "You are sure of that?"

"I am sure that the sub-editor says so."

Again there was silence. "This must be looked into," said Mr. Stafford at length, controlling himself by an effort. "For the

present I agree with Lord Pilgrimstone, that it alters the position-and perhaps finally."

"Lord Pilgrimstone will be damaged in the eyes of a large section of his supporters-seriously damaged," Mr. Scratchley said, shaking his head and frowning.

"Possibly. From every point of view the thing is to be deplored. But I will call on Lord Pilgrimstone," the Minister continued slowly, "after lunch. Will you tell him so?"

A curious embarrassment showed itself in the secretary's manner. He twisted his hat in his hands, and looked suddenly sad-as if he were about to join in the groan at a prayer-meeting.

"Lord Pilgrimstone," he said in a voice he vainly strove to render commonplace, "is going to the Sandown Spring Meeting to-day."

The tone was really so lugubrious-to say nothing of a shake of the head with which he could not help accompanying the statement-that a faint smile played on Mr. Stafford's lips.

"Then I must take the next possible opportunity," he said. "I will see him to-morrow."

Mr. Scratchley assented to this, and bowed himself out, after another word or two, looking more gloomy and careworn than usual. The interview had not been altogether to his mind. He wished that he had spoken more roundly to Mr. Stafford; even asked for a categorical denial of the charge. But the Minister's manner had overawed him. He had found it impossible to put the question. And then the pitiful confession which he had had

to make for Lord Pilgrimstone! That had put the copingstone to his dissatisfaction.

"Oh!" the secretary sighed, as he stepped into his cab. "Oh, that men so great should stoop to things so little!"

It did not occur to him that there is a condition of things even more sad: when little men meddle with great things.

Meanwhile, Mr. Stafford stood at the window deep in unpleasant thoughts, from which the entrance of the butler, who came to summon him to breakfast, first aroused him. "Stay a moment, Marcus!" he said, turning, as the man prepared to leave the room after doing his errand. "I want to ask you a question. Did you make up the messenger's bag last evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice a letter addressed to the *Times* office?"

The servant prepared himself to cogitate. But he found it unnecessary. "Yes, sir," he replied. "Two."

"Two?" Mr. Stafford repeated, dismay in his tone; though this was just what he had reason to expect.

"Yes, sir. There was one I took from the hand-box, and one Mr. Atlay gave me in the hall at the last moment," the butler explained.

"That will do. Thank you. Ask Mr. Atlay if he will come to me. No doubt he will be able to tell me what I want to know."

The words were commonplace, but the speaker's anxiety was so plain that Marcus when he delivered the message-which he did with haste-added a word or two of warning.

"It is about a letter to the *Times*, sir, I think. Mr. Stafford seems a good deal put out," he said, confidentially.

"Indeed?" Atlay replied. "I will go down." And he started. But before he reached the library he met some one. Lady Betty looked out of the breakfast-room, and saw him descending the stairs with the butler behind him.

"Where is Mr. Stafford, Marcus?" she asked impatiently, as she stood with her hand on the door. "Good morning, Mr. Atlay," she added, her eyes descending to him. "Where is my husband? The coffee is getting cold."

"He has requested me to go to him," Atlay answered. "Marcus tells me there is something in the *Times* which has annoyed him, Lady Betty. I will send him up as quickly as I can."

But Lady Betty had not stayed to receive his assurance. She had drawn back and shut the door quickly; yet not so quickly but that the private secretary had seen her change colour. "Hallo!" he ejaculated to himself-the lady was not much given to blushing-"I wonder what is wrong with *her* this morning. She is not generally rude-to me."

It was not long before he got light on the matter. "Come here, Atlay," his employer said, the moment he entered the library. "Look at this!"

The secretary took the *Times*, and read the important matter. Meanwhile the Minister read the secretary. He saw surprise and consternation on his face, but no trace of guilt. Then he told him what Marcus had said about the two letters which had gone the

previous evening from the house addressed to the *Times* office. "One," he said, "contained the notes of my speech. The other-"

"The other-" the secretary replied, thinking while he spoke, "was given to me at the last moment by Sir Horace. I threw it to Marcus in the hall."

"Ah!" his chief said, trying very hard to express nothing by the exclamation, but not quite succeeding. "Did you see that that letter was addressed to the editor of the *Times?*"

The secretary reddened, and betrayed unexpected confusion. "I did," he said. "I saw so much of the address as I threw the letter on the slab-though I thought nothing of it at the time."

Mr. Stafford looked at him fixedly. "Come," he said, "this is a grave matter, Atlay. You noticed, I can see, the handwriting. Was it Sir Horace's?"

"No," the secretary replied.

"Whose was it?"

"I think-I think, Mr. Stafford-that it was Lady Betty's. But I should be sorry, having seen it only for a moment-to say that it was hers."

"Lady Betty's?"

Mr. Stafford repeated the exclamation three times, in surprise, in anger, a third time in trembling. In this last stage he walked away to the window, and turning his back on his companion looked out. He recalled his wife's petulant exclamation of yesterday, the foolish desire expressed, as he had supposed in jest. Had she been in earnest? And had she carried out her

threat? Had she-his wife-done this thing so compromising to his honour, so mischievous to the country, so mad, reckless, wicked? Impossible. It was impossible. And yet-and yet Atlay was a man to be trusted, a gentleman, his own kinsman! And Atlay's eye was not likely to be deceived in a matter of handwriting. That Atlay had made up his mind he could see.

The statesman turned from the window, and walked to and fro, his agitation betrayed by his step. The third time he passed in front of his secretary-who had riveted his eyes to the *Times* and appeared to be reading the money article-he stopped. "If this be true-mind I say if, Atlay-" he cried jerkily, "what was Lady Betty's motive? I am in the dark! blindfold! Help me! Tell me what has been passing round me that I have not seen. You would not have my wife-a spy?"

"No! no! no!" the other cried, as he dropped the paper, his vehemence showing that he felt the pathos of the appeal. "It is not that. Lady Betty is jealous, if I dare venture to judge, of your devotion to the country-and to politics. She sees little of you. You are wrapped up in public affairs and matters of state. She feels herself neglected and-set aside. And-may I say it? – she has been married no more than a year."

"But she has her society," the Minister objected, compelling himself to speak calmly, "and her cousin, and-many other things."

"For which she does not care." returned the secretary.

It was a simple answer, but something in it touched a tender

place. Mr. Stafford winced and cast an odd startled look at the speaker. Before he could reply, however-if he intended to reply-a knock came at the door, and Marcus put in his head. "My lady is waiting breakfast, sir," he suggested timidly. What could a poor butler do between an impatient mistress and an obdurate master?

"I will come," Mr. Stafford said hastily. "I will come at once. For this matter, Atlay," he continued when the door was closed again, "let it rest for the present where it is. I know I can depend upon your" – he paused, seeking a word-"your discretion. One thing is certain, however. There is an end of the arrangement made yesterday. Probably the Queen will send for Templetown. I shall see Lord Pilgrimstone to-morrow, and-that will be the end of it."

Atlay retired, marvelling at his coolness; trying to retrace the short steps of their conversation, and to discern how far the Minister had gone with him, and where he had turned off upon a resolution of his own. He failed to find the clue, however, and marvelled still more as the day went on and others succeeded it; days of political crisis. Out of doors the world, or that small piece of it which has its centre at Westminster, was in confusion. The newspapers, morning or evening, found ready sale, and had no need to rely on murder-panics or prurient discussions. The Coalition scandal, the resignation of Ministers, the sending for Lord This and Mr. That, the certainty of a dissolution, provided matter enough. In all this Atlay found nothing at which to wonder. He had seen it all before. That which did cause him

surprise was the calm-the unnatural calm, as it seemed to him-which prevailed in the house in Carlton Terrace. For a day or two, indeed, there was much running to and fro, much closeting and button-holing; for rather longer the secretary read anxiety and apprehension in one countenance-Lady Betty's. Then things settled down. The knocker began to find peace, such comparative peace as falls to knockers in Carlton Terrace. Lady Betty's brow grew clear as her eye found no reflection of its anxiety in Mr. Stafford's face. In a word the secretary looked long but could discern no faintest sign of domestic trouble.

The late Minister indeed was taking things with wonderful coolness. Lord Pilgrimstone had failed to taunt him, and the triumph of old foes had failed to goad him into a last effort. Apparently he was of opinion that the country might for a time exist without him. He was standing aside with a shade on his face, and there were rumours that he would take a long holiday.

A week saw all these things happen. And then, one day as Atlay sat writing in the library-Mr. Stafford being out-Lady Betty came into the room for something. Rising to supply her with the article she wanted, he held the door open for her to pass out. She paused.

"Shut the door, Mr. Atlay," she said, pointing to it. "I want to ask you a question."

"Pray do, Lady Betty," he answered. "It is this," she said, meeting his eyes boldly-and a brighter, a more dainty creature than she looked had seldom tempted man. "Mr. Stafford's

resignation-had it anything, Mr. Atlay, to do with" – her face coloured a very little-"something that was in the *Times* this day week?"

His own cheek coloured violently enough. "If ever," he was saying to himself, "I meddle or mar between husband and wife again, may I-" But aloud he answered quietly, "Something perhaps." The question was sudden. Her eyes were on his face. He found it impossible to prevaricate. "Something perhaps," he said.

"My husband has never spoken to me about it," she replied, breathing quickly.

He bowed, having no words adapted to the situation. But he repeated his resolution (as above) more furiously.

"He has never appeared aware of it," she persisted. "Are you sure that he saw it?"

He wondered at her innocence, or her audacity. That such a baby should do so much mischief. The thought irritated him. "It was impossible that he should not see it, Lady Betty," he said, with a touch of asperity. "Quite impossible!"

"Ah," she replied, with a faint sigh. "Well, he has never spoken to me about it. And you think it had really something to do with his resignation, Mr. Atlay?"

"Most certainly," he said. He was no longer inclined to spare her.

She nodded thoughtfully, and then with a quiet "Thank you" she went out.

"Well," muttered the secretary to himself when the door was fairly shut behind her, "she is-upon my word, she is a fool! And he" – appealing to the inkstand-"he has never said a word to her about it. He is a new Don Quixote! a modern Job! a second Sir Isaac Newton! I do not know what to call him!"

