Marsh Richard

A Duel

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Marsh R.

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Содержание

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BOOK I
WIFE

CHAPTER I
THE END OF THE HONEYMOON

Isabel waited till the rat-tat was repeated a second time, then she went down to the front door. Since Mrs. Macconichie and her husband were both out, and she had the house to herself, there was nothing else for her to do, unless she wished the postman to depart with the letters. As it was, when she appeared at the door, he grumbled at being delayed.

"These Scotchmen are all boors," she told herself, in her bitterness.

She looked at the letter which had been thrust into her hand. It was addressed to "Mr. G. Lamb". The sight of it reopened the fountains of her scorn.

"They might at least have put G. Lamb, Esq. G. Lamb! What a fool I've been!"

Further consideration of the envelope led her to the conclusion that it was the letter they had both been waiting for-the answer to her husband's plea for help. She pressed it between her fingers to learn, if possible by the sense of touch, what the envelope contained.

"I believe there's only a letter-no cheque, nor anything. If there isn't, then we are done."

She hesitated a moment, then tore it open. It contained merely a sheet of common writing-paper, on the front page of which was this brief note: -

"Dear Gregory,

"I like the idea of your asking me to help you. You've had all the help you'll ever have from me. The shop won't bear it; business is getting worse. If it weren't, you'd get no more money out of me.

"You'd better get your wife to keep you.

"Susan Lamb."

Susan Lamb! That was his mother, the mother of the man she had married. So the truth was out at last. His mother kept a shop; he had been sponging on her for the money he had scattered broadcast. There was neither address nor date upon the letter, but the postmark on the envelope was Islington. Islington! His mother was a small shopkeeper in that haunt of the needy clerk! And she had believed him when he had posed before her as a "swell" – an aristocrat; when he had talked about his "coin" and his "gees". He had jockeyed her into supposing that money was a matter of complete indifference to him; that, as she boasted to her friends and rivals, "he rolled in it". So successfully had he hoodwinked her that she married him within a month of their first meeting-she, Belle Burney, the queen of song and dance! Had thrown up all her engagements to do it, too; and she was beginning to get some engagements which were not to be despised.

At the commencement he had done things in style: had taken her up to Edinburgh, leisurely, in a motor. She had imagined that the motor was his own. At Edinburgh it vanished; he told her to receive some trifling repairs. But she, having already discovered he was a liar, suspected him of having sold it. Later she learned that the machine had only been hired for a fortnight.

Already, at Edinburgh, money began to run short. He did his best to conceal from her the state of the case, but the thing was so obvious that his attempts at concealment were vain. He had lied bravely,

protesting that, in some inexplicable way, his remittances had gone wrong; that in the course of a post or two he would be in possession of an indefinitely large sum of money. The posts came and went, but they brought no money. So they drifted hither and thither, each time to humbler quarters. Now, within six weeks of marriage, they were stranded at a remote spot in Forfarshire, within a drive of Carnoustie. Isabel had reason to suspect that, at the time of their marriage, her husband had less than two hundred pounds in the world. He had squandered more than that already; the motor had made a hole in it. The pawnbroker had come to the rescue when the coin was gone. They were penniless; owed for a week's food and lodging; their landlady was already showing signs of anxiety. Now the much-talked-of and long-expected letter had arrived which was to bring the munificent remittance.

It turned out to be half-a-dozen lines from his shopkeeping mother, who declined to advance him a single stiver!

When the young wife realised, or thought she realised, all that the curt epistle meant, she told herself that now indeed the worst had come. She had just had another bitter scene with her husband; had, in fact, driven him out into the night before the tempest of her scorn and opprobrium. The landlady had departed on an errand of her own. Isabel told herself that now, if ever, an opportunity presented itself to cut herself free from the bonds in which she had foolishly allowed herself to be entwined. She went upstairs, put on her hat and jacket, crammed a few of her scanty possessions into a leather handbag, and then-and only then-paused to think.

It was nearly nine o'clock, late for that part of the world. The nearest railway station was at Carnoustie, more than seven miles away. She knew that there was an early train which would take her to Dundee, and thence to London; but, supposing she caught it, how about the fare? The fare to London was nearly two pounds; she had not a shilling. She did not doubt that, once in London, she could live, as she always had lived; but she had to get there first, across five hundred miles of intervening country.

She arrived at a sudden resolution, one, however, which had probably been at the back of her mind from the first. Yesterday, going suddenly into the landlady's own sitting-room, she had taken the old lady unawares. Mrs. Macconichie had what Isabel felt sure were coins-gold coins-in one hand, and in the other the lid of a tobacco jar which stood in a corner of the china cupboard. Although seeming to notice nothing, Mrs. Lamb, struck by the old lady's state of fluster, leaped to the conclusion that that tobacco jar was her cash-box. Now, bag in hand, she came downstairs to learn if her surmise had been correct.

Although she was aware that the sitting-room was empty, she was conscious of an odd disinclination to enter, dallying for some seconds with the handle in her hand. Once in, she lost no time in ascertaining what she wished to learn, meeting, however, with an unlooked-for obstacle. The china cupboard was locked; no doubt Mrs. Macconichie had the key in her pocket. She took out her own keys; not one of them was any use. She could see the tobacco jar on the other side of the glass door. She did not hesitate long; moments were precious. Taking a metal paper-weight off the mantelshelf she smashed the pane, breaking it right away to enable her to gain free access to the jar. She removed the lid. The jar was full of odds and ends; she did not examine them closely enough to gather what they were. At the bottom, under everything else, was a canvas bag. She took it out. It was tied round the neck with pink tape. It undoubtedly contained coins; perhaps twenty or thirty. Should she open it, and borrow two or three? or should she take it as it was?

The answer was acted, not spoken. Slipping the bag between the buttons of her bodice, she passed from the room and from the house. So soon as she was in the open air she thought she heard the sound of approaching footsteps; as if involuntarily she shrank back into the doorway, listening. She had been mistaken; there was not a sound. She came out into the street again, drawing a long breath. She looked to the right and left; not a creature was in sight. She set off in the direction of Carnoustie.

Her knowledge of the surrounding country was of the vaguest kind. She had not gone far before it began to dawn on her that this was a foolhardy venture in which she was engaged. It was a habit of

hers to act first and think afterwards, or she would never have become Mrs. Gregory Lamb. Hard-headed enough when she chose to give her wits fair play, she was, at that period of her career, too much inclined to become a creature of impulse. The impulses to which she was prone to yield were only too apt to be wrong ones. For instance, she had not long left Mrs. Macconichie's before she perceived clearly enough that the chances were possibly a hundred to one against her reaching Carnoustie in the darkness on foot. Houses were few and far between; the road was a lonely one; it was quite on the cards that she might not meet a soul from whom to make inquiries. If she had given the thing any thought at all, she would have perceived from the first how slight her chances were, in which case, since it was no use jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, she would certainly have postponed her departure. Now it was too late to return. The pane of glass in the china cupboard was broken; the canvas bag was inside her bodice. With the best will in the world she might find it difficult to conceal what had happened, not to speak of the possibility of Mrs. Macconichie's having already discovered her loss. So she pressed on.

Indeed, shortly she could not have gone back if she had wished. She had not started half an hour before she was forced to admit that she had lost her bearings utterly; that she had not the faintest notion in which direction Carnoustie lay, nor whereabouts she was. She was on a black road; that was all she knew. A rough, uneven road, which apparently straggled over open moorland. She could make out trees here and there, but the road itself seemed to have no boundaries. So far as she could make out, there was nothing on either side in the shape of a hedge or landmark.

Soon she was not at all sure that she was not off the road; that she was not roaming, blindly, over the open country. It seemed impossible that any road could be so uneven. She kept stumbling over unseen obstacles. Once she caught herself descending what seemed to be the steep sides of some sort of pit. With a sense of shock she drew back in time. She listened; she seemed to hear the sound of running waters. Could she be standing on the bank of some stream or river, into which, in another second, she might have descended? Anxious, even a little alarmed, turning right about face, she moved forward in what she supposed was the opposite direction. She seemed to be stumbling over a succession of hillocks. This could not be the road; she must have gone entirely astray. If she did not take care she would be running into some serious danger.

All at once her foot caught in some trailing root or plant; she went headforemost to the ground. Fortunately, she came down lightly enough. The fall was of little consequence, but when she tried to regain her perpendicular she learned, to her dismay, that her ankle refused to support her. Willy-nilly, she had to remain squatted where she had fallen.

"I seem to be in for a real good thing," she groaned. "Am I to stay here all night? I shall be frozen to the bone before the morning, to say nothing of waiting like a rat in a trap for Mrs. Macconichie to catch me."

She had to wait there for probably more than an hour, not exactly on the same spot. She managed, at intervals, to half hobble, half crawl across, perhaps another couple of hundred yards of ground. But the labour was thrown away. At that rate she would not have covered a mile before daybreak. Yielding to necessity, still clutching her bag, crouching on the turf, she watched for the light to come. She felt no need for sleep; she was only consumed by a great impatience, in that all things seemed to be against her.

The skies were clouded like her fate. Nowhere was there a glimmer of a star. A cool breeze was coming from what she judged to be the sea. It made itself more and more felt as the time stole on. By degrees it began to bring a mist with it. As she had foreseen, she became chilled to the marrow of her bones.

"If this goes on I shall freeze to death."

The idea recurred to her like a sort of formula. She kept telling herself again and again that that night would be the end of her.

When her vitality seemed at its lowest point the stillness of the night was broken by a sound-the sound of wheels.

CHAPTER II
AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

She raised her head to listen, thinking that her senses must be playing her a trick. No; it certainly was the sound of wheels, coming nearer and nearer. Some one was driving fast through the darkness, so fast that in what seemed to her to be less than a minute the driver was close upon her. Apparently nearly in front of her, although she could not see it, was a road along which the vehicle was approaching. It carried no lights; nothing broke the shadows; but, if her ears could be trusted, within a stone's-throw of where she was some wheeled conveyance was hurrying past. She stood upon her one sound foot and shouted: -

"Hallo! – hallo-o! – hallo-o-o!" again and again.

Her first shouts went unheeded. Possessed by a wild fear that she might remain unnoticed, raising her voice to a desperate yell, she started to scream herself hoarse.

This time her tones travelled. Suddenly the vehicle ceased to move. An answering shout came back to her: -

"Who's there? What's the matter with you?"

The accent was broad Scotch. Had it been the purest Cockney it could not have seemed more welcome. She replied to the inquiry: -

"I've sprained my ankle so that I can hardly move".

This time in the other voice there was an unmistakable suggestion of surprise.

"Is it a woman?"

"Yes."

Her tone was fainter.

"And what might you be doing here at this hour of the morning?"

"I'm going to Carnoustie."

"Carnoustie! You're going to Carnoustie! – along this road? You're joking! Can you get as far as this, so that I can have a look at you?"

"I'll try."

She did try. It was a distance of barely a hundred yards, but traversing it was a work of time. When the space was covered it was only by clutching at the wheel of the trap that she saved herself from subsiding in a heap upon the ground. In an instant the driver was off his seat, and with his arm about her.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It is pretty bad," she stammered.

"For the Lord's sake, don't faint! We've no time to waste upon such trifles."

"I'm not going to faint." At any rate the tone was faint enough. Suddenly she seemed to pull herself together, as if stirred by a spirit of resentment. "I never have fainted in my life-I'm not going to begin to do it now."

He laughed-that is, the little husky sound he made might have been intended for a laugh.

"If you'll keep quite still I'll lift you up into the trap somehow, though, by the feel of you, you're as big as I am, and, maybe, heavier. The mare won't move. She's one of the few female things I ever met that wasn't troubled with the fidgets."