It was Sir Horace, however, who precipitated the catastrophe. He happened to come in about teatime that afternoon, before, in fact, my lady had had an opportunity of seeing her husband. He found her alone and in a brown study, a thing most unusual with her and portending something. He watched her for a time in silence: seemed to draw courage from a still longer inspection of his boots, and then said, "So the cart is clean over, Betty?"

She nodded.

"Driver much hurt?"

"Do you mean, does Stafford mind?" she replied impatiently.

He nodded.

"Well, I do not know. It is hard to say."

"Think so?" he persisted.

"Good gracious, Horry!" my lady retorted, losing patience, "I say I do not know, and you say, 'Think so!' If you want to learn so particularly, ask him yourself. Here he is!"

Mr. Stafford had just entered the room. Perhaps she really wished to satisfy herself as to the state of his feelings. Perhaps she only desired in her irritation to put her cousin in a corner. At any rate she turned to her husband and said, "Here is Horace wishing to know if you mind being turned out?"

Mr. Stafford's face flushed a little at the home-thrust which no one else would have dared to deal. But he showed no displeasure. "Well, not so much as I should have thought," he answered, pausing to weigh a lump of sugar, and, as it seemed, his feelings. "There are compensations, you know."

"Pity all the same-those terms came out," Sir Horace grunted.

"It was."

"Stafford!" Lady Betty asked on a sudden, speaking fast and eagerly, "is it true, I want to ask you, is it true that that led you to resign?"

Naturally he was startled, and he showed that he was. She was the last person who should have put that question to him, but his long training in self-control stood him in good stead.

"Well, yes," he said quietly.

It was better, he thought, indeed it was only right, that she should know what she had done. But he did not look at her.

"Was it only that?" she asked again.

This time he weighed his answer. He thought her persistency odd. But again he assented.

"Yes," he said gravely. "Only that, I think. But for that I should have remained in-with Lord Pilgrimstone of course. Perhaps things are better as they are, my dear."

Lady Betty sprang from her seat with all her old vivacity. "Well!" she cried, "well, I am sure! Then why, I should like to know, did Mr. Atlay tell me that my letter to the *Times* had something to do with it!"

"Did not say so," quoth Sir Horace. "Absurd!"

"Yes, he did," cried Lady Betty, so fiercely that the rash speaker, who had returned to his boots, fairly shook in them. "You were not there! How do you know?"

"Don't know," Sir Horace admitted, meekly.

"But stay, stay a moment!" Mr. Stafford said, getting in a word with difficulty. It was strange if his wife could talk so calmly of her misdeeds, and before a third party too. "What letter to the *Times* did Atlay mean?"

"My letter about the Women's League," she explained earnestly. "You did not see it? No, I thought not. But Mr. Atlay would have it that you did, and that it had something to do with your going out. Horace told me at the time that I ought not to send it without consulting you. But I did, because you said you could not be bothered with it-I mean you said you were busy, Stafford. And so I thought I would ask if it had done any harm, and Mr. Atlay- What is the matter?" she cried, breaking off sharply at sight of the change in her husband's face. "Did it do harm?"

"No, no," he answered. "Only I never heard of this letter before. What made you write it?"

Lady Betty coloured violently, and became on a sudden very shy-like most young authors. "Well," she said, "I wanted to be in the-in the swim with you, don't you know."

Mr. Stafford murmured, "Oh!"

Thanks to his talk with Atlay he read the secret of that sudden shyness. And confusion poured over him more and more. It

caused him to give way to impulse in a manner which a moment's reflection would have led him to avoid.

"Then it was not you," he exclaimed unwarily, "who sent Pilgrimstone's terms to the *Times?*"

"I?" she exclaimed in an indescribable tone, and with eyes like saucers. "I?" she repeated.

"Gad!" cried Sir Horace; and he looked about for a way of escape.

"I?" she continued, struggling between wrath and wonder. "I betray you to the *Times!* And you thought so, Stafford?"

There was silence in the room for a long moment during which the cool statesman, the hard man of the world, did not know where to turn his eyes. "There were circumstances-several circumstances," Mr. Stafford muttered at last, "which made-which forced me to think so."

"And Mr. Atlay thought so?" she asked. He nodded. "Oh, that tame cat!" she cried, her eyes flashing.

Then she seemed to meditate, while her husband gazed at her, a prey to conflicting emotions, and Sir Horace made himself as small as possible. "I see," she continued in a different tone. "Only-only if you thought that, why did you never say anything? Why did you not scold me, beat me, Stafford? I do not-I do not understand."

"I thought," he explained in despair-he had so mismanaged matters-"that perhaps I had left you-out of the swim, as you call it, Betty. That I had not treated you very well, and after all it

might be my own fault."

"And you said nothing! You intended to say nothing?" He nodded.

"Gad!" cried Sir Horace very softly.

But Lady Betty said nothing. She turned after a long look at her husband, and went out of the room, her eyes wet with tears. The two men heard her pause a moment on the landing, and then go upstairs and shut her door. But her foot, even to their gross ears, seemed to touch the stairs as if it loved them, and there was a happy lingering in the slamming of the door.

They looked, when she had left them, anywhere but at one another. Sir Horace sought inspiration in his boots, and presently found it. "Wonder who did it, then?" he burst out at last.

"Ah! I wonder," replied the ex-minister, descending at a bound from the cloudland to which his thoughts had borne him. "I never pushed the inquiry; you know why now. But they should be able to enlighten us at the *Times* office. We could learn in whose handwriting the copy was, at any rate. It is not well to have spies about us."

"I can tell you in whose handwriting they say it was," Sir Horace said bluntly.

"In whose?"

"In Atlay's."

Mr. Stafford did not look surprised. Instead of answering he thought. As a result of which he presently left the room in silence. When he came back he had a copy of the *Times* in his hand, and

his face wore a look of perplexity. "I have read the riddle," he said, "and yet it is a riddle to me still. I never found time to read the report of my speech at the Club. It occurred to me to look at it now. It is full of errors; so full that it is clear the printer had not the corrected proof Atlay prepared. Therefore I conclude that Atlay's copy of the terms went to the *Times* instead of the speech. But how was the mistake made?"

"That is the question."

It happened that the private secretary came into the room at this juncture. "Atlay," Mr. Stafford said at once, "I want you. Carry your mind back a week-to this day week. Are you sure that you sent the report of my speech at the Club to the *Times?*"

"Am I sure?" the other replied confidently, nothing daunted by being so abruptly challenged. "I am quite sure I did, sir. I remember the circumstances. I found the report-it was type-written you remember-lying on the blotting-pad when I came down before dinner. I slipped it into an envelope, and put it in the box. I can see myself doing it now."

"But how do you know that it was the report you put in the envelope?"

"You had indorsed it 'Corrected speech. – W. Stafford,'" Atlay replied triumphantly.

"Ah!" Mr. Stafford said, dropping his hands and eyes and sitting down suddenly, "I remember! My wife came in, and-yes, my wife came in."

THE SURGEON'S GUEST

CHAPTER I

"To be content," said the carrier, "that is half the battle. If I have said it to one, I have said it to a hundred. You be content," says I, "and you will be all right."

For the first time, though they had plodded on a mile together, the tall gentleman turned his eyes from the sombre moorland which stretched away on either side of the road, and looked at his companion. There had been something strange in the preoccupation of his thoughts hitherto; though the carrier, lapped in his own loquacity, had not felt it. And, to tell the truth, there had been something still more strange in the tall gentleman's behaviour before their meeting. Now he had raced along the road and now he had loitered; sometimes he had stood still, letting his eyes stray over the dark groups of heather, which lay islanded in a sea of brown grass; and again he had sauntered onwards, his hat in his hand and his face turned up to the sky, which hung low over the waste, and had yet the breadth of a fen cloudscape. Whatever the eccentricity of his lonely movements, his tall hat and fluttering frock-coat had exaggerated it.

At length on the summit of one of the ridges over which the road ran he had made a longer halt, and had begun to look about

him to right and left, seeking, it seemed, for a track across the moss. Then he had caught sight of the carrier plodding up the next ridge at the tail of his cart, and he had started after him. But having almost overtaken him, he had reduced his pace and loitered as if his desire for human company had faded away. He had even paused as though to return. But a glance at the desolate waste had determined him. He had walked on again, and had overtaken and fallen to talking with the carrier. The latter on his part had been glad to have a companion, and had readily set down what was odd in the stranger's bearing to the cause which accounted for his costume. The tall gentleman was a Londoner.

"'You be content,' says I," quoth the old fellow again, his companion's tardy attention encouraging him to repeat his statement, "'and you will be all right.' I have told that to hundreds in my time."

"And you practise it yourself?" The tall gentleman's voice was husky. His eyes, now that they had found their way to the other's face, continued to dwell on it with a gleam in their depths which matched the pallor of his features. His forehead was high, his face long and thin, and lengthened by a dark brown beard which hid the working of his lips. A nervous man meeting his gaze might have had strange thoughts. But the carrier's were country nerves, and proof against anything short of electricity.

"Oh yes, I am pretty well content," Nickson answered sturdily. "I have twenty acres of land from the duke, and I turn a penny with the carrying, going into Sheffield twice a week, rain and

shine. Then I have as good a wife as ever kissed her man, and neither chick nor child, and no more than three barren ewes this lambing."

"My God!" said the stranger.

The words seemed wrung from him by a twinge of mental pain, but whether the feeling was envy of the man's innocent joys, or disgust at his simplicity, did not appear. Whatever the impulse, the tall gentleman showed an immediate consciousness that he had excited his companion's astonishment. He began to talk rapidly, even gesticulating a little. "But is there no drawback?" he said-"no bitter in your life, man? This long journey-ten-eleven miles? – and the same journey home again? Do you never find it cold, hot, dreary, intolerable?"

"It is cold enough some days, and hot enough some days," the carrier replied heartily. "But dreary? – never! And cold and heat are but skin deep, you know."

The tall gentleman let his head fall on his breast, and for some distance walked on in silence. The carrier whistled to his horse, the cry of a peewit came shrilling across the moor, one wheel of the cart squeaked loudly for grease. The evening was grey and still, and rain impended.

"It is all downhill after this," Nickson said presently, pointing to the sky-line, now less than a hundred yards ahead. "You see that stone there, sir?" he continued, and pointing with his whip to a stone lying a little off the road. "There was a man died in the snow there. Three years back it would be. I went by him myself

for a month and more, and took him for a dead sheep. At last a keeper passing that way turned him over with his foot, and-well, he was a sad sight, poor chap, by that time."

The carrier should have been pleased with the effect his story produced; for the stranger shuddered. His face even seemed a shade paler, but this might be the effect of the evening light. He did not make any comment, however, and the two stepped out until they gained the summit of the ridge. Here the moor fell away on every side-a dark sweep of waste bounded by uncouth round-backed hills, which rose shapeless and grey, with never a graceful outline or soaring peak to break the horizon.

"You will take a lift down the hill, sir?" the carrier asked, gathering up his reins and preparing to mount. "I am light to-day."

"No, I think not-I thank you," the stranger answered jerkily.

"You are welcome, if you will," persisted the carrier.

"No, I think not. I think I will walk," the tall gentleman answered. But he still stood, and watched the other's preparations with strange intentness. Even when Nickson, having wished him good day, drove briskly off, he continued to gaze after the cart until a dip in the descent-not far below-swallowed it up. Then he heaved a sigh, and looked round at the grey sky and darkening heath. He took off his hat.

"Hold up! what is the matter with the mare?" the carrier cried, coming to a stop as soon, as it chanced, as the dip in the road hid him from the other's eyes. "She has picked up a stone, drat it!"

He got down stiffly, and taking his knife from his pocket went to the mare's head. Having removed the stone he dropped the hoof, and stood a second while he closed the knife. In this momentary pause there came to his ear a sharp report like that of a gun, but brisker and less loud. It was difficult to suppose it the sound of a snapping stick; or of one stone struck against another. It puzzled Master Nickson, who climbed hastily to his seat again and drove on until he was clear of the dip. Then, swearing at himself for an old fool, he looked anxiously back at the top of the ridge, which had come into view again. He was looking for the tall gentleman. But the latter was not to be seen, either standing against the sky-line or moving on the intervening road. "Lord's sakes!" the carrier muttered uneasily, "what has become of him? He cannot have gone back!"

He continued to stare for some moments at the place where the stranger should have been. At last giving way to a sudden conviction, he got down from his cart, and, leaving it standing, hurried back through the dip, and so to the top of the ridge. The ascent was steep, and he was breathing heavily when he reached the summit and cast his eyes round him. No, the tall gentleman was not to be seen. The brown grass and heather stretched away on this side and that, broken by no human figure. Not even a rabbit was visible on the long white strip of road that in the far distance grew hazy with the fall of night.

"The devil!" the carrier said, shuddering, and feeling more lonely than he had ever felt in his life. "Then he has gone, and-"

He stopped. His eyes were on a dark bundle of clothes that lay a little aside from the road between two clumps of heather. Just a bundle of clothes it seemed, but Master Nickson drew in his breath at sight of it. The peewits and curlews had gone to rest. There was not a sound to be heard on the wide moor, save the beating of his heart.

He would have given pounds to drive on with a clear conscience, yet he forced himself to go up to the huddled form, and to turn it over until the face was exposed. There was a pistol near the right hand, and behind the ear there was a small, a very small hole, from which the blood welled sluggishly. Round this the skin was singed and blackened. The eyes were closed, and the pale face, thoughtful and placid, was scarcely disfigured.

Suddenly Master Nickson fell on his knees. "Dang me, if I don't think he is alive!" he whispered. "For sure, he breathes!"

Convinced of it, the carrier sprang to his feet a different man. He lost not a moment in bringing his cart to the spot and lifting the insensible form into it. Then he led the horse to the road, and started gingerly down the hill. "It is a mercy it happened right at the doctor's door," he muttered, as he turned off the road into a track which seemed to lead through the heather to nowhere in particular. "If he lives five minutes longer he will be in good hands."

A stranger would have wondered where the doctor lived; for there was no signs of a house to be seen. But when the wheels had rolled noiselessly over the sward a hundred yards a faint curl

of smoke became visible, rising from the ground in front. A few more paces brought the tops of trees to view, and nestling among them the gables of an old stone house, standing below the level of the moor in a gully or ravine, that here began to run down from the watershed towards Bradfield and the Loxley. The track Nickson was following led to a white gate, which formed the entrance to this lonely demesne.

The carrier found assistance sooner than he had expected. Leaning against the inner side of the gate, with her back to him, was a tall girl. She was bending over a fiddle, drawing from it wailing sounds that went well with the waste behind her and the fading light. Her head swayed in time, her elbow moved slowly. She did not hear the wheels, and he had to call, "Whisht! Miss Pleasance, whisht!" before she heard and turned.

He could see little of her face, for in the hollow the light was almost gone, but her voice as she cried, "Is that you, Nickson? Have you something for us?" rang out so cheerily that it strung his nerves anew.

"Yes, miss," he answered. "But it is your father I want. I have got a man here who has been hurt-"

"What? In the cart?" she cried. She stepped forward and would have looked in. But he was before her.

"No, miss, you fetch your father!" he said sharply. "It is just a matter of minutes, maybe. You fetch him here, please."

She understood now, and turned and sped through the shrubbery, and across the little rivulet and the lawn. In five

minutes the grey house, which had stood gaunt and lifeless in the glooming, was aroused. Lights flitted from window to window, and servants called to one another. The surgeon, a tall, florid, elderly man, with drooping white moustaches, came out, after snatching up one or two necessary things. The groom hastened behind him with a candle. Only Pleasance, the messenger of ill, whom her father had bidden stay in the house, had nothing to do in the confusion. She laid down her violin and bow, and stood in the darkness of the outer room-it was half hall, half parlour-listening and wondering.

The sound of heavy footsteps crunching the gravel presently warned her that the man was to be brought into the house. She heard her father direct the other bearers to make for his room, which was on the left of the hall, and her face grew a shade paler as the men stumbled with their burden through the doorway. There is something monstrous to the unaccustomed in limbs which fall lifeless, or stick out stiff and stark in ghastly prominence. She averted her face as the group passed her, and yet managed to touch the groom's sleeve. "What is it, Daniel?" she whispered.

"He has been shot, miss," the servant answered. He was enjoying himself hugely, if the truth be told.

She had no time to ask more. The door was shut upon her, and she was left alone with her curiosity. She wondered how it had happened, for this was not the shooting season, and Nickson had spoken of the man as a stranger. She pondered over the

problem until the maids, who were too much upset to stay in their own quarters, came into the room with lights. Then she stepped outside, and stood on the gravel listening to the murmur of the brook, and looking at the old sundial which gleamed white on the lawn.

She had been there no more than a minute when the doctor-as every one in those parts called him-came out with Nickson. Carefully closing the door behind him-an extraordinary precaution with one who was usually the most easy-going of men-he laid his hand on his companion's shoulder. "Why did he do it, Nickson?" he asked in a low voice, which was not free from tremor. "Can you tell me? Have you any idea? He is dressed as a gentleman, and he has a gold watch and money in his pockets."

Their eyes were new to the darkness, and they did not see her, though she was within earshot, and was listening with growing comprehension. "It beats me to say, sir," was Nickson's answer-"that it does. If you will believe me, sir, he was talking to me, just before he did it, as reasonably as ever man in my life."

"Then what the devil was it?"

"That is what I think, sir," the carrier answered, nodding.

"What?"

"It was just the devil, sir."

"Pshaw!" the doctor returned pettishly. "You are sure that he did it himself?"

"As sure as I can be of anything!" the carrier answered. "There was not a human creature barring myself within half a mile of

him when the pistol went off-no, nor could have been."

"Well," the doctor said, after a pause, and in a tone of vexation, "it is no good bringing in the police unless he dies, and I don't think he will. He has had a wonderful escape. I suppose you will not go blabbing it about, Nickson?"

"Heaven forbid!" the carrier replied. And after a few more words took his leave.

They went without discovering the listener, and she slipped into the lighted hall and stood there shivering. The darkness outside frightened her. It seemed to hold some secret of despair. Even in the familiar room, in which every faded rug and dusty folio and framed sampler had its word of everyday life for her, she looked fearfully at the closed door which led to her father's room. She shrank from turning her back upon it. She kept glancing askance at it. When her father came to supper, she could not meet his eye; and he must have noticed her strangeness had he not been absorbed in the riddle presented to him, in thoughts of his patient's case, and perhaps in some painful train of meditation induced by it. Such questions as his daughter put he answered absently, and he ate in the same manner, breaking off once to visit his charge. It was only when the preparations for the night were complete, when the maids had retired, and Pleasance was waiting, candlestick in hand, to say good night, that he spoke out.

"When is Woolley coming back?" he asked with a sigh.

"The twenty-eighth, father," she answered. She betrayed no surprise at the question, though it was one he could have

answered for himself. Woolley was his assistant, and was absent on a holiday tour.

He was silent a moment. His tone was querulous, his eye wandered when he spoke next. "I thought-I did think that we should have this little bit to ourselves, Pleasance," he complained. And he seemed shrunken. His fierce moustaches and his florid colour no longer hid his weakness of moral fibre. He looked years older than when he had bent with professional alertness over his patient. Something in that patient's strange case had come home to him and unmanned him. "This little bit," he continued, looking at her wistfully, "though it be the last, girl."

"It will not be the last, father," she answered, meeting his look without flinching. "We shall stay together whatever happens."

"Ay, but where, child?" he cried with passion, throwing out his hands as though he appealed to the dumb things around him-"where? Do you think to transplant me? I am too old. I have lived here too long-I and my fathers before me for six generations, though I am but a broken country apothecary-for me to take root elsewhere! Why, girl" – his voice rose higher-"there is not a stone of this old place, not a tree, that I do not know, that I do not love, that I would not rather own than a mile of streets!"

To her surprise he broke down and turned away to hide the tears in his eyes-tears which it pained her deeply to see. She knew how weak he was, and what cause she had to blame him in this matter. But his tears disarmed her, and she laid her hand on his and stroked it tenderly. "How much do you owe Mr. Woolley,

father?" she asked, when he had recovered himself.

"Three thousand pounds," he answered, almost sullenly.

He had never told her before, and she was appalled. "It is a large sum," she said, looking at the faded cushions on the window-seats, the fly-blown prints, the well-worn furniture, which made the room picturesque indeed, but shabby. "What can have become of it?"

He made a reckless movement with his hand-he still had his back towards her-as though he flung something from him.

She sighed. She had not intended to reproach him, for economy was not one of her own strong points; and she remembered bills owing as well as bills paid, and many a good intention falsified. No, she could not reproach him; and she chose to look at the matter from another side. "It is a great deal of money," she repeated. "Would he really let all that go if-just to marry me?"