As he put it, "somehow" he did get her up into the trap, then climbed on to the seat beside her. Presently they were bowling along together. For some seconds neither spoke. She was endeavouring to accustom herself to her new position. He, possibly-as his questions immediately showed-was wondering who it was that he had chanced upon.

"You're English?"

"I am."

"Staying in these parts?"

"I'm on a walking tour."

"A walking tour at one o'clock in the morning!"

"It wasn't one o'clock when I started. I've been where you found me for hours and hours."

"Where were you making for?"

"I've told you, I was going to Carnoustie."

"Going from Carnoustie, you mean. You'll never be finding it in this part of the country."

"I daresay. Since it became dark I've been hobbling round about just anywhere. I don't know where I am; I've lost myself completely." He was silent, as if he found something in her words which made him think. Then she took up the *rôle* of questioner: "Where are you going?"

"To a man that's dying."

"Are you a doctor?"

"It's my trade."

"Then you'll be able to look at my ankle. I hope it's nothing serious, but it seems to be getting worse instead of better."

"I'll look at your ankle, never fear. I'll find you an easier patient than the one I'm bound for."

Little more was said on either side. The doctor seemed to be by nature a taciturn man, or perhaps he was too preoccupied for speech. Isabel was feeling too miserable to talk. She was cold and wet; her ankle was occasioning her no little pain. She could hardly have been less inclined for conversation, and she, also, had at times a gift of silence. During the twenty or thirty minutes the drive continued probably not half-a-dozen words were exchanged.

At last the doctor brought his mare to a standstill.

"I suppose you couldn't get down and open a gate? There's one right in front of us. I can see it's closed."

His eyes must have had the cat's quality of being able to penetrate the darkness; she could see nothing.

"I might be able to get down-if I had to tumble, but I doubt if I'd ever be able to get up again."

He grunted as if in disapprobation.

"Can you hold the reins while I get down?"

"I daresay I could do that."

He passed her the reins and descended. She heard a gate swing back upon its hinges. He reappeared at the horse's head.

"I'd better lead her through and up to the house; it's as black as the devil's painted under the trees. I ought to have brought my lamps, but I came away in such a hurry. When some folks are dying they will not wait."

They passed through a darkness which was so intense that she could not see the horse which was drawing her on. The avenue seemed a long one. It was some minutes before, drawing clear of the overhanging foliage, they stopped in front of a house which loomed grim and ominous in the shadows. Apparently their approach had been heard. No sooner had they stopped than the door was thrown wide open. The figure of a woman was seen peering out into the darkness, with a lamp in her hand.

"Is it the doctor?" she demanded.

"Yes, it's the doctor. And how is he now?"

"He's as near to death as he can be to be still alive. I believe he's only keeping the breath in his body till he gets a sight of you."

"To be sure that's uncommonly good of him. Now, madam, will that ankle of yours permit you to tumble down with the help of a hand from me?"

Without answering Isabel commenced a laborious and painful descent. At sight of her the woman on the doorstep evinced a lively curiosity.

"Why, doctor, who is it you're bringing with you?"

"It's a visitor for you, and another patient for me, Nannie. You'll have to find her a corner somewhere while I go up to see the laird. When I've done with him I'll have to start with her. I'm hoping that she'll be the easier job of the two. Come, lend a hand. It's beyond my power to get her into the house alone, and it seems that by herself she'll never do it."

Between them they got her up the steps, through the door and into a room which, immediately after passing it, was entered on the right. They placed her on a couch.

"Now, madam," observed the doctor, "here you'll have to stay until I've seen my other patient. And since Heaven only knows how long he'll keep me, you'll have to make the best of it until I come. So keep up the character you told me of and don't you faint, or any silliness of that kind, but just make yourself as comfortable as ever you can."

With that the speaker left her, the woman going with him. She had placed on a table the lamp which she had borne in her hand. It was a common glass affair, which did not give too good a light. For some minutes Isabel showed no inclination to avail herself of its assistance to learn in what manner of place she was. By degrees, however, as the time continued to pass, and there were still no signs of any one appearing, she began to show a languid interest in her surroundings. She was dimly conscious that the room was not a large one; that it was sparely, even austerely, furnished. She was aware that the couch on which she lay was of the old-fashioned horsehair kind, both slippery and uncomfortable. She had a vague suspicion that if she was not careful she would slip right off it, and her misty imaginings became mistier still. Before she knew it she was asleep.

She slept for two good hours before she was disturbed; at least that period of time had elapsed before the doctor made his reappearance in the room. The sight of the sleeping woman seemed to occasion him surprise. He observed her with a slight smile adding another pucker to his wrinkled cheeks. He was a little, thin man, clean shaven and bald-headed. He had a big, aquiline nose. His eyes were sunk deep in his head, looking out from overhanging shaggy eyebrows. His lips were drawn so tightly together as to hint at a paucity of teeth.

"Who are you, I wonder? You've youth, health, good looks-three good things for a woman to have. You're not ill-dressed. And yet there's that about you, as you lie sleeping there-we're all of us apt to give ourselves away when we're asleep-which makes me wonder who you are, and how you came to sprain your ankle on Crag Moor when going to Carnoustie. However that may be, there's an adventure lying ready to your hand-if you've a fancy for adventures. And, unless I'm much mistaken, I think you have."

He laid his hand upon the sleeper's shoulder. The touch was a light one, but it was sufficient to arouse her. With a start she sprang up to a sitting posture, crying-

"You shan't! It's a lie! You shan't." She put her hand to her bodice, as if to guard something which was hidden there. The doctor said nothing; he stood and watched. Waking to a clearer sense of her surroundings, she perceived him standing by her side. "Oh, it's you. How long have I been asleep?"

"Sufficiently long, I hope, to rest you. Will you allow me to introduce myself? My name is Twelves-David Twelves, M.D., of Edinburgh. May I ask if you have any objection to introduce yourself to me, and tell me your name?"

"Not the least; why should I have? I'm not ashamed of my name. Why do you want to know it?"

"Because the immediate object of my presence here is to make you what is to all intents and purposes an offer of, say, twenty thousand pounds, and I have a not unnatural desire to know to whom I am offering it."

She sat more upright on the couch, swinging round so as to bring her feet upon the floor, looking at him with eyes which were now wide open.

"What do you mean? You are making fun of me."

"I am doing nothing of the kind. This is likely to be one of the most serious moments of your life. I am not disposed to lighten it by misplaced attempts at playfulness." Yet even as he spoke again that nebulous smile seemed to add another pucker to his cheeks. "What I say is said very much in

earnest. There is a man upstairs who's dying. Perhaps he is already dead while I stand here talking to you. If he's not dead, before he dies he wants another curious thing-a wife."

"A wife! – and you say he's dying!"

"It's because he's dying that he wants her. He has had no need of such an encumbrance living. I have come to ask you if you'll be his wife."

"I be his wife!"

Instinctively she doubled up the finger on which was the wedding-ring. She still wore her gloves, so it had remained unnoticed.

"Yes, you. You're the only woman within reach, except old Nannie, who hardly counts, or I wouldn't trouble you. Answer me shortly-yes or no-will you be his wife?"

"Marry a perfect stranger! – a man I've never seen! – who you say is dying!"

"Precisely; it is a mere formula to which I'm asking your subscription. He'll certainly be dead inside two hours, possibly in very much less. You'll be a widow in one of the shortest times on record; in possession of a wife's share of all his worldly goods-and that, by all accounts, should be worth fully twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds! But why should he want to marry any one if he's dying?"

"There's not much time for explanation, but I'll explain this much. He's made a will in favour of a certain person. That will he is anxious to revoke. If he marries it will become invalid. As matters stand it will be easier for him to take a wife than to make another will."

"You are sure he will be dead within two hours?"

"Quite. I shall not be surprised to learn that he's dead already. You are losing your chances of becoming a well-to-do widow by lingering here."

"You are certain he will leave me twenty thousand pounds?"

"The simple fact of his death will make it yours. So soon as the breath is out of his body you will become entitled to a wife's inheritance-if you are his wife."

"You are not playing me any trick? It is all just as you say?"

"On my honour, it is all just as I say. There is no trick. If you will come with me upstairs you will be able to judge for yourself."

"But how can we be married at a moment's notice? Is there a clergyman in the house?"

"You forget you are in Scotland. Neither notice nor clergyman is needed. It will be sufficient for you to recognise each other as husband and wife in the presence of witnesses; that act of mutual recognition will in itself constitute a legal marriage which all the lawyers will not be able to break. That is why it will be easier for him to marry than to make another will."

"There is not the least doubt that he will be dead within two hours?"

"Not the least-unless a miracle intervenes."

She was sitting with her hands clenched in her lap, a perceptible interval of silence intervening before the words burst from her lips-

"Then I'll marry him!"

CHAPTER III
WHOM GOD HATH JOINED

Dr. Twelves showed no sign of either surprise or gratification. He looked at her dispassionately, almost apathetically, from under his overhanging eyebrows.

"Can you walk upstairs without assistance?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't think my ankle is any better."

He stooped down.

"It's swollen; it looks as if it were going to be an awkward business. Your boot and stocking will have to be cut away; but there's no time to do it now-moments are precious. You will have to wait until you're married. It's only on the first floor. Do you think you'll be able to get up with the aid of my arm and of the baluster?"

"I'll try."

"Might I suggest, before we start, that it would do no harm if you were to remove your hat and jacket. It would seem more in keeping."

She acted on his suggestion.

"I ought to wash and tidy myself; I know I'm all anyhow."

"Now you will do very well. Your future husband is too far gone to be able to tell if your hair is straight or crooked; at the point he's reached that sort of thing doesn't matter." When they had reached the landing at the top of the stairs the doctor said to her: "By the way, the name of your future husband is Grahame-Cuthbert Grahame. May I ask what yours is? It is just as well that he should know it."

She hesitated a moment.

"My name is Isabel Burney."

"Miss Burney, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Grahame's room."

He threw open the door of the room in front of which they had been standing. As he did so Isabel slipped off her left-hand glove, bringing with it, at the same time, her wedding-ring. Crumpling up her glove she squeezed it into her waistband, the ring inside it. On the doctor's arm she hobbled to a big armchair, into which she sank with a sigh of unmistakable relief.

The room in which she found herself, although low-ceilinged, was a spacious one. It seemed to her that all the furniture it contained was old-fashioned, a fact which, although she did not know it, increased its value perhaps a hundred-fold. She thought it simply dowdy. A huge Chippendale bed was in the centre of the room. In it, propped up on pillows, was the figure of a man which, if only from the point of size, fitly matched the bed. Leaning over him, on the other side, was Nannie, the old woman who had admitted them into the house. The doctor addressed himself to her.

"How is he?"

"About the same."

Although they had both spoken in a whisper their voices were audible to the man in the bed.

"Is that that old devil Twelves come back again?"

The tone was harsh, and it was obvious that the speaker spoke with difficulty, but the words themselves were plain enough. The doctor evinced no sign of annoyance at the other's somewhat uncomplimentary reference to himself; on the contrary, he chose to apply to himself the other's epithet as he answered: -

"Yes, it's the old devil back again, and, what's more, he's brought the young devil too-begging your pardon, Miss Burney, for speaking of you in such a manner. But it's the fashion in this house to use strong language, and always has been. Laird, I've brought the lady."

"Where is she?"

"At this moment she's sitting in your armchair. As I told you, she's sprained her ankle, which makes it difficult for her to walk, or even stand."

"Damn her ankle!"

"By all means. You should know more about that sort of thing than I do. You're nearer to it than I am."

"You think that hurts me?"

"Not I. I know that nothing hurts you. I doubt if even the torments of hell will trouble you much. You're past all hurting. Shall I tell Miss Burney she isn't wanted, and can go again?"

"What's her name?"

"Burney-Isabel Burney. At least, she says so."

"Isabel Burney, you are my wife; you're Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame. I acknowledge you as my wife, and I wish all men to acknowledge you also. Are you content that it should be so?"

"I am."

"You hear, Nannie? You hear, Twelves? You're both witnesses. I take Isabel Burney to be my wife, and she agrees."

"I hear. But does she take you for her husband-eh, Miss Burney?"

"I do. I take Cuthbert Grahame to be my husband in the sight of God and man."

Isabel had returned to one of her old faults-overemphasis. There was a theatrical intensity about both her manner and her words which was singularly out of place when compared with the matter-of-fact ribaldry which seemed to mark the husky utterance of the man in the bed. Its inappropriateness seemed to strike the others. After a perceptible pause the man in the bed wheezed-

"Leave God out of it". Presently he added, still more wheezily, "Come here, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame".

The doctor moved towards her.

"Can I assist you, Mrs. Grahame, to your husband's side?" With the doctor's aid she gained the bed. "Laird, here's your wife; can you see her?"

Isabel saw the man whom she had taken to be her husband. The sight of him shocked her. She told herself that she had never seen a more dreadful object even in her dreams. His size was abnormal. Not only was he naturally a big man, but his frame had become swollen and bloated till it was monstrous-a horror to look upon. His head and face were covered with scanty red hair, which needed cutting. He had a huge head, and his neck was so short and thick that it conveyed a grotesque impression that his head sprang directly from his trunk. His whole form seemed to be afflicted with some sort of tetanus, so that he was rigid, immovable. He lay on his back, with his arms straight down at his sides. Through his parted lips came jerky, stertorous breaths. His eyelids were partially open, but only the whites of his eyes were visible; his own words made it clear that they were of little use to him as organs of sight.

"See her? No, I can't see her. I don't want to."

As he spoke a tremor passed all over him. His whole frame heaved; as if seized by a sudden convulsion he began fighting for his life. The doctor spoke to her.

"You had better go, unless you'd like to see the last of him. This is likely to be the end. He'll hardly win through another bout."

He moved towards the bed, Nannie joining him. Isabel was left to her own devices. Powerless to move far unaided it was all she could do to stagger to the nearest chair. In it she sat, waiting, watching, listening, like an unwilling spectator in some bad dream. It was a scene which she never wholly forgot. The dim light, the quaintly furnished room, the figures of the old man and woman bending this way, then that, as they struggled with the creature on the bed. What ailed him she did not know; she vaguely surmised that he might be in the throes of some kind of epileptic fit. His contortions shook the bed, indeed the room. He kept uttering sounds which had a disagreeable resemblance to the half-strangled yelps of some wild beast.

How long it lasted she did not know. Long enough to strain her already highly strung nerves almost beyond endurance. At last there came a lull. The man on the bed was first quieter, then still. She took advantage of the silence to exclaim: -

"Can't you take me away somewhere? You know I can't move. If I have to stay here much longer I-I shall make a fool of myself."

The doctor and Nannie paid her no heed. Side by side they were stooping together over the silent figure. After affording them what she deemed a more than sufficient opportunity to answer, she appealed to them again.

"Can't you hear me? Take me away somewhere-I don't care where! I'll go mad if you don't."

The doctor did not answer her directly; he spoke to Nannie.

"Do as she bids you; take her away."

"Where'll I take her?" the woman asked.

"Take her and put her to bed in the best bedroom. Remember that she's now the mistress of this house."

Nannie moved towards Isabel. For a woman, she was tall and brawny, but she was probably well past fifty, and Isabel certainly had not credited her with the capacity to do what she immediately did. She eyed the stranger for a moment in silence, then she asked, in the broadest Scotch: -

"Can't you walk by your own self?"

Isabel resented both the tone and the scrutiny.

"You know I can't."

Without more ado the woman, stooping, put her arms about her and lifted her bodily from the chair as if she were some great child. Isabel was taken by surprise, and a little alarmed.

"You'll drop me!" she cried.

"I'll not drop you; you're nothing of a weight."

As if to prove it, the old woman bore her from the room, across the landing, to another room on the other side, one which was in darkness. But Nannie seemed to know its geography by instinct. She deposited her burden on what Isabel realised was a bed. Striking a match on a box which she took from her pocket, she lit some candles which stood on the mantelshelf. Isabel, remaining where she had been placed, eyed her as she moved about.

"You're very strong."

"I'm not so strong as once I was. There was a time when I'd have carried four of you, and thought nothing of it either. Now can you undress yourself, or will you be needing me to do it for you?"

"Thank you, I think I can undress myself; but if you would help me take the boot off my bad foot."

Nannie bent over the foot which the other extended. She regarded it in silence, then, still without a word, she left the room. So soon as she was gone Isabel dragged the glove which contained her wedding-ring out of her belt, and the canvas bag which had come out of Mrs. Macconichie's tobacco jar from her bodice, and thrust them as far as possible under the bolster which was beneath the pillow on which she was reclining. Scarcely had she done this when Nannie reappeared, in her hands a pair of large scissors. With their aid she proceeded, still speechless, to cut, first, the laces of Isabel's boot, and then the boot itself, till it came away from her foot. As it came away she did what she boasted she had never before done in her life-she fainted. When she came to herself again she found that Nannie, who had apparently remained indifferent to the fact that her senses had left her, having bathed her foot and ankle, was putting the finishing touches to the bandages in which she had swathed it. When the bandage was completed the old woman, still without vouchsafing a word, began to undress her, and did it with a deftness and neatness which would have done her credit had she played the part of lady's-maid her whole life long. Almost before she knew it, she was ready for the sheets, and so soon as she was ready she was placed between them.

"You're very good to me," she murmured, with a luxurious sigh, as she recognised what a delicious feeling it was to be between them.

"I'm not good to you-anyway I'm not wanting to be good to you."

Isabel looked up with surprise; the tone was almost savage.

"Why not? Don't you think that you will like me?"

"Like you! – like you!"

The emphasis with which the words were repeated was unmistakable. It would have been difficult for scorn to have been more eloquent. Without condescending to further speech, as if everything had been said which could be said, Nannie moved towards the door. Isabel put a question to her as she reached it.

"Is my husband dead?"

Nannie turned swiftly round to her.

"Your-what?"

"My husband."

"Your husband! – your husband!"

Again the repetition was marked by the same wealth of scorn. Isabel was moved to some show of resentment.

"He is my husband-you know he's my husband."

"Oh, he's your husband, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame. I'm not doubting it, ma'am, or that you're a fit and proper wife for him. I'm ready to tell to any one that you're a well-matched pair."

"Is he dead?"

As she repeated her inquiry Isabel's manner was a trifle more subdued; she was finding Nannie a difficult person to contend with.

"You'd better be asking Dr. Twelves if your husband's dead, ma'am; he's a surer judge of dead folk than I am. You'll be feeling anxious till you know, and so I'll tell the doctor. When a woman's been acquainted with a man so long as you've been acquainted with your man, so that you've come to know all the secrets of his heart, and the very shape and fashion of the soul which God has lent him, to be sure all her nature stirs within her when she begins to fear he's near to dying. It's hard to lose the husband to whom you've only been married a couple of minutes, so I'll tell the doctor to hurry and let you know if you're a widow before you're a wife."

Without giving Isabel a chance to retort, Nannie opened the door with a swishing movement, which was in harmony with her state of mind, and vanished from the chamber.

CHAPTER IV
A SECOND HONEYMOON

She had slept well; Isabel admitted so much. She suspected something else, that the morning was far advanced. There was that in the atmosphere which conveyed that impression. Apparently some one had been in while she still slept and put the room in order. The blinds were up, the curtains drawn back, the sun streamed in through the small square windows which were set deep in the thickness of the wall. As she looked about her, from her vantage place on the pillow, she felt that this was the queerest place she ever had been in. Everything, including the room itself, seemed to her to be hundreds of years old. The paper on the walls was like nothing she had ever seen before. The furniture was of the oddest shapes; indeed, what some of the articles might be intended for was beyond her comprehension. As she gradually absorbed it all, she began to be conscious of an almost eerie feeling that she had woke up in some ancient habitation and in some bygone age of which she had no knowledge.

Then something else forced itself on her attention, she felt that she was helpless. As she tried to turn in bed, the better to enable her to see what was to be seen, a spasm of pain passed over her, which was so acute that she had to shut her eyes and bite her lips to prevent herself from crying out. For some moments she lay quite still, waiting for the pain to go. It was some time before it diminished; even when it was easier she learnt, to her dismay, that she would have to be very careful in her movements if she did not wish it to return with probably increasing violence. Her foot seemed, from the feel of it, to be about as bad as it could be. It was not only useless, it held her prisoner. The slightest attempt to move it in any direction resulted in the keenest anguish. It seemed that relief from almost unendurable torment could only be obtained by remaining entirely quiescent. That meant, in effect, that she was chained, possibly for an indefinite period, to the bed in which she was lying. An agreeable prospect!

As the true inwardness of the position began to dawn on her, in phantasmagoric procession the events of the previous night flashed across her mind. The letter to her husband-to Gregory Lamb-which she had opened and read, the letter with the Islington post-mark, containing the curt refusal to accord him further help; the resolution to leave him, which she had instantly arrived at after its perusal; her visit to Mrs. Macconichie's sitting-room; her forcible entry into the china cupboard; her abstraction of the canvas bag from the tobacco jar.

At this point, her thoughts branching off in another direction, she felt, gingerly enough, for it seemed that movement of any sort meant pain, under the bolster, and produced from it the bag in question and the glove in which she had secreted the wedding-ring. The sight of the ring started her thoughts travelling again.

To her flight through the darkness, with the leather handbag. By the way, what had become of that bag? She had no recollection of having done anything with it. Possibly she had put it down when she had sprained her ankle, and, in her trouble, had forgotten its existence; in which case it might be still upon the moor. If it were found, and nothing could be learned of her, what deductions would be drawn? She wondered. One thing was certain, it contained all her worldly possessions. Without it she had not so much as a pocket-handkerchief, not to speak of such a necessity of existence as a brush and comb.

Then the trap had come through the night, and borne her to the house in which she lay. There she had been married to a man upon his death-bed. Such a man and such a death-bed! Could it be possible? She clenched her fists, and asked herself if the whole business had not been the wild imaginings of some disordered dream. Even to herself she could not furnish a satisfactory answer.

Why had she suffered herself to be dragged through such a farce? – to play a part in such an odious scene? Because that old man who called himself a doctor had told her that the creature would be dead within two hours, and that then she would be richer by twenty thousand pounds. Twenty

thousand pounds! Could that part of the tale be possible? Why, in that case, this house, the very room in which she was, the queer furniture which filled it, all might be hers. She would be a wealthy woman, who had won her wealth so easily without incurring risk worth mention. Because, even in the storm and stress of the moment, she had understood that bigamy was bigamy, even though one of the marriages into which she had entered was a Scotch one. Of course, nothing could make that marriage of the night before a real one, since she was a wife already. But, as the man was dead, and she was supposed to be his widow, if fortune favoured her the truth never need come out. She believed that she was clever enough to conceal it-at any rate from whom it was worth her while to do so. Only let her get hold of the twenty thousand pounds, or so much of it as could be turned into ready cash-let them find out afterwards what they chose-they would find it hard to get the money back from her. Twenty thousand pounds! She fancied herself letting go of such a sum as that if she once had it in her grip!

The first thing she had to do was to inform herself as fully as possible as to the actual situation. If she was a widow, and her husband had died without a will-he had certainly not made one after marrying her, while the doctor had assured her that marriage had rendered nugatory any he might have made before-then this house, and all that it contained, if it had been his property, was now hers. At least she hoped it was, because, after a little muddled consideration, it began to occur to her that, by English law, a wife did not necessarily inherit all that a husband who had died intestate left behind him. Exactly what share was hers she was not sure, but she had a more or less dim conviction that it was less than the whole. The same objectionable law might obtain in Scotland, or even a worse one. The sooner she ascertained exactly how the ground lay the better it would be for her peace of mind. So she began to call attention to the fact that she was wide awake. Since there was apparently no bell within reach, she had to make the best use of her voice.