"To be sure!" her father said briskly. "That is," he continued, his conscience pricking him, "it would be the same thing then. The place would come to him anyway."

"I see," she answered dryly. She was always pale-though hers was a warm paleness-but now there were dark shadows under her eyes. They were grey eyes, frank and resolute, now sad and scornful also. As she sat upright in a high-backed chair, with the forgotten candle in her hand and her gaze fixed on vacancy, she seemed to be gazing at the Skeleton of the House. It was a skeleton which she and her father kept for the most part locked

up. Possibly it had never been brought so completely to view before.

"You will think of it?" the doctor presently ventured, stealing a glance at her.

"I may think till Doomsday," she answered wearily. "I shall never do it."

"Why not?" he persisted. "What have you against him?"

"Only one thing."

"What is it?" A gleam of hope sparkled in his eyes as he put the question. A definite accusation he might combat and refute; even a prejudice he might overcome. He prepared himself for the effort. "What is it?" he repeated.

"I do not love him, father," she said. "I think I hate him."

"So do I!" the doctor sighed, sinking suddenly into himself again. Alas for his preparations!

CHAPTER II

It was characteristic of both Pleasance and her father-and particularly characteristic of the latter-that when they met at breakfast next morning they ignored the trouble which had seemed so overwhelming at midnight. The doctor was constitutionally careless. It was his nature to live from day to day, plucking the flowers beside his path, without giving thought to the direction in which the path was leading him. Pleasance was careless too, but with a difference. She did not shut her eyes to the prospect; but she was young and sanguine, and she was confident-of a morning at any rate-that a way of escape would be found. So the doctor gazed through the window as cheerfully as if his title-deeds had been his own; and if Pleasance felt any misgivings, they related rather to the man lying in the next room than to her own case.

"How is he, father?" she asked. "Have you been kept awake much?" The doctor had spent the night on a sofa in order that he might be near the stranger.

"He is not conscious," Doctor Partridge answered, "but I think that the brain is recovering from the shock, and if all goes well he will come to himself in a few hours." Pleasance shuddered. Her father, without noticing it, went on: "But he ought not to be left alone, and I must see my patients. It is useless to ask the servants to stay with him-they are as nervous as hares. So you must sit

with him for an hour or two after breakfast, Pleasance. There is no help for it."

"I?" she said.

"Yes, to be sure; why not?" he answered lightly. "You are not afraid, I suppose? There is nothing to be done, and Daniel can be within call."

She gulped down her fears and assented. She was a good girl, though she could not keep the housekeeping bills-nor her own bills, for the matter of that-within bounds. She was used to a lonely life-Sheffield lay nine miles away, and there were few neighbours on the moorland; and her nerves had been braced by many a long ramble over the ling and bracken, where the hill sheep were her only companions.

Yet she might have answered otherwise had she known that, while the words were on her father's lips, he questioned the wisdom of his proposal. The man might on coming to his senses-the doctor did not think he would-but he might repeat his attempt. And then-

Her answer, however, clenched the matter. When they rose from breakfast the doctor said, "Now my dear, come, and I will put you in charge."

She followed him. It was a relief to her to discover-from the threshold of the room-that the bed had been moved, so that the light might not fall on the patient's face. In its new position a curtain hid him. The doctor set a chair for her behind the curtain, and she sat down outwardly calm, inwardly trembling. He went

himself to the bedside, and stood for a moment gazing with a critical eye. Then he nodded to her and went softly out.

He left the door ajar, and she heard him ride away. She heard too Daniel's clumsy footsteps as he came back through the house, and the clatter of the china as Mary washed it in the kitchen. But these homely sounds served only to heighten her dislike for her task. She was not afraid. She no longer trembled. But she shrank almost with loathing from contact with her wretched companion. She conjured up a dreadful picture of him-ghastly and disfigured-defiant and hopeless-self-doomed.

He lay perfectly still. The curtain too on which her eyes dwelt hung motionless. And presently there began to grow upon her a feeling and a fear that he was dead. She fought with it, and more than once shook it off. But it returned. At length she could bear it no longer, and she rose in the silence, her breath coming quickly. She took a step towards the bed, paused, stepped on, and stood where her father had stood.

"Water!"

Before the faintly whispered word had ceased to sound she was halfway to the carafe. Where was the loathing now? She brought a little water in the tumbler, and held it to his lips. "Do not speak again," she said softly. "You are in good hands. The doctor will return in a few minutes."

She watched the weary dazed eyes close; then she went back to her chair as though she had been a trained nurse and this the most ordinary case in the world. But she was immensely puzzled. The

picture of the patient as he really was remained with her, causing her to wonder exceedingly how such a man had come to attempt his life. The face handsome despite its bandages and pallor, the eyes kindly even in stupor, were features the very opposite of those which she had ascribed to the dark creature of her fancy.

When her father returned she flew to tell him what had happened. He entered and saw the patient, and came out again. "Yes," he said in his professional tone, "if he can be kept quiet for forty-eight hours he will do. Fever is the only thing to be feared. But he must not be left alone, and I have to go to Ashopton. Do you mind being with him?"

"Not at all."

This time the easy-going doctor did not hesitate. He muttered something about Daniel being within call, and, snatching a hasty meal, got to horse again.

The case at Ashopton proved to be serious. It led to complications, and even to a consultation with a London physician. And so it happened that that day, and the next, and the next, Pleasance was left in charge at home. The stranger, as his senses returned to him-and with them Heaven knows what thoughts of the past and the future, what thankfulness or remorse-grew accustomed to look to her hands for tendance. A woman can scarcely perform such offices without pitying the object of them; and Pleasance after the first morning came to wait upon the stranger's call and minister to his wants without the disturbing remembrance that his own act had brought him to this.

Away from the bedside she shuddered; beside it she forgot. In the mean time the tall gentleman, who at first lay gazing upwards, taciturn and still, came more and more to follow her with his eyes as she moved to and fro in his service. None the less he remained grave and smileless, speaking little even when he began to sit up, and saying nothing from which the current of his thoughts could be judged.

"Father," she said one morning, when they had gone on in this way for several days, "do you think that he is quite sane?"

"Sane? yes, as sane as any of us," was the uncompromising answer. "Indeed," the doctor continued, looking at her sharply, "more sane than you will be if you stop in the house so much, my girl. Leave him to himself this morning and go out. Walk till lunch."

She assented, and, the weather being soft and bright, she started in excellent spirits. As she climbed she thought that the moorland had never looked more beautiful, the distance more full of colour. But this mood proved less lasting than the May weather. Reaching the brow of the hill, she turned to look down on the Old Hall, and the sudden reflection that it must pass to strangers fell on her like a cold shadow. The tears rushed to her eyes, the walk was spoiled. She came back early, wondering at her own depression.

As she emerged from the shrubbery she saw with surprise two figures standing on the lawn. One was her father. The other-could it be Edgar Woolley come back before his time? No; this man

was taller and paler, with an air of distinction which the surgeon lacked. She drew near, and her father, not seeing her, went into the house; while the other sank into an arm-chair which had been set for him, and turned and saw her. He rose with an effort, and raised his hat as she approached. It was the tall gentleman.

The fact annoyed the girl. It was one thing, she thought, to nurse him when he lay helpless, another to associate with him. She made up her mind to pass him with a frigid bow. But at the last moment the sight of his weakness melted her, and she paused on the threshold to tell him that she was glad to see him out.

"Thank you," he answered. He spoke very quietly; but a slight flush came and went on his brow. Probably he understood her hesitation.

Within doors a fresh surprise awaited her. She found the table laid for lunch, and laid for three. "Father!" she cried, in a tone of vexation, "is he going to take his meals with us?"

"Where else is he to take them?" the doctor answered gruffly, looking up from the old bureau at which he was writing. "Would you send him to the servants? If he is left alone in his room, he will go mad in earnest."

He spoke gruffly because he knew he was wrong. He knew no more of the tall gentleman, or of his reason for doing what he had done, than he knew of the man in the moon. That the stranger dressed and spoke like a gentleman, that there was no mark on his linen, that he had a watch and money in his pockets, and that he had tried to take his life-this was the sum of the doctor's

knowledge; and he could not feel that these matters rendered the stranger a fit companion for his daughter. But the doctor had not strength of mind to grapple with the difficulty, and he let things slide.

Pleasance would not discuss the question, but at the meal she sat silent and cold. The doctor was uncomfortable, and talked jerkily. A shadow-but it seemed more than temporary-darkened the stranger's face. At the earliest possible moment Pleasance withdrew.

When she came down she found that the tall gentleman had retired to his room, and she saw nothing more of him that evening. Next day, the post brought a letter from Woolley, postponing his return for a day or two, and this sent the doctor on his rounds in high spirits. Pleasance herself, moving upstairs about her domestic business, felt more charitable. There might be something in what her father said about leaving the poor man to himself. She would go down presently, and talk to him, preserving a due distance.

She had scarcely made up her mind to this when she chanced to look through the window, and saw the stranger walking slowly across the lawn. She watched him for a moment in idle curiosity, wondering in what class he had moved, and what had brought him to this. Then she noticed the direction he was taking, and on the instant a dreadful fear flashed into the girl's mind, and made her heart stand still. Below the lawn the rivulet formed a pool among the trees He was going that way, glancing sombrely

about him as he went.

Pleasance did not stay to think-to add up the chances. She flung the door open, and ran down the stairs. She reached the lawn. He was not to be seen, but she knew which way he had gone, and she darted down the path that led to the water. She turned the corner-she saw him! He was standing gazing into the dark pool, his back towards her, in an attitude of profound melancholy. She ran on unfaltering until she reached him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"What are you doing?" she cried, on the impulse of her great fear.

He turned with a violent start, and found the girl's pale face and glowing eyes close to his. He looked ghastly enough. There was a bandage round his head, under the soft hat which the doctor had lent him; and in the surprise of the moment the colour had fled from his face. "Doing?" he muttered, trembling in her grasp. And his eyes dilated-his nerves were still suffering from the shock of his wound, and probably from some long strain which had preceded it. "Doing? Yes, I understand you."

He uttered the last words with a groan and a distortion of the features. "Come away!" she cried, pulling at his arm.

He let her lead him away. He was so weak that apparently he could not have returned without her help. Near the upper end of the walk there was a rustic seat, and here he signed to her to let him sit down, and she did so. When he had somewhat recovered himself he said faintly, "You are mistaken; I came here

by chance."

She shook her head, looking down at him solemnly. She was still excited, taken out of herself by her terror.

"It is true," he said feebly. "I swear it."

"Swear that you will not think of it again," she responded.

"I swear," he answered.

She gazed at him awhile. Then she said, "Wait!" She went quickly back to the house, and returned with some wine. "Perhaps I startled you without cause," she said, smiling on him. He had not seen her smile before. "I must make amends. Drink this."

He obeyed. "Now," she said, "you must take my arm and go back to your chair."

He assented as a child might, and when he reached the chair he sank into it with a sigh of relief. She stood beside him. The back of his seat was towards the house, and before him an opening in the shrubbery disclosed a shoulder of the ravine rolling upwards, the gorse on one rugged spur in bloom, the sunshine everywhere warming the dull browns and lurking purples into brilliance.

"See!" she said, with an undertone of reproach in her voice, "is not that beautiful? Is not that a thing one would regret?"

"Yes, beautiful now," he replied, answering her thought rather than her words. "But I have seen it under another aspect. Stay!" he continued, seeing she was about to answer. "Do not judge me too hastily. You cannot tell what reason I had-what-"

"No!" she retorted, "I cannot. But I can guess what grief you

would have caused to others, what a burden you would have shifted to weaker shoulders, what duties you would have avoided, what a pang you would have inflicted on friends and relations! For shame!" She stopped for lack of breath.

"I have no relatives," he answered slowly, "and few friends. I have no duties that others would not perform as well. My death would cause sorrow to some, joy to as many. My burden would die with me."

She glanced at him with compressed lips, divining that he was reciting arguments he had used a score of times to his own conscience. But she was puzzled how to answer him. "Take all that for granted," she said at last. "Are there no reasons higher than these which should have deterred you?"

"It may be so," he replied. "Perhaps I think so now."

She felt the admission a victory, and, seeing he had recovered his composure, she left him and went into the house. But the incident had one lasting effect. It broke down the wall between them. She felt that she knew him well-better than many whom she had owned as acquaintances for years. The confidence surprised in a moment of emotion cannot be recalled. It seemed idle for her to affect to keep him at arm's length when she knew, if she did not acknowledge, that he had confessed his sin, and been forgiven.

So when she saw him walking feebly from the house next day she went with him, and showed him where he could rest and where obtain a view without climbing. Afterwards she fell

naturally into the habit of going with him; and little by little, as she saw more of him, she owned the spell of a new perplexity. Who was he? He talked of things in a tone novel to her. He seemed to have thought deeply and read much. He spoke of visits to this country, to that country. One day her father found him reading their day-old *Times*, and took it from him. "You must not do that yet," the doctor said. "My daughter can read to you, if you like, but not for long."

She asked what she should read. He chose a review of a historical work, and gently rejected the passing topics-even a speech by Lord Hartington. This gave her an idea, and she privately searched the back numbers of the paper, but could not find that any one who resembled him was missing. Yet he had been with them almost three weeks; he had received no letters, he had sent none. How could such a man pass from his circle and cause no inquiry? Here at the Old Hall they knew no more of him than on his coming. He had not offered to disclose his name, and his host, who had fallen under his spell, had not plucked up courage to ask for it, or for an explanation-had come, indeed, to no understanding with him at all.

It is possible that of himself the doctor might have gone on unsuspicious to the last. But one afternoon, as he made up his books at the old bureau in the hall-the door being open and a flood of sunshine pouring through it-he was aware on a sudden of a shadow cast across the boards. He looked up. A middle-sized fair man, with a goatee beard and a fresh complexion, was setting

down a bag on the floor and beginning to take off his gloves. "Why, Woolley!" exclaimed the doctor, gazing at him feebly, "is it you? We did not expect you until Monday."

"No, but you see I have come to-day," the traveller answered. It was a peculiarity of this young man-he was not very young, say thirty-eight-that when he was not well pleased he smiled. He smiled now.

The doctor rubbed his hands to hide a little embarrassment. "Yes, I see you have come," he said. "But how? Did you walk from Sheffield?"

"I came with Nickson."

The doctor stopped rubbing, then went on faster, as his thoughts flew from Nickson to the tall gentleman, and for some mysterious reason from the tall gentleman to Pleasance. He had never consciously traced this connection before, but something in his assistant's face helped him to it now.

"He tells me," Woolley continued, making a neat ball of his gloves and smiling at the floor, "that you had a strange case here, a case he was mixed up with, and that you made a cure of it."

"Yes."

"The fellow has cleared out, I suppose?"

"Well, no," the doctor stammered, feeling warm. How odd it was that he had never seen into what a pit of imprudence he was sinking! He had been harbouring a lunatic, or one who had acted as a lunatic-a criminal certainly; in no light a person fit to associate with his daughter. "No, he is still here," he stammered.

"I think-I suppose he will be leaving in a day or two!"

"Here still, is he?" Woolley said with a sneer. "A queer sort of parlour-boarder, sir. May I ask where he is at present?"

"I think he is out of doors somewhere."

"Alone?"

When the doctor thought over the scene afterwards he whistled when his memory brought him to that "Alone." He knew then that the fat was in the fire. He saw that Woolley had pumped the carrier-who had been to the house several times since the affair-and drawn his own conclusions. "I rather think," he ventured, "I am not sure, but I think-"

"I do not think," the other said dryly, "I see."

He pointed through the open door, and alas! the tall gentleman and Pleasance were visible approaching the house. They had that moment emerged from the shrubbery, and were crossing the lawn. The girl was carrying a basket full of marsh marigolds, the man had a great bush of hawthorn on the end of his stick. They were both looking at the front of the house without a thought that other eyes were upon them. Pleasance's face, on which the light fell strongly, was far from gay, her smile but a sad one; yet there was a tenderness in the one and the other which was not calculated to reassure a jealous onlooker.

"So!" Woolley muttered, his fingers closing like a vise on the doctor's arm. "Let me deal with this."

CHAPTER III

The walk which roused so much indignation in Edgar Woolley's breast had been one of more than common interest; as perhaps something in the faces of the returning couple assured him. There is a point in the journey towards intimacy at which one or other of the converging pair turns the conversation inwards, disclosing his or her hopes, fears, ambitions. Pleasance in the purest innocence had reached this stage to-day; arriving at it by the road of that silence which is tolerable only when some progress has been made towards friendship, and which even then invites attack. The tall gentleman, having lopped and picked at her bidding, gathered up the last scraps of the hawthorn which he had ruthlessly broken from the tree. He turned to find his companion gazing into distance with a shadow on her face. "Your thoughts are not pleasant ones, I fear," he said, half lightly, half seriously. "A penny were too much for them."

"I was thinking of Mr. Woolley," she answered simply.

"Indeed!" he said, surprised. He was more surprised when she poured out of a full heart the story of her father's debt to his assistant, and of the mortgage on the old house which the Partridges had owned for generations, and which was to her father as the apple of his eye. She let fall no word of Woolley's position in regard to herself. But the voice has subtle inflections, and men's apprehensions are quick where they are interested-and

he was interested here. Her story omitted little which he could not conjecture.

"I am sorry to hear this," he said, after a pause. "But money troubles-after all, money troubles are not the worst troubles." He raised his hat and walked for a moment bareheaded.

"But this is not merely a money trouble," she answered warmly. She was wrapped up in her own distresses, and did not perceive at the moment that he had reverted to his. "We shall lose *that*."

They had reached the crown of the hill, and as she spoke she pointed to the Old Hall lying below them, its four gables, its stone front, its mullioned windows warmed into beauty by lichens and sunlight. "We shall lose that!" she repeated, pointing to it.

"Yes," the stranger said, with a quick glance at her. "I understand. And I do not wonder that it grieves you. It has always been your home, I suppose?" She nodded. "And your father thinks it must go?" he continued, after a pause given to deep thought, as it seemed.

"He thinks so."

"Something should be done!" he replied, in a tone of decision. "I conclude from what you say that Mr. Woolley is pressing for his money?"

She nodded again. Her eyes were full of tears, which the sight of the house had brought to them, and she could not trust herself to speak. His sympathy seemed natural to her, so that she saw nothing at this minute strange in his position. She forgot that

only a few days or weeks earlier he had been in the blackness of despair himself. He talked now as if he could help others!

They were close to the house, and he had referred to the mouldering shield over the doorway, and she was telling its story when she checked herself and stood still. Edgar Woolley had emerged, and was standing before them with a flush of triumph on his check. The tall gentleman could scarcely be in doubt who he was; nor could Woolley well take Pleasance's involuntary cry for a sign of gladness-though he strove to force the smile which was habitual to him.

"Miss Pleasance," he said, "will you step inside? Your father is asking for you."

"Where is he?" she asked. He had used no form of greeting, neither did she. Something-perhaps not the same thing in each-was at work, kindling the one against the other.

"He is in the hall," he answered, chafing at her delay.

She turned to her companion. "I will take your flowers in, if you please," she said. She held out her arms as she spoke, and he laid the pile in them, Woolley looking on the while. The assistant's gaze was bent on her, and he did not see what she saw-that some strong emotion was distorting the tall gentleman's face. He turned a livid white, his nostrils twitched, and a little pulse in his cheek beat wildly.

She changed her mind, seeing that. "No, do you take them in," she said. "Will you take them in, please?" she repeated peremptorily; and she pushed the hawthorn into his arms, and

held out her basket. The stranger took the things with reluctance, but without demur, and went into the house.

"Now," she said, turning rapidly upon Woolley, "what do you want?"

"My answer?" he retorted, with answering curtness.

A second before he had not intended to say that. He had meant to carry the war into the stranger's country. But his temper mastered him for a second, and he found himself staking all, when he had planned an affair of outposts. "Wait, Miss Pleasance," he added desperately, seeing in a moment what he had done, and that he had committed himself. "I beg you not to give it me without thought-without thought of others, of me, of your father, as well as of yourself! Do not judge me hastily! Do not judge me," he continued passionately, for her face was icy, "by myself as I am now, Pleasance, wild with love of you, but-"

"By what then, Mr. Woolley?" she asked, her lip curling. "By what am I to judge you if not by yourself?"