"Nannie!" she called. "Nannie! Nannie!" And she kept on calling, because there was none that answered. Her voice was a strong one-she exerted it to the utmost-but it seemed that it was not strong enough to reach any one outside that room. She shouted till she was hoarse, and angry too, quite in vain; nothing resulted.

"If there's any one in the house they must hear me, and I expect they do, only they don't choose to come. Oh, if it weren't for this foot of mine! That Nannie's an insolent hag. She knows perfectly well that I can't move, and thinks she can treat me as she likes. If I could move I'd soon show her. Nannie! Nannie!" She shouted till she could really shout no longer. No one came; nor was there anything to show that she was heard. She began to be possessed by a fresh alarm. "I wonder if the house is empty? Suppose that old hag has gone off and left me alone in the house with that-that dead man. I'll be bound she's quite capable of doing it-old wretch! I shall starve to death! Nannie! Nannie!"

But all the strength had gone out of her voice-it was not strange that those muffled tones remained unheeded-a fact of which she herself was conscious. At last, wholly exhausted, she lay and thought hard things of every one. She was genuinely hungry. She told herself that if some one did not come soon and bring her food something would have to be done, though she had not the faintest notion what. Self-help was out of the question; she was as powerless to move as if she had been riveted to the bed.

She was rapidly reaching a despairing stage when Nannie entered with a tray in her hand, quite calmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should come just then and not before. Isabel broke into angry expostulation.

"Why have you kept me waiting. Why didn't you come before? You must have heard me long ago-you're not stone deaf. I've screamed myself hoarse."

Nannie placed the tray upon a table. Then, with the most matter-of-fact air, putting her arms about the angry woman, she raised her to a sitting posture, arranging the pillows so that they formed a prop for her back. Divided between indignation and bewilderment, Isabel submitted in silence; she was so helpless, the old woman's manner was so masterful, that to expostulate seemed vain. The tray was put beside her on the coverlet, Nannie observing-

"When you've eaten your fill I'll come and take a look at that foot of yours".

"It's ever so much worse. I've been in agony-and am still. I believe I've broken a bone."

"Not you; it's no but a sprain."

"It's more than a sprain-much more, I'm convinced of it. Where's Dr. Twelves? He ought to attend to it at once. He said he would come and see me. Why hasn't he been?"

"He's been and gone hours ago."

"Been and gone! Why didn't you let me know that he was here?"

"What for should I let you know?"

"You knew that I wished to see him."

"You never said it; and, anyway, he never said that he was wishing to see you."

"You're taking advantage of me! You think I'm at your mercy, and that you can do as you like with me because I can't move! You're a wicked old woman!"

"Am I? Then I'm reckoning that age is the only difference there is between us."

Burning words flamed to Isabel's lips, but she had enough prudence and self-control not to allow them to go any farther. She was at the other's mercy, and she knew it. The only way to obtain from her some slight consideration was to endeavour to appease, not anger her. Instead of giving her anger vent, she put to her a question, the one she had put the night before.

"Is my husband dead?"

She received what was practically the same answer.

"Didn't I tell you that for that you must ask Dr. Twelves, since he's knowing when folks are dead better than me?"

Without affording Isabel another opportunity to speak Nannie left the room.

If the new Mrs. Grahame could have got out of bed there would have been some lively doings. It is not impossible that Nannie would have found that she had met her match. When that lady was really roused, and had a fair chance to show it, she was a difficult person to deal with. But she was, literally, held by the leg; as incapable of doing what she would have liked to have done as if she had been an infant in arms.

When, after an interval of no long duration, the ancient servitor returned, Isabel did treat her to what she meant to be a taste of her claws. For all the effect she produced she might have saved herself the trouble. The Scotchwoman evinced a serene indifference to anything she might say or do, which influenced her more than she would have cared to own. Then the pain she endured was exquisite. Nannie's ministrations were deft enough. She set about her task like one who understood well what she had to do, and was capable of doing it. She removed the bandages, bathed the injured foot, applied hot poultices; so far as Isabel was able to judge, did all that could be done. But the most delicate touches could not prevent her suffering agony. By the time the other had finished her anger was forgotten. All she desired was rest-peace-to be left alone.

For seven days Isabel remained, willy-nilly, in bed. All the time the only person she saw was Nannie. Dr. Twelves never came near her. Whether the fault was his or her attendant's was more than she could determine. She heard no news of any sort or kind. Nothing could be got out of Nannie. No answers to any of her questions; only the fewest possible words on unimportant subjects.

It is true that during the first two or three days her ankle gave her so much trouble, her sufferings from it were so intense, that she was, in a measure, content to be left alone and in ignorance. But as the pain lessened her impatience, and indignation, grew apace. More than once she attempted to get out of bed and to start on a voyage of exploration through the house to acquire information on her own account. Since, however, her attempts only resulted in disaster, and it was made plain that they only postponed her convalescence, common-sense gained the upper hand. She resolved to endure with as much calmness as she could command till the time arrived when, at least to some extent, she should again be mistress of her own powers of locomotion.

After the longest week she had ever known she decided that that time was not far off. She informed Nannie that, since her foot was now on the high road to recovery, on the morrow she would be capable of getting out of bed, and that, therefore, get out of bed she would. Nannie, as was her wont, kept silence when this piece of information was vouchsafed to her. But that she was impressed by it was evident when on the morrow in question, instead of the old woman, Dr. Twelves came into the room. It seemed as if Nannie must have told him that the time had now come when it was desirable that he should make his re-entry on the scene. At least that was the conclusion at which, at sight of him, the lady in the bed instantly arrived.

CHAPTER V
A CONVERSATION WITH THE DOCTOR

"So you've come, have you, at last! I suppose that old hag told you you had better before I came to you? I should have come in half an hour."

That was the greeting the angry lady accorded her tardy visitor.

Dr. Twelves seemed to be in no haste to answer. Coming to within a foot or two of her bedside he stood and eyed her. He looked very old in the daylight, older than she had thought he was. Short; thin to the point of emaciation. There was something almost sinister in his attitude, in the way in which, inclining his head a little forward, his arms held close to his sides, he examined her keenly, as if he were some bird of prey, and she an object on which he was doubtful whether or not to pounce. As she gave him glance for glance she understood that this was a person who was not so frail as he might at first sight appear. But want of courage was not a deficiency which could justly be laid to the lady's charge. When he did reply it was with a question.

"Why do you speak to me like that?"

"You know very well why! You promised that first night that you would attend to my foot; but though I've asked for you again and again you've never been near me once, till you were afraid that I should be after you."

"You've been in good hands. Nannie has done all for you that I could have done."

"I don't doubt that."

"Then of what do you complain?"

"You've kept me a prisoner."

"Kept you a prisoner! I! Madam, you jest. Has not your foot had something to do with your confinement? Is it not holding you a prisoner still?"

"It won't do long, so don't you think it. I'll be out and about before the day's over, and when I am I'll make things hum. Is my husband dead?"

"Your husband?"

"My husband! Are you deaf?"

"No, madam, not yet. So far age has not robbed me of my hearing. But to whom do you refer when you speak of your husband?"

There was that in the fashion in which he asked the question which caused her to clench her fists, tighten her lips and descend to vulgarity-unfortunately an easy descent for her to make when her temper waxed warm.

"What are you playing at? Do you think you're clever, or that I'm an utter fool? You're wrong if you do, you may take it from me. Is my husband, Cuthbert Grahame, dead? I've not been able to get an answer out of that old harridan, but I'll get one out of you."

"Then is Cuthbert Grahame your husband?"

"Is he! Isn't he? Didn't he marry me the other night in front of you and that old woman?"

"Have you a certificate or any writing to show it?"

"A certificate! What do I want with a certificate? You said nothing about a certificate! Look here, old man, don't you try to play any fool-tricks with me, or you'll be sorry. Are you trying to make out that he's not my husband?"

"Not at all; I am trying to do nothing. I should like to ask you a question, to which, before you answer it, I would suggest that you should give a little careful consideration. Would you rather be Cuthbert Grahame's wife or not?"

"I am his wife, and you very well know it, so it's no use talking, and that's enough said. I ask you again, is my husband dead?"

"Your husband? That is the point which I am gradually approaching. Mr. Cuthbert Grahame is not dead."

Her jaw dropped open.

"Not dead?"

"Not dead."

"But you told me-"

"Precisely; I am aware that I told you. You will, however, remember that I made an express reservation in favour of a miracle. The miracle has happened."

"How long will he live?"

"Madam, I am not omniscient. I have once, within your knowledge, failed as a prophet; I should not care to fail again."

"Is he dying?"

"I may venture to say that, at the present moment, to the best of my knowledge and belief, he is not."

"You are beating about the bush. You can at least say if he is likely to live long."

"It is possible, madam, that he may outlive me-even you."

"Then you have cheated me! – cheated me! You have got me into this mess by your lies."

"Any injustice I may have done you was unintentional. You will also be so good as to observe that I have just now offered you something which was intended to be in the nature of a loophole out of the dilemma in which you are placed."

"You mean when you asked me if I wanted to be his wife. Am I his wife, or am I not?"

"It might present a pretty point for the lawyers. If you had chosen to repudiate the connection, it might not have been easy to establish. Nannie and I can hold our tongues-that I beg you to believe. The occasion for a wife having passed, he might have preferred to hold his too."

"Would he rather be unmarried?"

"That is not a matter on which I should care to positively pronounce."

"Then why was he so eager?"

"I explained at the time. He had made a will in favour of a certain person, which he desired to render ineffective; marriage makes null and void any will which a man may have previously made; under the circumstances that seemed to be the easiest and the shortest way out of it. As matters have turned out the measure seems to have been a little drastic, since he can now, if he chooses, make a dozen new wills each day."

"Is he so far recovered as that?"

The doctor seemed desirous to consider before he answered. He put up his long, thin hand to stroke his bristly chin. Moving a few steps, he leaned over the foot of the bed, and from that point attentively regarded her.

"Madam, I do not wish to trouble you with the medical names of all the complicated diseases with which Mr. Grahame is afflicted. I am not sure that I am myself acquainted with them all; some of them puzzle even me. Among other troubles he is paralysed. He cannot move hand or foot of his own volition, or crook a finger. Again, straying into the paths of prophecy, I dare assert that he never will be able to. He has his senses-after a fashion; he is sane-also after a fashion. That is, he is legally capable of making a will, or of taking a wife. But if he desires to affix his signature to a document a pen will have to be placed between his fingers, his hand will have to be guided. To that extent he has recovered, beyond that he almost certainly will never go."

"But he is not dying?"

"No, madam, he is not dying."

"Nor likely to die?"

"No office would insure his life for four-and-twenty hours, though it is quite within the range of possibility that the breath may continue in his body for years. Such cases have been known. Some

people death takes at the first call; some have to be called again and again; some seem to go beyond the portal and yet return. Cuthbert Grahame is one of them. He'll not go till death is very much in earnest; when that will be I cannot say. I mistook death's mood the other night-the oldest of us make such mistakes at times. In this case my mistake may seem to press a little hardly upon you."

She looked at him askance. There was a whimsical gravity in his tone which was a little beyond her comprehension, a something which was almost sympathetic. She changed the subject; a fresh intonation had come into her voice also.

"I wish you'd look at my foot. It's better. I think that before long I'll be able to get about again as usual. I want to very much; it's awful being a prisoner in bed. I'm not good at keeping still."