"By-"

"Well?" she said mercilessly. He had paused. He could not find words. In truth, he had made a mistake. If he had ever had a chance of winning her his chance was gone now; and, recognising this, he let his fury grow to such a pitch that he could not wait for the answer he had requested. He was mad with love of her, with rage at his own mistake, with shame at being so outgeneralled. "I will tell you, Miss Partridge!" he cried, his eyes sparkling with passion; "Judge me by the future! That fellow who was with you,

do you know who he is? Do you know that I can put him in gaol any day? – ay, in goal!"

"What has he done?" she asked. "Tell me."

It was a pity he could not say, "He is a thief-a forger-a swindler!" The charge he could bring against the stranger was heavy enough; and yet he found it difficult to word it so that it should seem heavy. "You thought he was shot?" he said at last. "Bah! he shot himself."

"I know it," she answered, without the movement of a muscle.

He stared at her. How was it? he wondered. Before his departure he had been the Old Hall's master. He had wound the poor doctor round his finger, and Pleasance had been civil to him at least. Now all this was altered. And why? "Ah, well! He shall go to gaol, d-n him!" he said, putting his conclusion into words. "He shall go to gaol! and if you have a fancy for him you must go there to see him!"

She lost her self-possession under the insult, and her face turned scarlet. "You coward!" she said, with scorn. "You would not dare to say to his face what you have said behind his back. Let me pass!"

She swept into the house and left him standing in the sunlight. As she hurried through the hall, which to her dazzled eyes seemed dusky, she caught a glimpse of the tall gentleman leaning over the bureau with his back to her. Had he heard? The door was open, and so was one window. She could not be sure, but the suspicion was enough. Her face was on fire as she ran up the

stairs. How she hated, oh, how she hated that wretch out there! She thought that she had never known before what it was to hate.

For there was something in what he had said. There was the sting. How had she come to be so intimate with one who had done what the tall gentleman had done? She tried to trace the stages, but she could not. Then she tried to think of him with some of the horror, some of the distaste which she had felt at the time of his arrival, when he lay ghastly and blood-stained behind the closed door. But she could not. The face we have known a year can never put on for us the look it wore when we saw it first. The hand of time does not move backward. Pleasance found this was so, and in the solitude of her own room hid her face and trembled. Could anything but evil come of such a-a friendship?

Meanwhile Woolley's state of mind was even less enviable. Hitherto his way in the world had been made by the exercise of tact and self-control; and he valued himself upon the possession of those qualities. He could not understand why they had failed him at this pinch, or why the advantage he had so far enjoyed had deserted him now. Yet the secret was not far to seek. He was jealous; and when jealousy attacks him, the man who lives by playing on the passions of others falls to the common level. Jealousy undermines his judgment as certainly as passion deprives the fencer of his skill.

Though Woolley did not allow that this was the cause of his defeat, he knew that he could not command himself at present, and before seeking the doctor he took a turn to collect his

thoughts and arrange his plans. When he returned to the house he found the hall empty. He passed through it and down a short passage to a small room at the back, which Dr. Partridge used-especially in times of trouble, when bills poured in and he mediated a fresh loan-as a kind of sanctum. Woolley rapped at the door.

To his surprise no "Come in!" answered his knock, but some one rising hastily from his chair came to the door and opened it to the extent of a few inches. It was the doctor. He squeezed himself through. His face was agitated-but then the passage was ill lit, even on a summer afternoon-his manner nervous. "You want to see me, my dear fellow?" he said, holding the door close behind him and speaking effusively. "Do you mind coming back in a quarter of an hour or so? I am-I shall be disengaged then."

"I would prefer," Woolley said doggedly, "to see you now."

"Wait ten minutes, and you shall," the doctor replied, taking him by the button with his disengaged hand, as though he would bespeak his confidence. "At this moment, my dear fellow-excuse me!"

There was an odd tone in the doctor's voice-a tone half wheedling, half hostile. But Woolley concluded that Pleasance was with him-making a complaint in all probability; and this satisfied him. He thought that he could still depend on the doctor. With a sulky nod he gave way and returned to the lawn, and there he paced up and down, prodding the daisies with his stick. Things had gone badly with him. So much the worse for some one.

When he returned he found the doctor alone in the dingy little room, into which one plumped down two steps, so that it was very like a well. "Come in, come in," the elder man said fussily. "What is it, Woolley? What can I do for you?" As he spoke his hands were busy with the papers on the table. Moreover, after one swift glance, which he shot at his assistant's face on his entrance, he avoided looking at him. "What is it?"

"First," Woolley rejoined with acidity, "I should like to know whether you propose to keep that fellow in your house as a companion for your daughter?"

"The tall gentleman?"

"Precisely."

"He is gone!" was the unexpected answer. "He is gone already. If you doubt me, my dear fellow," the doctor added hastily, "ask the servants-ask Daniel."

"Gone, is he?" Woolley said gloomily, considering the statement.

"Yes, he quite saw the propriety of it," the doctor continued. "He gave me no trouble."

"And paid you no fees, I suppose?"

"Well, no, he did not."

"Then now to my second question, sir," Woolley went on, tapping with his fingers on the table. But try as he might, he could not quite rise to the old level of superiority, he could not drive the flush from his cheek or still his pulse. "What is your daughter's answer? From something which has passed between

us I conclude it to be unfavourable to me."

"Indeed?" the doctor said, looking at him blankly.

"But, favourable or unfavourable," Woolley continued, "I must have it betimes. You bade me go away and give her a month to think over it. I have done so, and I am back. Now I ask, What is her answer?"

"Well," the doctor said, rubbing his hands in great perplexity, "I have not-I am not sure that I am prepared to say. You must give me a little more time-indeed you must. Let us say until the day after to-morrow. I will sound her and give you a decisive answer then-after breakfast, and here if you like."

The suitor restrained himself. He longed to reject the proposal. But he did love her in his way, and at the sound of her father's uncertain utterance hope began to tell her flattering tale. "Very well!" he said. "But you understand, I hope," he continued, his manner curiously made up of shame and defiance, "the alternative, sir? If I am not to be allied to you, it will no longer suit me to have my money tied up here, and I must have it-the sooner the better."

"Well, well," the poor doctor said testily, "we will talk about that, Woolley, when the time comes."

There seemed to be nothing more to say. Yet Woolley lingered by the table, fingering the things on it without looking up. Perhaps an impulse to withdraw his threat and end the interview more kindly was working in him. If so, however, he crushed it down, and presently he took himself off. When his step ceased

to sound in the passage the doctor drew a sigh of relief.

It has been said that travellers along the moorland road which passes near the Old Hall-a road once frequented, but now little trodden, save by tramps-that travellers along it see nothing of the house. The house lies below the surface. In like manner a visitor arriving at the Old Hall itself during the next thirty-six hours would have observed nothing strange, though there was so much below the surface. The assistant contrived to be abroad at his work during the greater part of the intervening day. He judged that love-making would help him little now. The doctor rubbed his hands and talked fast to preserve appearances; and Pleasance as well as her suitor seemed to regret their joint outbreak. She was civil to him, if somewhat cold. So that when he knocked at the door of the little room-after a sleepless night in which he had pondered long how he should act at the coming interview-he had some hopes. He was feeling almost amiable.

The doctor was seated behind his table, Pleasance on a chair in the one small window recess. With three people in it the room looked more like a well than ever. With three people? Nay, with four. Woolley shut the door behind him very softly and set his teeth. For behind the doctor stood the tall gentleman.

The assistant smiled viciously. He was not prepared for this, but his nerves were strung to-day. "A trick?" he said, looking from one to another. "Very well. I know what to do. I can guess what my answer is to be, doctor, and need scarcely stay to hear it. Shall I go?"

"No! no!" the doctor replied, hurriedly. He was distressed and perturbed, perhaps by the menace which underlay the other's words. As for the tall gentleman, he gazed gravely over his beard, while Pleasance looked through the window, her face hot. "No, no, I have something to say which affects you. And this gentleman here-"

"Has he anything to say?" the assistant retorted, eyeing his antagonist. "I am ready to hear it-before I take out a warrant against him for attempting to commit suicide. It is punishable with a considerable imprisonment, my friend!"

"I am no friend of yours," was the stranger's reply, given very gravely. "You do not know me, Edgar Woolley."

The assistant started. It was the first time he had heard the tall gentleman's voice, and for a breathing space, while the looked two on one another, he seemed to be racking his memory. But he got no result, and he retorted with a bitter laugh, "No, I do not know you. Nor you me-yet!"

"Yes, I do," was the unexpected answer. "Too well!"

"Bah!" Woolley exclaimed, though it was evident that he was ill at ease. "Let us have an end of these heroics! If you have anything to say, say it."

"I will," the tall gentleman answered. He was still quiet, but there was a glitter in his eyes. "I have already outlined my story, now I must ask Dr. Partridge to hear it more at length. Many years ago there was a young man, almost a boy, employed in the offices of a great firm in Liverpool-a poor boy, very poor, but

of a good and an old family."

Woolley's smile of derision became fixed, so to speak. But he did not interrupt, and the other after a pause went on. "This lad made the acquaintance of a medical student a little older than himself, and was led by him-I think he was weak and sensitive and easily led-into gambling. He lost more than he could pay. His mother was a widow, almost without means. To meet the debt, small as it was, would have ruined her."

The stranger paused again, overcome, it seemed, by painful memories. There was a flush on Woolley's brow. The girl sitting in the window, her hands clasped on her knees, turned so as to see more of the room. "Now listen," the speaker continued, "to what happened. One day this clerk's friend, to whom the greater part of the money was due, came to the office at the luncheon hour and pressed him to pay. The other clerks were out. The two were alone together, and while they were alone there came in a client of the firm to pay some money. The lad took the money and gave a receipt. He had power to do so. The man left again, after telling them that he was starting to South America that evening. When he was gone" – here his voice sank a little-"the friend made a suggestion. I think you know what it was."

No one spoke.

"He suggested to the clerk to take this money and pay his debts with it-to steal it. The boy resisted for a time, but in the end, still telling himself he did not intend to steal it, he put it away in his desk and locked it up, and gave in no account of it. After that the

issue was certain. A day came when, the other still pressing him and tempting him, he took the money and used it, and became a thief."

The silence in the little room was deep indeed. On Woolley a spell had fallen. He would have interrupted the man, but he could not.