He did as she requested, then pronounced a verdict.

"Your foot is better-much better, as you say. There is no reason why you should not get up, though it may be some little time before you have the entire use of it again."

"At any rate I'll get out of bed-at once."

"And, then, what do you propose to do when you are up?"

"I'm going to see my husband."

"Your husband?"

"Can't I? Why can't I?"

"Mrs. Grahame! – if it is your wish that you should be Mrs. Grahame."

"Aren't I Mrs. Grahame? If I am, what's the good of pretending that I'm not? I am Mrs. Grahame, so there's an end of it."

"Mrs. Grahame, haven't you any friends?"

"What do you mean by friends?"

"Haven't you any relatives? Is there no one to whom you are near and dear? no one to whom you are in any sense responsible for your actions; with whom in a measure your happiness or unhappiness must be shared?"

"No one in this world!"

He smiled at her vehemence, observing her closely all the time.

"Since I am, in a degree, responsible for the-we will call it situation-you are in, I am not unnaturally desirous of having my conscience as clear as I conveniently can. I would, therefore, beg you earnestly to let the first thing you do be this: If you have-we will say an acquaintance-on whose judgment you can rely, write to him; lay the facts before him clearly, and await his response before you take any further step whatever-certainly before you seek to have an interview with Mr. Grahame."

"There is no such person."

"It is unfortunate, since you are so young, and, therefore necessarily, so inexperienced, that you should be so entirely alone in the world. Will you allow me to offer you some advice?"

"What's the use? I've had enough of your advice already-too much."

"How do you make out your case? I am unconscious of having offered you any advice."

"You advised me to marry that man."

"I advised you!"

"Of course you did. There are more ways than one of offering advice; you chose the roundabout way. You told me that if I married him he'd be dead inside two hours, then I'd be richer by twenty thousand pounds. This is what comes of acting on your tip! No thank you. I've had enough and to spare of your advice; now and henceforward I'm going to act upon my own."

"None the less I'm going to give you a piece of advice-of very sincere advice. You have been subjected to some slight inconvenience-though, perhaps, inconvenience is hardly the proper word."

"I should think not."

"My advice to you is: When your foot permits leave this house-I assure you it is not a pleasant one to live in; accept a reasonable sum by way of compensation; then blot the whole episode from your memory."

"What do you call a reasonable sum?"

"Say a hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds? – the idea! when you talked of twenty thousand! None of your kid's talk for me! Look here, Dr. Twelves, you're an old fox. Don't you think I don't know it however hard you try to play the lamb? You've got some game of your own on. I don't know what it is, but I soon will. If you offer me a hundred pounds to go, I'm dead sure it'll be worth a good deal more than that to me to stay-and I'm going to stay! This is my house; I'm the mistress here; and all the more the mistress because my husband's a rich man who can't look after himself. I'll look after him! I'll show you who's who and what's what! – and every one else as well! – you can take that straight from me!"

As he rubbed his chin, as if he found comfort in the feel of the bristles, the doctor's smile grew more pronounced.

"Content, Mrs. Grahame, content! Only-still a further scrap of advice! – postpone your first call on your husband till you are able to move about as you please."

This piece of advice the lady did act upon, for the simple reason that she was powerless to do otherwise. When she did get out of bed it was agony to hop even as far as the couch. Three more days passed before she was able to stand without flinching overmuch; another whole week had gone before she was able to hobble unaided to the door.

During that time she perhaps suffered more than she had done while she was still in bed. To her restless nature the compulsory inaction was almost unendurable. Her desire to attack the problem which confronted her, to solve it if she could-at any rate to learn what really was the position in which she stood-possessed her like a consuming fever. Nothing could be got out of Nannie; she was impervious to questions of every sort and kind. Arguments, coaxing, threats, alike were unavailing. The old woman could scarcely have been more taciturn had she taken on herself a vow of silence. And after that one visit she saw no more of Dr. Twelves; she could even hear nothing of him from Nannie. That angered her almost more than anything, that he should seem to ignore her so completely! She swore to herself that he should smart for it before very long.

During that week she laid up a fund of resentment against both the doctor and Nannie which she promised herself she would pour forth upon their heads at the earliest possible moment. Only let her be able to get about again as of old, and they should see!

On the eighth day she decided that her time had come, or, at least, that it had begun to come. She said nothing to Nannie, but having proved by actual experiment that she could move about with comparative ease, she dressed herself, waited till the old woman had paid her her usual morning call, then set out on a voyage of exploration. Hobbling to the door, she opened it as quietly as possible, then stood and listened She could hear Nannie moving about downstairs. Then she moved towards the door which was on the opposite side of the landing. Had she had a stick on which to lean her progress might have been quicker. In spite of her reiterated requests Nannie had failed to provide her with one. Without support of any sort she moved very slowly. But she did get to her destination at last. She laid her hand upon the handle, paused a moment to learn if her movements had been observed, then turned it as quietly as she could.

CHAPTER VI
HUSBAND AND WIFE

She stood just inside the threshold of the room, with the handle of the open door between her fingers, and listened. She had moved so noiselessly that, quite possibly, to the ear alone her entry had been imperceptible. She looked about her, recalling the picture which it had presented to her mind on that first night. For some reason which she would have found it hard to explain a shiver passed all over her; a sudden chill seemed to penetrate to her very bones.

The room looked different by daylight, the windows wide open, the sun sending wide, warm splashes of yellow light from wall to wall. One of them came right at her as she remained there motionless. As she lifted her face she was blinded by the glare. It was odd that she should shiver in that glow of sunshine. Everything was so neat and orderly; there was such an absence of any signs of occupation, such complete stillness prevailed, that her first impression was that she had in some way made a mistake; that the room was empty. It was only when her wandering glance reached the great bed, which stood in such a position that it was partially screened by the door which she still held open, that she understood.

Its occupant was asleep, or-he was so motionless, so silent, her own heart seemed to cease beating-could he be dead? With unexpected ease she moved closer to the bed. No, he certainly was not dead; he merely slept, to all appearance, as peacefully as a little child.

Sleep produced no improvement in his looks. She went still nearer, so that, by leaning over, she could examine him in detail.

The conviction which she had had at first sight of him recurred with, if anything, even greater force. Beyond a doubt she had never seen a more unprepossessing-looking man. She had an almost morbid liking for good looks in a man. Gregory Lamb's handsome face had had almost as much to do with winning her as his lying tongue, which dowered him with splendid wealth. Her ideas of good looks were probably her own-Gregory was there to show it. But her attachment to them was so marked that she could with difficulty be civil to a man who was positively plain. An absolutely ugly man was to her an object of aversion; her first feeling towards such an one was actual physical repulsion, as if he were some unclean thing.

There could be no sort of doubt as to the ugliness of the man in the bed. His huge size was in itself a sufficiently unpleasant feature. It lent to him an uncomfortable aspect which was almost inhuman. He seemed to have swelled and swelled till his skin had become as tight as a drum. One had a disagreeable notion that if one pricked him, like some distended bladder, he would burst. He was all bloated, not only his body, but his head as well, and, above all, his neck. She had once had an aunt who had died of dropsy. This man seemed dropsical from the crown of his head to the tip of his toe-monstrously dropsical.

Nor was his appearance improved by the manner in which his head and face were covered with long sandy red hair, growing in scanty tufts, with bare spaces in between. The hair matched ill with his complexion, which was brick red, tinged, as it were, with a suggestion of pallid blue. He slept so quietly that it was difficult to be sure, at first sight, that his condition was one of slumber, not death. As Isabel bent over, she did not hesitate to tell herself that she wished he was as dead as he seemed. The sight of him afflicted her with such a sensation of aversion that she was then and there filled with an almost irresistible desire to crush him out of existence, as if he had been some loathsome reptile. She was possessed by a shrewd suspicion that she had only to strike him a hearty blow-anywhere! – to bring him to an end upon the spot. It would be so easy. She had been tricked; he ought to have been dead ere then. What was the use of such a creature living, and what enjoyment could he get out of life? Where should she strike him? She clenched her fist as if it had been actuated by an involuntary tightening of the muscles. As she did so, he opened his eyes, and looked at her.

It was a curious moment for both of them-so both of them seemed to think. There was in his gaze such a take-it-for-granted air that one could not but wonder if he had not been conscious of her presence even while he slept. The sight of a strange woman leaning over his bed, with such a queer expression on her countenance, did not seem to surprise him in the least. That she was strange to him was plain. He seemed to be searching in his muddy brain for some clue which would tell him who she was. The search did not seem to be meeting with much success.

For probably more than a minute they continued to look at each other, the contrast between the fashion of their looks being almost grotesque in its completeness. Her bold, handsome face was, at the same time, illuminated by keen intelligence, and marked by an expression of vindictiveness which gave it an unpleasanter effect than if it had been actually ugly. His face, on the other hand, was vacuous, expressionless; more, it was incapable of expression. It reminded one, in some uncomfortable way, of a piece of blubber, without form and void.

The eyes, particularly in comparison with the rest of him, were small; with the exception of the pupils they were blood-shot. One wondered how much, or how little, they could see; they regarded Isabel blankly, as if she had been a wooden doll.

After an inspection which lasted, as it seemed, an unnatural length of time, it was he who broke the silence. His voice was a little clearer than when she had heard it first, but not much. It still had the peculiar quality of appearing to belong to some one who was at a distance.

"Who are you?"

There was a significant pause before she answered. In her tone was significance of another kind.

"I'm your wife."

Either her words took him by surprise, or he did not gather what she meant, or disliked what he did gather. He was still again, as if ruminating on what she had said. When he did speak the remark he made was a little startling.

"Damn you!"

The unparliamentary utterance, especially as addressed to a lady, was accentuated by the matter-of-fact stolidity which marked it. It was not impossible that for a moment or two she was moved to give him back as good as he sent-and better. Possibly, however, the impulse was changed, as regards form, in the making. Instead of imitating the vigour of his epithet, she cut at him with a lash of her own.

"You're my husband." It would have been difficult for the strongest language to have been more scathing than her plain pronouncement of a simple fact. As if desirous of driving her dart still further home, she repeated her own words, with an even added bitterness-"You're my husband! – you!"

It would appear that the man, object as he was, was not without some sense of humour, and, also, that his feelings were not of the kind which are unduly sensitive. After what seemed to be due consideration of her words, he endorsed their correctness with a brevity which in itself was eloquent.

"I am."

There was something in the two little monosyllables which seemed to sting her more than his curse had done. She gave a movement, as if she were disposed to let her resentment take some active and visible form. But, again, maybe, her impulse changed in the making; she endeavoured to put a meaning into her repetition of a simple statement, which should make it strike him with greater force than a blow could have done.

"I am your wife."

Once more he showed himself to be her match in the game of give and take. Hardly were the words out of her mouth than he endorsed them again, with what was almost like the semblance of a grin upon his blubber-like face.

"You are."

"And I propose to let you see that I'm your wife."

"No doubt."

"Your real, actual wife, not a puppet, a thing you can pull by a string."

"Quite so."

"You may imagine, perhaps, that I'm a mere dummy, an automaton, which can be set in movement only when you choose. If you do, you're wrong, as I intend to show you, Mr. Cuthbert Grahame."

"Precisely, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

It seemed, for an instant, as if a torrent of words was trembling at the tip of her tongue, needing but a touch to set them loose; if so, the touch did not come. Turning, she went and stood by an open window; resting her hand on the sill she leaned out, as if she needed fresh air. She looked out on to a garden which was evidently of considerable size, but which sadly needed attention. The grass could not have been cut for months; it competed with weeds for possession of the footpaths. There were flowers, but they needed pruning; the weeds threatened to choke them in their own beds. Beyond, the ground rose; everywhere the slopes were covered with trees, pines for the most part-scarcely a cheerful framework to what was already bidding fair to become a scene of desolation. In spite of the sweet, clean air and of the brilliant sunshine, in her surroundings, as she saw them, there was a hint of something uncongenial, unfriendly, which did not tend to make her mood a gayer one.