"Immediately after this," the speaker continued, "those two parted. Within a week-for the man had not gone to South America-the theft was discovered. The boy's employers were merciful-God reward them! They declined to prosecute; nay, they kept the matter secret, or as secret as it could be kept, and even found him work in their foreign office. He did not forget. He served them faithfully, and in the course of years he repaid the money with interest. Then-God's ways are not our ways-strange news reached this clerk. Three distant kinsmen whom he had never seen had died within three months, and the last of them had left him a large property. The name and the honour" – for the first time the tall gentleman's voice faltered-"of a great family had fallen upon his shoulders to wear and to uphold! And he was a thief!"

"*You*," he went on-and from this point he directly addressed the man who gazed at him from beyond the table-"*you* cannot enter into his feelings, nor understand them! It were folly to tell *you* that the remembrance that he had stained the honour and disgraced the name of his family poisoned his whole life. He tried-God knows he did-to make amends by a life of integrity,

and while his mother lived he led that life. But he found no comfort in it. She died, and he lived on alone in the house of his family, and it may be" – again his voice shook-"that he brooded overmuch on this matter, and came to take too morbid a view of it, to let it stand always between him and the sun." He stopped, and looked uncertainly about him.

"Yes, yes!" the doctor said. Pleasance had turned to the window, and was weeping softly. "He did, indeed!"

"Be that as it may, he met one day the manager of the firm he had robbed, and he read in the man's eyes that he remembered. And if he, why not others? He went out then, and he formed a resolution. You can guess what that was. It was a wild, mad, perhaps a wicked resolution. But such as it was-an ancestor in sterner times, writing in a book which this man possessed, had said, 'Blood washes out shame!'-such as it was he made it, and Heaven used it, and frustrated it in its own time. The lad, now a man, following blind chance, as he thought, was brought within a mile of this house-this one lonely house, of all others in England, in which you live. But it was not chance which led him, but Heaven's own guiding, to the end that his, Valentine Walton's life, might be spared, and that you might be punished."

Woolley struggled to reply. But the thought which the other's words expressed was in his mind also, and held him dumb. How had Walton been led to this house of all houses? Why had this forgotten sin risen up now? He stood awhile speechless, glaring at Walton; aware, bitterly aware, of what the listeners

were thinking, and yet unable to say a word in his defence. Then with an effort he became himself again.

"That is your version, is it?" he said, with a jeering laugh which failed to hide the effect the story had produced upon him. "You say you are a thief? It is not worth my while to contradict you. And now, if you please, we will descend from play-acting to business. You have been very kind in arranging this little scene, Dr. Partridge, and I am greatly obliged to you. I need only say that I shall take care to repay you to the last penny."

"First," the doctor said mildly, yet with dignity, "I should repay you what I owe you-if you really want your money now, that is."

"Want it? Of course I do!" was the fierce rejoinder. The man's nature was recovering from the shock, and in the rebound passion was getting the upper hand.

"Very well," said the doctor firmly. "Then here it is." He pushed aside a paper, and disclosed a small packet of notes and a pile of gold and silver. "You will find the amount on that piece of paper, and it includes your salary for the next quarter in lieu of notice. When you have seen that it is correct I shall be glad to have your receipt, and we will close our connection."

The trapped man had one wish-to see them dead before him. But wishes go for little, and in his rage and chagrin he clung to a shred of pride. He would not own that he had been outgeneralled. He sat down and wrote the quittance. The first pen-it was a quill-would not write. He jabbed it violently on the table, and flung it

with an oath into the fireplace. But the next served him.

"You have lent this money, I suppose," he said, looking at Walton as he rose. "More fool you! You will never be repaid."

He did not turn to Pleasance or look at her. He had come into the room hoping to win her in spite of all. He went out-a stranger. Not even their eyes had met. He had lost her, and revenge, and everything, save his money.

CHAPTER IV

Within doors a bedroom, littered and dismantled, showed a pile of luggage stacked in the middle of the floor. Without was a grey cloudy sky, such as we sometimes have in June, and a nipping east wind that blew roughly; a wind almost visible to the man moodily gnawing his nails at the window. He found no comfort within or without, in the past or the future. Behind him he had a retrospect of humiliation, of vain hopes and ambitions; before him no prospect but that dreary one of starting afresh in a new place among new people, unfriended, save by three thousand and odd pounds. It had come to this.

"D-n him!" he whispered between his clenched teeth. It was no formal expletive. He meant it-every letter of it.

By and by he turned from the window, and his eyes fell on a small article lying on the dressing-table. It was almost the only thing, save a stout walking-stick, which he had not packed up. It was a pistol. He had hit on it the day before in a dark nook behind the medicine bottles in the surgery; and finding it in good condition, with one barrel of the two undischarged, he had had no difficulty in conjecturing whose it was and how it came there. No doubt it was Walton's, the pistol with which he had shot himself-as indeed it was. Nickson had brought it to the doctor, and the latter with a natural distaste had thrust it into the first out-of-the-way place which lay ready to his hand.

This piece of evidence Woolley presently put in his pocket, and taking his stick left the room; leaving it, as he knew, for good, and not without a last bitter glance round the place where he had slept, and schemed, and hoped for two years. He went down the stairs, and through the house to the back door, seeing no one except Daniel, who was rubbing down the mare in the yard. To the surgeon's fancy the house, as he passed through it, seemed abnormally still; as if in the hush and silence which fall upon a house in the afternoon it awaited something-as if it knew that something strange was in the air, and all the stones were saying "Hist!"

Shaking off this feeling, the surgeon took a back path, which, passing through the shrubbery, came into the main drive near the white gate. From that point the track mounted between the bracken-covered flanks of the ravine until it emerged on the crown of the moor. In one place both path and glen turned at a sharp angle, and Woolley at this corner happened to lift his eyes. He stopped short with an exclamation. Before him, strolling slowly along in the same direction as himself, with his hands behind him and his eyes on the path, was the tall gentleman-Walton.

"Ah!" Woolley whispered to himself, hating the other the more for falling in his way now, "the devil take you for a mooning lunatic! I would like to give you in charge here, and this minute, and swear you were going to try it again!"

He laughed grimly at this, his first thought; a natural thought

enough, since his intention at starting had been to swear an information against Walton, and get him locked up if possible; at any rate, to cause him as much vexation as he could. But that first natural thought led to another which drove the blood from his cheek and kindled an unholy fire in his eyes. That revenge was a poor one. But was there not another within his grasp? What if Walton were found lying on the path shot and dead, his own pistol beside him?

Ah! what then? What would people say? Would they not say-would not Nickson be ready to swear that the madman had done it again, and with more thoroughness? Woolley's hand closed convulsively on the butt of the weapon in his pocket. One barrel of it was still loaded. No one had seen him take it. No one knew that he knew of its existence. Would not even the doctor conclude that Walton had repossessed himself of it, and in some temporary return of his moody aberration had used it-this time with fatal effect?

The perspiration stood on the tempted man's brow. Though the wind was blowing keenly, and a wrack of white clouds was sweeping over his head, the glen seemed to grow close and confined, roofed in by a leaden sky. "It is a devil's thought!" he muttered, his eyes on the figure before him, "a devil's thought!" At that moment there could be no question with him of the existence of a devil. He felt him at his elbow tempting him, promising revenge and impunity.

"No! Not that!" He rather gasped the words than said them,

yet gasped them aloud, the more thoroughly to convince himself that he did reject the idea. "Not that!"

No, not that. Yet he began to walk on at a pace which must bring him up with the other. His brain too dwelt on the ease and safety with which he might carry out the scheme. He remembered that before he turned the corner he had looked back and seen no one. Therefore for some minutes he was secure from interruption from behind. All round the ravine he could command the sky-line. There was one no visible. He and Walton were alone. And he was overtaking Walton.

The latter heard him walking behind him, and turned and stopped. He showed no surprise on discovering who his follower was, but spoke as if he had eyes in his back, and had watched him drawing gradually nearer. "I have been waiting for you, Woolley," he said. "I thought I should meet you."

"Did you?" Woolley said softly, eying him in a curious fashion, and himself very pale.

"Yes, I wanted to say this to you." There the tall gentleman paused and looked down, prodding the turf with his stick. He seemed to find a difficulty in going on. "It is this," he continued at last. "I have done you a mischief here, acting honestly, and doing only what seemed to me to be right. But I have harmed you-that is the fact-and I am anxious to know that you will not leave here a hardened man-a worse man than I found you."

"Thank you," the other said. His lips were dry, and he moistened them with his tongue. But he did not take his eyes

from Walton's face.

"If you will let me know," the tall gentleman continued haltingly-he was still intent upon the ground-"what your plans are, I will see if I can further them. Until lately I thought you had spoiled my life, and I bore you malice for it. I would have done you what harm I could. Now-"

"Yes?"

"I think-I trust it may not be so. I have dwelt too much on that old affair. I hope to begin a new life now."

"With her?"

The tall gentleman looked up, as if the other had struck him. There was menace in the tone, and menace more dreadful in the face and gleaming eyes which he found confronting him. "You fool!" Woolley hissed-passion in the calmness of his voice-and he took a step nearer to the other. "You fool, to come and tell me this! – to come and taunt me! *You* help me! *You* pardon me! *You* will not leave me worse than you found me! Ay, but you will!" His voice rose. A wicked smile nickered on his lips. His eyes still dwelling on the other's face, he drew the pistol slowly from his pocket and levelled it at Walton's head. "You will, for I-am going-to kill you."

Walton heard the click of the hammer as it rose. For a second, during which his tongue refused obedience, he tasted of the bitterness of the cup which he had held to his own lips. It flashed across him, as his heart gave a bound and stood still, that this was his punishment. Then he recovered himself.

"Not before that child!" he said coolly. He forced his eyes to quit the dark muzzle which threatened him and to glance aside.

There was no one there, but Woolley turned to look, and in an instant Walton sprang upon him, and, knocking up the pistol with his stick, closed with him. The one loaded barrel exploded in the air, and the men went writhing and stumbling to and fro, Woolley striking savagely at the other's face with the muzzle of the pistol. The taller man contented himself with parrying these attacks, while he clutched Woolley's left wrist with his disengaged hand.

Presently they were down in a heap together. Then they rose and drew apart, breathless and dishevelled, but there remained unnoticed on the ground between them a tiny white object, a small packet about the size of a letter. It was very light, for in the twinkling of an eye the wind turned it over and over, and carried it three or four paces away.

"You villain!" Walton gasped, trembling with excitement. His nerves were shaken as much by the narrowness of his escape as by the struggle. "You would have murdered me!"