While she still seemed to be absorbing the spirit of the landscape, Mr. Grahame's voice came to her out of the bed.

"I want to speak to you."

She heard him, but it was not until he had repeated the same sentence three times that she chose to favour him with her attention. Bringing her head back into the room she turned her face slightly towards the speaker.

"Well?"

"Why did you marry me?"

"Because I was told that you would be dead inside two hours."

Although the reply was brutal in its plainness, it did not seem to hurt him in the least-indeed, it seemed rather to amuse him.

"That's a poor reason. What were you to gain by my death?"

"Dr. Twelves told me that I should have twenty thousand pounds."

"Did he? I see. That was the bait. You're a ready-witted young woman."

"You mean that you think I'm a fool."

"Not at all; no more than the rest of your sex, or, for the matter of that, of mine. We're all fools; only some of us are fools of a special brand. Who are you?"

"I'm your wife."

"You've told me that already. I mean who were you before you were my wife?"

She moved her hand to and fro, restlessly, upon the window sill.

"I've half a mind to tell you."

"Make it a whole one. Yours should be a story not without features of interest. Besides, a husband ought to know something about his wife."

She stood up straighter, her back to the window, looking towards the bed with gleaming eyes. It was evidently easier to provoke her to an exhibition of temper than him.

"I'll tell you nothing. I'm your wife; that's all I'll tell you; and that ought to be enough."

"It is-more than enough. You're an embodied epigram. I think I can guess at part of your story." The indifferent, almost assured tone in which he said it brought her near to wincing. "My eyes are not so bright as they were-no, not so bright-but they're bright enough to enable me to perceive that you're young, and not bad-looking-after a sufficiently common type. You appear to be one of those big, bouncing, blusterous, bonny-four b's-young females who spring out of the gutter by the mere force of their own vitality; who push and elbow themselves through life with but one thing continually in view-self. You're probably ill-bred, ignorant, impudent and imbecile-four i's-four which are apt to

go together-and, in consequence, blundering along rather than advancing by any reasonable method of progression, you'll keep tumbling into ditches and scrambling out again, until you tumble into one which will be too deep for you to scramble out of, and in that you'll lie for ever."

To hear him, in his dim, distant, uninterested tones, mapping out, as it were, a chart of her life and conduct, affected her unpleasantly. When he had finished she had to pull herself together before she could deliver a retort which she was conscious was sufficiently futile.

"I daresay you think yourself clever."

"I'm afraid you're disappointed. If I'm not altogether to be congratulated on having you for a wife, neither are you to be altogether congratulated on having me for a husband."

"Congratulated! My stars!"

"Exactly-your lucky stars. Come, I've drawn a little fancy sketch of the kind of wife you appear to me to be; tell me, what kind of husband do you think I am?"

"Think! I don't think; I'm sure you're a monster. You ought to be in Barnum's show-that's where you ought to be."

"That is your candid opinion? Your tone has the ring of genuine candour. It's an illustration of how one changes. Would you believe that once-not so long ago-I was remarkable for my good looks as well as my figure?"

"Tell that for a tale!"

"I'm telling it for a tale that is told-and over. It must have been a disappointment when you learned that I was not dead."

"It was. I could have shook old Twelves when he told me. Perhaps I'll do it yet."

"Will you? That will be nice for Twelves. I should like to be present at the shaking. You look as if you could shake him."

"I should think I could-shake the bones right out of his body. I'm as strong as a horse-stronger than most men. I once thought of coming out as a strong woman, only I didn't fancy the training."

"Didn't you? By training do you mean clean and healthy living? Is that what you disliked?"

She had already repented her lapse into the autobiographical.

"Never you mind what I mean."

"We won't; why should we? May I take it that you have got over the disappointment of not finding me dead, and have become reconciled to the idea of my living?"

"You don't look to me as if you would live long, considering that you're as good as dead already."

"You think so. We've not been long at arriving at that stage of perfect candour which, I fancy, marks the career of the average husband and wife. I think you're wrong. I am one of those beings who are very tenacious of life. I'm only fifty, whatever I may look. There's no real reason-your friend Dr. Twelves will tell you-why I shouldn't live another five-and-twenty years."

"I don't care what he says after what he told me. I'll bet you don't."

"Suppose I do, would you propose to spend them with me?"

"I should do as I like."

"I begin to suspect you'd try to. Let me put the case in another way. What would you want to leave this house and never re-enter it again?"

"Twenty thousand pounds."

"Is that your lowest figure?"

"It is."

"Thank you. I will give the matter my careful consideration. In the meanwhile may I ask you to leave me for a time? My conversational powers soon become exhausted; with them I am apt to become exhausted too. A little rest might do you good."

"Listen to me. I came here so that you and I might understand each other."

"We have gone some distance in that direction, haven't we?"

"I don't think you have, or you wouldn't talk to me like that. It may be clever, and cutting, and that kind of thing, but I don't like it. I'm your wife, your equal, more than your equal, since you're lying there like a log, already more than three parts dead. I'm the mistress of this house; this room is as much mine as yours."

"Is it?"

"It is. That's what you've got to understand. When I choose to leave it I will, but not a moment before. So don't you order me about, because I don't intend to let you, and there'll be trouble if you try."

"Am I to understand when I ask you to leave the room, my bedroom, in spite of your courteous hint of a moment back, that you refuse?"

"You are; you bet you are. And you're to understand more than that; you're to understand that if you're not careful what airs and graces you take on with me, I'll stuff a handkerchief into your mouth. Then we'll see what you'll do next. A helpless lump like you to talk to me-your lawful wife! – as if I were nothing and no one. I'll soon show you."

"Will you? Maybe you'll first be shown a thing or two yourself, my lady!"

The tones were familiar. They were not those of the man in the bed. Looking round Isabel found that Nannie was glaring at her from the other side of the room.

CHAPTER VII
A TUG OF WAR

Perceiving that Isabel made no reply, Nannie addressed her again, with both in her manner and her words perhaps a superfluity of truculence.

"What for have you left your room and come here disturbing Mr. Grahame, you bold-faced hussy?"

Nannie's appearance and the vigour of her speech, both of which were probably a trifle unexpected, seemed to take Isabel somewhat aback. It was not unlikely that a rapid debate was taking place in her mind as to what exactly was the *rôle* it was most advisable that she should play.

One point was obvious, that the moment had come when it would have to be decided, possibly finally, just what position in the household hers was going to be. If she was to be its real mistress-as she had boasted that she was, and would be! – then it was out of the question that Nannie should be allowed to speak to her in such terms as she had just employed. How was she to be prevented? In her own way Isabel was not a bad judge of character. In the course of her short life her adventures had been so many and various that it had grown to be a habit to measure herself against nearly every one with whom she was brought in contact. Nannie was a dour old Scotchwoman. Isabel was perfectly conscious that she was not likely to be subdued-to the point to which she desired to bring her-by words alone. She herself was wholly devoid of scruples. As to self-respect, she was incapable of realising what it meant. She had been brought up in a school in which that sort of thing was not taught. Her early days had been spent among women who were quite as ready to resort to physical force as the men, which was saying not a little. As she had grown older she had never hesitated to use her muscles when her tongue was beaten. She was quick to perceive that this was a case in which she would have to use her muscles again, if she did not wish to degenerate into something worse than a figure-head in the house which she aspired to rule.

The only question she had to decide was whether she would be a match for the Scotchwoman. It would be worse than vain to challenge conclusions if she was likely to be proved the weaker. Brief consideration, however, persuaded her that there was but little fear of that. Her ankle was against her, and the fact that she had been inactive for a fortnight. But, on the other hand, though tough and brawny, Nannie might be old enough to be her grandmother. Even though handicapped by her ankle, Isabel did not doubt that she excelled her both in sheer strength and in agility, while as to knowledge of how to make the best of her powers she was convinced that, as compared with her, the other was nowhere.

She resolved to bring the question as to who was to be mistress to an issue then and there-if necessary, in the presence of the man in the bed. Instead of answering Nannie she put a question to him.

"Who is this objectionable old woman?"

"My housekeeper."

"Then, perhaps, you'll tell your housekeeper that, where I'm concerned, if she can't keep a civil tongue in her head and mend her manners, she won't be your housekeeper long-or mine either."

"Hadn't you better tell her so yourself?"

"Does that mean you're afraid to?"

"Never interfered in the housekeeping since the day I was born, nor with Nannie either. She's always run this house as if it were her own."

"Then the sooner she understands that she's not going to do so any longer the better it will be. If you won't make that plain to her, then I will. Now, my woman, remember that I'm your mistress, and that I'll stand impertinence from no one-least of all from a servant of mine. Leave this room at once; I'll talk to you when we're alone."

Nannie seemed to be surprised almost into speechlessness by the other's attitude and manner of addressing her. It was a second or two before she could find words with which to illustrate her feelings.

"Of all the brazen impudence! That a nameless besom, picked up from the roadside in the middle of the night, should have the face to speak to me like that! And you to call yourself Mr. Cuthbert's wife! Why, you're nothing but a shameless trollop! And though the doctor said that Mr. Cuthbert was to be kept as quiet as possible, if needs be I'll take you out of this room in my two arms, as you well know I did before. So out you come before I make you!"

"Go it, Nannie!"

The mocking encouragement from the man in the bed was to Isabel as the final straw. She did not allow him to range himself, before her face, on the woman's side. From words she proceeded to measures. Traversing the room with a rapidity which wholly ignored the twinges which proceeded from her injured ankle, she planted herself immediately in front of Nannie.

"Are you going to leave this room, or am I to put you out of it?"

"Me to leave Mr. Cuthbert's room, and ordered out of it by you! It'll be you that'll be put out of it, and that pretty quick, you-"

Isabel did not wait for her to finish; she anticipated the volley of compliments which had no doubt been intended to follow by straightening her left arm in the most approved fashion, and striking the other full on the nose with a vigour and unexpectedness which caused the old woman to lose her balance and go toppling over on to the floor. Before she had a chance to recover, Isabel had the door wide open, and began bundling the still prostrate Nannie unceremoniously through it. She was conscious that words were proceeding from the man in the bed, but what they were she neither knew nor cared. It was not her intention, if she could help it, to continue the proceedings in his room. Having got the other out of the room somehow, she shut the door behind her, determined to let him know as little of what was to follow as circumstances would permit, at any rate till all was over.

Then she waited for Nannie to rise, which she did with an agility which did credit to her years. As the other had possibly foreseen, the old woman was beside herself with rage. She rushed blindly at her opponent, who was at once cooler and more experienced in little discussions of the kind. Although hampered by her ankle she had no difficulty in evading the other's mad onrush, at least sufficiently long to enable her to receive her with a hail of blows directed impartially at her face and body. The proceedings had only lasted a few seconds, and were waxing momentarily warmer, when they were interrupted by some one who ascended the stairs. It was Dr. Twelves. As was only natural, being very far from edified by the spectacle by which he was confronted, he raised his voice to remonstrate.

"What does this mean? Have you two women gone mad, that you behave like drunken fishwives? Nannie! – Mrs. Grahame! – shame on you!"

Nannie, who had been severely pommelled, and had so far got much the worst of it, abstained, for the moment, from her attempts to return some of the marks of esteem with which she had been presented, and proceeded to vouchsafe some sort of explanation. As, however, she talked at the top of her voice, which failed her badly, and had to stop at uncomfortably short intervals to gasp, it was rather difficult to make out what she said, and when that was done it was not easy to join her observations with each other and supply them with a meaning.