"I would!" the other said, with vengeful emphasis, and the two men stood a moment glaring at one another. Meanwhile the wind, toying with the white packet, rolled it slowly along the path; then, getting under it at a place where a break in the ridge produced an eddy, it began to hoist it merrily up the slope. At this point Walton's eye, straying for a second from his opponent, alighted on it.

Just then Woolley spoke. "You have had a lucky escape!" he

said, with a reckless gesture, half menace, half farewell. "Good-bye! Don't come across my path again, or you will fail to come off so easily. And don't-don't, you fool!" he added, returning in a fresh fit of anger when he had already turned his back, "pat a man on the head when you have got him down, or he will-"

He stopped short, his hand at his breast pocket. For a moment, while his face underwent a marvellous change, he searched frantically in the pocket, in other pockets. "My notes!" he panted. "They were here! Where are they?" Then a dreadful expression of rage and suspicion distorted his features, and he advanced on Walton, his hands outstretched. "What have you done with them?" he cried, scarcely able to articulate. "Where are they?"

"There!" the other answered sternly. He pointed to a little space of clear turf halfway up the slope. On this the white packet could be seen fluttering gently over and over. "There! But if you are not pretty quick, you villain, you will pay a heavy price for this business!"

With an oath Woolley turned and started up the hill, the tall man watching his exertions with grim satisfaction. The pursuer speedily overtook the notes, but to gain possession of them was a different matter. Three times he stooped to clutch them, and three times a mischievous gust swept them away. Then he tripped and fell, and his hat tumbled off, and his oaths flew freely on the breeze.

Altogether it was not a dignified retreat, but it was a very characteristic one. The last time Walton got a glimpse of him, he

was on the crown of the hill. He was still running, bent double with his face to the ground, and his hand outstretched. Walton never saw him again.

The latter, getting back to the house unnoticed, said nothing for the time of what had happened. But at night before he went to bed he told the doctor. "He ought to go to prison!" the latter said sternly. He was shocked beyond measure.

"So ought I," said Walton, "if it is to come to prisons."

"Pish!"

A little word, but it cheered the tall gentleman, who, notwithstanding his escape, stood in need of cheering. He had not seen Pleasance since she had escaped from the room after hearing his explanation. She might have taken his story in many different ways, and he was anxious to know in which way she had taken it. But all day she had not shown herself. Even at dinner the doctor apologised for her absence. "She is not very well," he said. "She was a little upset this morning." And of course the tall gentleman accepted the excuse with a heavy heart, and presaged the worst.

But dressing next morning he caught sight of Pleasance on the lawn. She was walking with her father-talking to him earnestly, as Walton could see. Apparently she was urging him to some course of action, and the doctor, with his hands under his coattails, was assenting with a poor grace.

When Walton descended, however, they were already seated at breakfast, and nothing was said during the meal either of this

prelude or of what was in their minds. But presently, when the doctor rose, he had something to say. It was something which it went against the grain to say; for he walked to the door-they were breakfasting in the hall, and it stood open-and looked out as if he had more mind to fly than speak. But he returned suddenly, and sat down with a bump.

"Mr. Walton," he said, his florid face more florid than usual, "I think there is something I ought to tell you. I do not think that I can repay you the money you have advanced. And the place is not worth it. What am I to do?"

"Do?" the other said, looking up. "Take another cup of tea, as I am doing, and think no more about it."

"That is impossible," Pleasance cried impulsively. She turned red the next instant, under the tall gentleman's eyes. She had not meant to interfere.

"Indeed!" he said, rising from his chair. "Then please listen to me. There came to a certain house a man who had been a thief."

"No!" she said firmly.

"A man hopeless and despairing."

"No."

"Alas! yes," he answered, shaking his head soberly. "These are facts."

"No, no, no!" she cried. There were tears in her eyes. "I do not want to hear. I care nothing for facts!"

"You will not hear me?"

"No!"

Something in her face, her voice, the pose of her figure told him the truth. "If you will not listen to me," he said, leaning with both hands on the table and speaking in a voice scarcely audible to the doctor, "I will not say what I was going to propose. If I must be repaid, I must. But you must repay me, Pleasance. Will you?"

The doctor did not wait to hear the answer. He found the open door very convenient. He got away and to horse with a lighter heart than he had carried under his waistcoat for months. He felt no great doubt about the answer; and indeed all that June morning, which was by good luck as fine as the preceding one had been gloomy, while he rode from house to house with an unprofessional smile on his lips and in his eyes, the two left at home walked up and down the lawn in the sunshine, planning the life which lay before them, and of which every day was to be as cloudless as this day. A hundred times they passed and repassed the old sundial, but it was nothing to them. Lovers count only the hours when the sun does *not* shine.

THE COLONEL'S BOY

A stranger, coming upon the Colonel as he sat in the morning-room of the club and read his newspaper with an angelic smile, would have sought for another copy of the paper and searched its columns with pleasant anticipations. But I knew better. I knew that the Colonel, though he had put on his glasses and was pretending to cull the news, was only doing what I believe he did after lunch and after dinner, and after he got into bed, and at every one of those periods when the old campaigner, with a care for his digestion and his conscience, selects some soothing matter for meditation. He was thinking of his boy; and I went up to him and smacked him on the shoulder. "Well, Colonel," I said, "how is Jim?"

"Hallo! Why, it's Jolly Joe Bratton!" he replied, dropping his glasses, and gripping my hand tightly-for we did not ride and tie at Inkerman for nothing. "The very man I wanted to see."

"And Jim, Colonel? How is the boy?" I asked.

"Oh, just as fit as a-a middy on shore!" he answered, speaking cheerfully, yet, it seemed to me, with an effort; so that I wondered whether anything was wrong with the boy-a little bill or some small indiscretion, such as might be pardoned in as fine a lad as ever stepped, with a six-months'-old commission, a new uniform, and a station fifty minutes from London. "But come," the Colonel continued before I could make my comment, "you have lunched,

Joe? Will you take a turn?"

"To be sure," I said; "on one condition-that you let Kitty give you a cup of tea afterwards."

"That is a bargain!" he answered. And we went into the hall. Every one knows the "Junior United" hall. I had taken down my hat, and was stepping back from the rack, when some one coming downstairs two at a time-that is the worst of having any one under field rank in a club-hit me sharply with his elbow. Perhaps my coat fits a bit tightly round the waist nowadays, and perhaps not; any way, I particularly object to being poked in the back-it may be a fad, or it may not-and I turned round and cried "Confound-"

I did not say any more, for I saw who had done it. My gentleman stammered a confused apology, and taking a letter which it seemed I had knocked out of his hand, from the Colonel, who had politely picked it up, he passed into the morning-room with a red face. "Clumsy scoundrel!" I said, but not so loudly that he could hear.

"Hallo!" the Colonel exclaimed, standing still, and looking at me.

"Well?" I said, perhaps rather testily. "What is the matter?"

"You are not on very good terms with young Farquhar, then?"

"I am not on any terms at all with him," I answered grumpily.

The Colonel whistled. "Indeed!" he said, looking down at me with a kind of wistfulness in his eyes; Dick is tall, and I am-well, I was up to standard once. "I thought-that is, Jim told me-that he was a good deal about your house, Joe. And I rather gathered

that he was making up to Kitty, don't you know."

"You did, did you?" I grunted. "Well, perhaps he was, and perhaps he wasn't. Any way, she is not for him. And he would not take an answer, the young whipper-snapper!" I continued, giving my anger a little vent, and feeling all the better for it. "He came persecuting her, if you want to know. And I had to show him the door."

I think I never saw a man-certainly on the steps of the "Junior United" – look more pleased than the Colonel looked at that moment. "Gad!" he said, "Then Jim will have a chance?"

"Ho! ho!" I answered, chuckling. "The wind sets in that quarter, does it? A chance? I should think he would have a chance, Colonel!"

"And you would not object?"

"Object?" I said. "Why, it would make me the happiest man in the world, Dick. Are we not the oldest friends? And I have only Kitty and you have only Jim. Why, it is-it is just Inkerman over again!"

Really it was, and we stumped down the steps in great delight. Only I felt a little anxious about Kitty's answer, for though I had a suspicion that her affections were inclined in the right direction, I could not be sure. The young soldier might not have won her heart as he had mine: so that I was still more pleased when the Colonel informed me that he believed Jim intended to put it to the test this very afternoon.

"She is at home," I said, standing still.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he responded, taking my arm to lead me on.

But I declined to move. "I'll tell you what," I said-"it is a quarter to four; if Jim has not popped the question by now, he is not the man I think him. Let us go home, Colonel, and hear the news."

He demurred a little, but I had him in a hansom in the time it takes to blow "Lights out," and we were bowling along Piccadilly in two minutes more. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation, and, following the direction of his hand, I was in time to catch a glimpse of Jim's face-no other's-as he shot past us in a cab going eastwards. It left us in no doubt, for the lad's cheeks were flushed and his eyes shining, and as he swept by and saw us, he raised his hat with a gesture of triumph.

"Gad!" the Colonel exclaimed, "I'll bet a guinea he has kissed her! Happy dog!"

"Tra! la! la!" I answered. "I dare swear we shall not find Kitty in tears."

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when the cab swerved to one side, throwing me against my companion. I heard our driver shout, and caught sight of a bareheaded man mixed up with the near shaft. The next moment we gave a lurch and stopped, and a crowd came round us. The Colonel was the first out, but I joined him as quickly as I could. "I do not think he is much hurt, sir," I heard the policeman say. "He is drunk, I fancy. Come, old chap, pull yourself together," he continued, giving a shake to the grey-haired man whom he and a bystander were

supporting. "There, hold up now. Here is your hat. You are all right."

And sure enough the man, whose red nose and shabby attire lent probability to the policeman's charge, managed when left to himself to keep his balance; but with some wavering. "Hallo!" he muttered, looking uncertainly upon the crowd round him. "Is my son here to take me home? Isaac? Where is Isaac?"

"He's one part shaken," the policeman said, viewing him with an air of experience. "And three parts drunk. He had better go to the station."

"Where do you live?" the Colonel asked.

"Greek Street, Soho, number twenty-seven, top floor" – this was answered glibly enough. "And I'll tell you what," the man added with a drunken hiccough and a reel which left him on the policeman's shoulder-"if any gentleman will take another gentleman home, I will make him rich beyond the dreams of avarice. I'll present him his weight in gold. That I will. His weight in gold!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.