"Put me out of Mr. Cuthbert's room! – ordered me out! – hit me in the face, that had never been laid hands on by any but my mother! – knocked me about as if I were an old rag-bag! – a bold-faced besom that's nothing in the world but the clothes she stands in! – and less character than that! – before I've done with her I'll strip her to her impudent skin!"

Nannie proceeded to do it. The attempt could scarcely have been called successful, because no sooner had she brought herself within the reach of the other's dangerous left arm than she received a smashing blow in the face which sent her staggering backwards. The course of the combat had brought her near the head of the stairs, uncomfortably near, as the event immediately showed. Before she was able to recover herself, reaching the topmost stair, she went crashing down it on to the doctor

who stood remonstrating below. Luckily for him he was on the bottom step but one, so that he had time to move somewhat aside before she was in his immediate neighbourhood. As it was she sent him cannoning with uncomfortable violence against the wall, while she herself came toppling on to the landing with a bang which shook the house.

Silence followed-a speaking silence. Above was Isabel, a really striking figure, as, with flushed cheeks, flaming eyes, clenched fists, straightened arms, she stared down on her victim in the depths below. The doctor, more startled than hurt, seemed to be in two minds what to do or say. With one eye, as it were, he looked at Isabel up above, and with the other at Nannie down below. At last he spoke, addressing himself to the triumphant figure up above.

"For all you know you may have killed her."

"It will serve her right if I have!" came the defiant response.

That she was not killed was soon made plain by Nannie herself.

"She's broken my leg! – and I'll be bound half the bones in my body! – the she-devil! Oh, doctor, what'll I do?"

There came the voice from above.

"You'll stop that noise! and if you're wise you'll cut out your tongue! Because the next time you say a rude thing to me, or of me, as sure as you're lying there, I'll have you dragged into the road, and there you shall be left; you shall never set foot inside this house again-I promise you that!"

The doctor had been leaning over her, as if to ascertain the nature of her injuries.

"I believe you have broken her leg."

"To be sure she has! Oh, doctor, doctor, I told you we'd rue the day you brought her into the house!"

"Next time I'll not be content with breaking half the bones in her body-I'll break them all!"

"Hush, woman! you forget yourself; have you no pity?"

"I've pity for those who deserve it, but not for an unmannerly servant who tries to bully her mistress, and then whines when she herself gets thrashed instead! And look here, Dr. Twelves, don't you think that I'm an ordinary woman, because I'm not-"

"That I am rapidly beginning to believe."

"Don't you interrupt me when I'm speaking, not even by attempts to be smart, especially as you happen to be one of those silly old men who are not meant to shine in that line. If you'd got an ordinary woman into the mess you've got me by your lies and humbug, I daresay you'd have been able to do as you liked with her. I suppose that's what you and that old woman have been reckoning on. But I want you to understand just once, and once for all, that you're mistaken. It's going to be the other way round; I'm going to play this game, in my way, not yours; I'm going to do as I like with you. You'll take your instructions from me, and from me only. If you want to be allowed on these premises you'll treat me as a lady and as the mistress of the house ought to be treated. Who's that down there? I heard you sneaking about and listening! Come up here and let me look at you." A shock-headed young woman appeared, followed, at a respectful distance, by one still younger. "If you two are my servants-and I suppose you are, or you wouldn't be there-if that old woman can't walk alone pick her up, carry her to her room and put her to bed, and leave her there; then go on with your work and let me have no nonsense."

All this time Nannie, who still lay motionless, had been groaning in what was evidently genuine pain. The doctor, who had been bending over her, remarked a little dryly: -

"I trust you will pardon me, Mrs. Grahame, but I think her leg is broken".

"Well, what of it? It's her fault, not mine; she's brought it on herself. She may think herself lucky that her neck's not broken after the way she's behaved. I'd have thrown her out of a window if there'd been one handy, and it would have served her thoroughly well right. I suppose you don't want her to lie there, littering up the stairs, even if her leg is broken. She carried me to my room as if I were a sack of potatoes, now they shall carry her. Do you hear what I say, you two?"

So Nannie was borne to her room with anything but the honours of war.

CHAPTER VIII
THE MINIATURE

Like some other persons, so long as she had her own way, and nothing occurred to annoy her, Isabel could be quite agreeable. Now that Nannie was laid low, and Dr. Twelves accorded her the respect she demanded-at least outwardly, for she continually suspected him of having his tongue in his cheek-she proceeded to show that there was a side to her character which was not altogether unpleasant. The household-what remained of it-consisted of two raw damsels, whose English was of such a quality that Isabel not infrequently found herself at a loss to understand what they were saying. They made no secret of the fact that they were by no means heart-broken at Nannie's discomfiture. She had ruled them with a rod of iron, and they were by no means sorry that some one had tried her hand at ruling her-with distinctly solid results. Especially was this the case when they learned that the new mistress was inclined to be as lax as the dethroned one had been rigid. So long as the work of the house was done-and there was not much of it as Isabel managed things-they were free to do pretty well as they chose, even to the extent of there being practically no watch kept on their outgoings and incomings.

The truth was that the new Mrs. Grahame was above all things desirous that no watch should be kept on her. Most of her time was spent in ransacking the house from top to bottom-an occupation she enjoyed immensely, and found no little to her profit. Now that Nannie was laid on her back, and-since at her time of life a broken leg is no small matter-promised to remain there for some time, there was no one to say her nay. Isabel turned out every cupboard and every drawer; waded through every scrap of writing they contained; appraised every article she found-and, indeed, assembled quite a nice collection of what she deemed the more valuable trifles in her own apartment, for her personal use and consolation. She lighted on what, to her, was a considerable sum of money. On this, she learned, Nannie had been accustomed to draw for various current expenses. She, of course, regarded it, there and then, as her own personal property.

Her first appearance out of doors took the form of a visit to a neighbouring small town-not Carnoustie-where she purchased such articles of attire as she imagined she required, together with a trunk to contain them. These she paid for out of Nannie's store. She did not think it necessary to inform Mr. Grahame how she had used what was, after all, his money. She did not seem to think it worth her while to tell him anything.

Her mind was occupied with various problems. First and foremost, she was extremely anxious to ascertain how much money the man she called her husband actually had, where it was, and how it could be got at, say by one who had a right to get at it. Almost as if he were conscious of what was transpiring in her brain, Cuthbert Grahame took advantage of an opportunity which arose, or which he, perhaps, made himself, to volunteer some information on the subject on his own account. The afternoon on which the conversation took place would have been memorable for something else, even if he had not seen fit to make her the receptacle of some very interesting confidences.

Isabel was an active young woman; healthy, full-blooded, vigorous, one in whose veins the blood ran strong. Inaction to her was punishment. So soon as her ankle permitted, and it proceeded to a rapid and complete recovery, she spent a portion of each day in taking the air-that portion of the day which was not spent in prying into everything the house contained. As her researches drew to a conclusion-as even the most thorough investigation allowed them to do in time-that unoccupied portion became more and more. So, having examined the inside of the house she turned her attention to the outside, to learn that her husband's estate was of considerable extent. She wandered up and down it, to and fro, till she began to be almost as intimately acquainted with it as with the contents of the residence. One afternoon she was indulging in one of these rambles when she received what really amounted to a shock.

She was passing through one of the woods of which her husband's property seemed chiefly to consist, and was resting on the bole of a tree, when she heard the sound of wheels. She was perhaps in a peculiar mood, because it immediately brought back to her that night on which she had listened-with what an anxious heart! – to the wheels of Dr. Twelves' approaching trap. Passers-by, thereabouts, were few and far between; for days together she would not encounter any. She had grown to love seclusion, possibly for sufficient reasons of her own. She was seated on a slope. The road began at the foot, perhaps thirty feet away. She instinctively altered her position, so that, while she could see herself, the trunk of the tree almost entirely screened her from observation. She wondered who was coming, peeping round to see. When she did see she drew back with a start.

In the dogcart which presently appeared was her husband-her real husband-Gregory Lamb. The sight of him took her wholly by surprise, and filled her with unwonted perturbation. What was he doing there? What could have brought him to that neighbourhood? She had taken it for granted that he had long since returned to London. Even Mrs. Macconichie's-supposing he was still there, which seemed unlikely-was a good twelve miles away. She was conscious that he was not alone in the trap. Who his companion was she had not noticed; she had not time.

The vehicle drew rapidly level with the tree on which she rested. She decided that she might venture to peep again, and was just doing so when the horse shied so violently that the cart was almost overturned. Recovering itself, apparently getting the bit between its teeth, it bolted like a thing possessed, and vanished from her sight, though not before she had nearly convinced herself that the man with her husband-the one who was driving-was Dr. Twelves. She had only seen him from the back, and then had had but occasional glimpses through intervening trees for half-a-dozen seconds, but she was almost sure that it was he. There was, however, just a possibility that she was mistaken, and it was that possibility which worried her. She would have liked to have been certain, either one way or the other. Then, in the case of the worst, she might have been prepared.

For the juxtaposition could but mean trouble for her. She was too clear-sighted to delude herself with the notion that the doctor was anxious to be a friend of hers. He had, to outward seeming, accepted the situation; probably, in part, because, as she herself put it, she was no ordinary woman; and partly because, under the circumstances, considering the part which he himself had played, he did not see what else there was for him to do. Let him, however, learn how wholly baseless was her claim to occupy the place which she had arrogated to herself, and she did not for a moment doubt that he would use that knowledge to oust her from it in the shortest possible space of time.

The only two points on which she had her doubts were: Was it really the doctor who was driving Gregory Lamb? and, if so, had Gregory Lamb given him cause to even suspect the relation in which she stood to him? On a third point there was no doubt-the dogcart had been moving from, not towards the house, so that in any case the peril was not actually approaching her now.

Another thought suddenly occurred to her, one which set her heart beating faster than was altogether agreeable. The doctor and her husband might have been to the house already, in which case danger might be awaiting her return to what she had learned to call her home.

That was a question which might be quickly resolved-she would resolve it quickly. She started off homewards then and there, telling herself as she went that, whatever had happened, or might happen, they should only be rid of her on terms of her own.

It turned out that, so far, nothing had happened; to that extent, at least, her agitation had been uncalled for. No one had been near the house since she had left it; nothing had happened which was in any way out of the common. The relief she felt at learning even so much showed how real she had imagined the danger was. With some vague idea of subjecting him to cross-examination and learning if he had suspicions of her of any sort or kind, so soon as she had removed her hat she paid a visit to Cuthbert Grahame's room.

As usual, he lay immobile between the sheets, preserving that death-in-life rigidity which, it seemed, was to continue his condition to the end. The sight of him struck in her an unwonted note.

"Don't you get tired of lying there? – especially on a day like this, when the sun is shining and the breeze is stealing among the trees and flowers?"

She did not strike a responsive note in him. He was silent for some seconds, then he asked, in his strange, far-away voice, which was like a husky whisper-

"Aren't you well?"

"Oh yes, I'm well enough. I'm only wondering if you're not tired of being ill. It seems to me that you might as well be dead as keep on lying there with only your voice alive-and that's pretty nearly done for."

She had returned to her more familiar mood.

"Tired! – tired!" He repeated the word twice, then after an interval went on: "What's the use of being tired of what has to be? I'm tired of you, but it seems you have to be-so what's the use?"

"I don't see why you need be tired of me. I'm no more to you than a chair or table."

"You're my wife."

"Your wife! It's because I'm your wife that I'm likely to get tired instead of you. I'm not a helpless statue-I'm a woman; I don't want a dead log-I want a man."

"I was once a man."

"You a man!"

"Seems queer, doesn't it?"

"I don't believe it."

"Yet I was, physically, not a bad sample of a man. Now the Lord knows what I am! – a husk, I suppose. There's a man inside me somewhere still."

"You look as if there were, and you sound it."

She laughed, not pleasantly. It was one of her defects that her laughter seldom had a pleasant sound, as if it were only the spirit of malice which had power to move her to mirth.

"You've confessed why you married me. Do you know why I wanted to marry you, or any one? I'd have married your friend Nannie if she'd agreed, but she refused point-blank."

"Is that true?"

"Quite. It was only when she persisted in her refusal that the doctor thought of the woman he'd found in a ditch. Since anything in the shape of a woman would serve he hauled you up the stairs." She was still. She was standing in her favourite position by the open window, looking out at the woods on the slope of the hill. "Shall I tell you why, when already looking into hell-and I had a good look, I promise you! – I wanted to marry any one?"

"I know."

"Who told you?"

"Dr. Twelves."

"He seems to have imparted to you a good deal of useful information. What did he tell you?"

"That you'd made a will in some one's favour, which you wanted to break, and that was the easiest way to break it."

"Did he tell you who the some one was?"

"No."

"It was a woman. Do you hear-it was a woman!"

"I hear."

"A young woman-younger than you and prettier. Prettier? My God! You're not bad-looking in a way, but there's a streak of the vulgar in you now. No one could ever mistake you for a lady. You're one of the blowzy sort; you'll become impossible; hard-featured; flame-coloured cheeks; bold, staring eyes; huge, unwieldy, gross. She! – she's the most perfect woman God ever made, and she'll only improve as the years go by."

"I've met that kind of woman before."

"Not you. She's not to be found in the sort of society in which you've moved."

"She's to be found in the penny novelettes-never out of them. You and your perfect women! In spite of her perfection you don't seem to have found her all milk and honey, or you wouldn't have been so keen to break that will of yours."

"Do you know why I wanted to break it?"

"Some silly nonsense. Because she tried to scratch your eyes out, I daresay-serve you right if she did."

"Because she wouldn't marry me."

"Because-!" She stopped to burst into noisy, strident laughter. "She must have been a fool. I should have thought any one would have married you if you'd made it worth their while."

"I told you that she was not the kind of woman you have ever met; she's clean beyond your understanding. Put your hand underneath my pillow-gently. You'll find a case; take it out."

Isabel looked at him, hesitating, as if in doubt of his meaning, then she did as he had told her. He was propped up on a nicely graduated series of pillows. As she withdrew her hand, the case between her fingers, she dragged one of the pillows with it right from under the one on which his head reposed, so that, denuded of its support, his head fell back. In a second he began to choke before her eyes. His face grew bluer and bluer; the veins stood out through his skin; he fought for breath; his stertorous gasps shook him from head to foot. She raised his head to its normal position, returning the pillow to its place. As she watched him struggle back to what-to him-was life, she laughed.

"It wouldn't take long to make an end of you."

By degrees he regained the use of his attenuated voice.

"I do want careful handling-that's so. Still I wouldn't murder me if I were you-it would be murder. Murder has to be paid for in full. It would be hardly worth your while to be compelled to render full payment for such a remnant as I am. Have you got the case? Open it."

She held a square Russia leather case, in corn-flower blue. She looked for a spring or for something which would enable her to get at its interior, but found nothing.

"Does it open? I don't see how."

"It's a little idea of my own that spring. I didn't want any one to see what is inside but me. But it's so long since I've seen that I have grown hungry for a look, so you shall have one too. I think I should like you to have one. Hold the case between your finger and thumb, one of them exactly in the centre of each side, then press firmly."

Obeying him, immediately one of the sides flew open in the middle, revealing, framed in the other, the miniature of a young girl. Isabel was no artist; she was incapable of appreciating the artistic value of the portrait which confronted her. What struck her instantly was that it was surrounded by what looked like three rows of precious stones-pearls, sapphires, diamonds.

"Are they real?" she inquired.

"Do you mean the stones in the setting? They are. The pearls are there because she is the queen of pearls; the sapphires, because they are her favourite stones; the diamonds, because I chose to have them."

"They must be very valuable."

"They cost a lot of money, and they'd fetch a lot. That is the girl I wanted to marry me. What do you think of her?"

"She is pretty."

"Pretty! She's beautiful."

"She's too fair for me."

"That's because you're dark. I hate dark women-always have done. Hold the case open in front of me. Let me look at her."

She did as he asked. No change took place in his expression; none could take place. His voice remained the same; that also was incapable of modulation. Yet she knew that an alteration had taken

place in him; that as he gazed the man of whom he had spoken, who was inside him somewhere, was stirred to his inmost depths.

"Not beautiful! She's the most beautiful creature in the world. She always has been; she always will be. God bless her! though He has been hard on me." Then, after a pause, "Take the case away and shut it, and put it back beneath my pillow-gently. That glimpse will last me a long time, thank you. Though I may never look at her again, her face will be with me always to the end. Before you close the case you might look at her again more carefully. Perhaps, after you have gazed at her attentively, understanding may come to you; you may begin to perceive the beauty which was hidden from you at the first."

She returned, the case still open in her hand, to the window in front of which she had been standing.

CHAPTER IX
THE SLIDING PANEL

The silence remained unbroken for some seconds. Then he asked-

"Well, what do you think of her now?"

"I think she's pretty, as I said. You may think her beautiful. I daresay plenty of men would; that sort of thing's a question of taste. I tell you what I do think beautiful-that's these diamonds. The sapphires and the pearls are all very well, but the diamonds are the stones for me."

"You would think that. You're the sort of woman who'd admire a gaudy frame, and have no eyes for the picture that was in it. If you like I'll tell you who she is and all about her. It may seem like sacrilege to talk of her to you, but I think I'll tell you all the same."

"Tell away. I suppose it's the old, old story: she met some one she fancied more than you. Men always do think that sort of thing is wonderful. But I don't mind listening."

"Yes, there was some one she liked better than me. That was the trouble."

"It generally is, while it lasts; then it turns out to be a blessing. But, of course, you've never had the chance."

"As you say, I've never had the chance. Her name-I won't tell you her name-though why shouldn't I? Her name is Margaret Wallace."

"Scotch, is she?"

"Her father was Scotch, her mother English. He was my dearest friend. When he died-"

"He left his only daughter, then a mere child, and that was all."

"That was all, and as you say she was a mere child. You seem to have had some experiences of your own."

"One or two. I'm more than seven."

"So I should imagine."

"You took her to your own home, found her in food and washing, and pocket-money now and then. As she grew older her wondrous beauty and her many virtues-especially the first lot-warmed your withered heart. When she attained to womanhood you breathed to her the secret of your passion, which she had spotted about eighteen years before; but as she didn't happen to be taking any, of course the band began to play. Isn't that the sort of story you were going to tell, only I daresay you wouldn't have told it in quite that way?"

"I certainly shouldn't have told it in quite that way."

"You had expended on her two hundred and forty-nine pounds nineteen and sixpence ha'penny, besides any amount of fuss, so her ingratitude stung you to the marrow. Still you might have borne with her; you might not even have altered the will which you had made in her favour, and which you kept shaking in her face; only when she took up with another chap she seemed to be coming it a bit too thick. You cried in your anger, 'I'll make you smart for this, my beauty!' So you started to make her smart; but it seems to me that you've done most of the smarting up to now. Was it her cruelty which made you the pretty sight you are?"

"Not altogether."

"Not altogether! You don't mean to say that when you wanted her to be your wife you were anything like what you are now? A nice kind of love yours must have been!"

"I appear to have acquired a really delightful wife."

"If you weren't a dead log it might be that you'd find out how true that was. Any man with a touch of spice in him would give the eyes out of his head for a wife like me, and there have been plenty who were ready to do it."

"As you yourself observed, these things are a question of taste. So you think she was justified in treating me as she did?"

"Justified for not wanting to marry a thing like you! You ought to have been drowned for hinting at it."

"I am myself beginning to think that your point of view may not be wholly incorrect, and that, therefore, it was fortunate that I did not die on the night we were married."

"I don't."

"You wouldn't-you have, of course, your own point of view. From mine it is fortunate that I have been spared to enable me to make another will."

"How are you going to make a will, when you can't move so much as a finger?"

"I can have one drawn up according to my instructions. You will find that I'm capable of signing it. Would you have any objection?"

"It would depend on what there was in it."

"I see. May I ask if you are under the impression that if I die without a will-even supposing our marriage is valid-"

"It's valid enough, don't you be afraid."

"I'm not afraid; you, I fancy, have the cause to fear. But I say, supposing our marriage is a marriage-as to which I say nothing either one way or the other-if I die intestate do you imagine that you will necessarily come into possession of all I have?"

"Have you any relatives?"

"Not one in the whole wide world."

"Then you bet I shall."

"You may bet you won't."

"Who's got more right to what you leave behind than your lawful wife?"

"It depends. Under no circumstances would you inherit more than half of my personal property, and a third of my real estate; the rest would go to the Crown."

"Half's something! Look here, Dr. Twelves told me that if I married you I should have twenty thousand pounds. Have you got as much?"

There was an interval before an answer came. Possibly the man in the bed was considering what answer he should make to such a very leading question.

"I cannot tell you exactly what I have got, but I may safely venture to assert this much: If all I possess-land, houses, shares and so on-were to be turned into cash to-morrow, I should find myself with at least two hundred thousand pounds."

"Two hundred thousand pounds! Go on!"

"This is a curious world, and Fortune is a curious jade; she bestows her gifts with feminine irresponsibility. She gives one health and strength and youth-and empty pockets-just when he could get enjoyment out of full ones. To another, crippled limbs, physical helplessness, premature old age-and pockets brimming over-just when money is of as little use to him as pictures to the blind. I have been denied most things except fortune. Sounds ironical, doesn't it? As with Midas, everything I have touched has turned to gold-in my case a thing wholly worthless. I never made a bad money speculation in my life. I doubt if I ever made an investment which did not pay me ten per cent. Some of my investments have paid me forty and fifty per cent, for years, and are worth ten times what I gave for them. I wasn't worth twenty thousand pounds when I began life; now, to adopt your phraseology, I'll bet I'm worth more than a quarter of a million."

"And yet you live in a place like this, without a horse in the stable, and the garden like a wilderness!"

"Why shouldn't I? Where would you have me live? In a castle? with an array of servants who would take my money and from whom I should have to hide. A well-bred servant wouldn't be able to endure the sight of such an object as I am. All I need is a bed to lie on, some one to put food between my lips, money to pay for it. Since here I have those things, here I have all I need. Besides, you should bear in mind that, as nothing is being spent, there will be all the more to leave behind."

She was silent; her face turned towards the open window, the miniature in its jewelled case still in her hand. His words had fired her imagination. A quarter of a million! – this man worth a quarter of a million! – and he supposed himself to be her husband! Not long ago she had told herself that a certain and clear five pounds a week earned by singing and dancing at the minor music halls would be her idea of fortune. She had married that deceitful humbug, Gregory Lamb, because she believed that he might possibly have as much as a thousand a year. What was a thousand a year compared to a quarter of a million! If he died without a will half of it would be hers, or was it a third? Why shouldn't she have more than that? If he had no relatives to make a fuss, why shouldn't she have it all?

Even as she asked herself the question an answer came to her dimly, yet with sufficient clearness to start her trembling. It was born of an idea which would have disposed most women to do more than tremble. Her breath came faster; her eyes brightened; something like a smile wrinkled her lips; the vista presented to her imagination, which would have appalled most persons, titillated her.

After a while she asked, without turning her head-

"If you were to make a will, what would you put in it?"

"I'll show you."

"When?"

"Now. There's a secret hiding-place in this room. If you tried do you think that you could find it?"

"I'd find it fast enough."

"Then find it."

"What sort of place is it?"

"That's asking for assistance. I'll give you this much. It's in the wall, concealed by a panel of wood. Now I've given you the scent, follow it to a finish-if you can."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.