

Hume Fergus

A Woman's Burden: A Novel



Fergus Hume

A Woman's Burden: A Novel

«Public Domain»

Hume F.

A Woman's Burden: A Novel / F. Hume — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
PART I	14
CHAPTER I.	14
CHAPTER II.	19
CHAPTER III.	23
CHAPTER IV.	28
CHAPTER V.	33
CHAPTER VI.	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

Fergus Hume

A Woman's Burden: A Novel

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I.

A QUEER ADVENTURE

It was midnight – midnight on Waterloo Bridge. A plague was over the city – the concentrated vomit of a million and more chimneys wrapped all in an Egyptian darkness.

The miracle of Moses could not have produced a deeper gloom – an atmosphere more impenetrable. It clung to the skin, it even pressed against the eyeballs. It might in truth have been that very outer darkness which we are taught is reserved for those amongst us who are sinners.

Big Ben and his brethren of the steeples struck a muffled twelve, seeming to insist upon their strokes the more as if they knew their dials were hidden from all sight. The very gas lamps entered into rivalry, some looming out mere splotches of dirty yellow light, while here and there one more modern than its fellows managed successfully to penetrate the gloom. The bridge leapt across the river from fog-bank to fog-bank, like the bridge in Mira's vision, and if the chill mist lifted a trifle toward the centre, it was but a matter of a few feet. And above it all presumably there shone the stars and moon in their spacious firmament, they and their kindly influence shut out, it might be for ever, by the relentless pall.

And in the darkness on the bridge, there crawled and lurked and squatted the noisome creatures of the night. They could hear the sullen lapping of the unseen river against the piles, as it swept full tide from the sea. To their ears, sharpened by hunger and misery, the waters were all articulate, inviting them to exchange their stony resting-place for its softer bed below. And they pondered greatly at the invitation. Were it not better to accept it, and let their half-starved bodies drift seaward with the morning ebb? Nothing, they thought, and truly, could be worse than their present plight. Were it not better to end existence now and for all time? Yet so does the mind of man shrink from the unknown – revolt against the almighty plunge from light to darkness, that of all those hungry miserable creatures, not one got further than the pondering – not one was there who would brave the momentary wrench which should part him from this earthly wretchedness, and give him peace, oblivion even, and that because he did not know, and dared not solve the problem.

So the waters surged on ruthlessly through the arches into the heart of the land, and the fog grew thicker, colder, and more clammy over the city.

Yet humdrum respectability had its representative here withal; and that in the person of an elderly, genteel, moneyed, and apparently unexceptionable gentleman, who should surely rather have been tucked away between blankets, than abroad at such a time and on such a night. For ragged poverty, bedless and foodless, to camp on these stone benches, and seek oblivion there, was in the ordinary course of existence as it runs its way in the daily and nightly round of the great city. Its victims have ample time for reflection, retrospective or prospective – a ruined past, or a wholly problematic future. Workhouse or prison, suicide or starvation – such is their food for thought, with but little or no choice between the evils. But for an irreproachable gentleman of years, who had every sort of comfort at his call, to be pacing about the Surrey side was, in the existing circumstances, truly remarkable.

He appeared to have lost his way, which of itself was natural enough considering all things. He stopped every now and then, and paused, obviously in doubt which way to turn. As he stood

deliberating, a small figure emerged, as it were, from nowhere – a very ragged imp – and huskily demanded,

"Wot the blazes 'e was arter?"

Then the gentleman addressed the small figure:

"What bridge is this?" he asked, through the muffler which was tight around his neck.

"It's wuth a tanner, any way, m'lord," answered the boy – such a ragged, stunted, evil-looking boy, true product of the London mud.

Respectability felt instinctively that it was face to face with Iniquity, and that, too, in no very choice neighbourhood, and in a thick fog to boot. Respectability therefore took counsel for a moment, and in the end produced a coin.

Iniquity snatched it, bit it, and spat upon it – why this latter it is difficult to say – through all of which tests the coin seemingly emerged triumphant. It was pocketed, and the sought-for information was hoarsely supplied.

"It's Wat'loo Bridge, m'lord."

Then he vanished into the fog like a dismissed spirit.

The elderly gentleman groped his way on, ever keeping touch of the stone balustrade. Suddenly he started at the sound of a shrill whistle. He quickened his step, for he knew not what such a call might portend, and he had no fancy for being the means of supplying the breakfast-table next morning with sensational matter.

Yet as he moved quickly over the sticky pavement, there came upon him the feeling that he was being followed. What if the boy were a pilot-fish, and had returned to direct the shark towards his prey, and the shark were close at his heels now? The thought was disquieting, and took strong hold of him. He looked round for a policeman, forgetful in his apprehension of the fog. At last he took to his heels. Such a thing it was safe to say he had not done for years, and those years had had their say, as was quickly demonstrated, for he got no further than the centre of the bridge. There a murky halo of light was some small comfort. He paused. What was it he heard? Hurried footsteps surely! His blood seemed more than ever to chill, and he could feel his heart thumping against his ribs. It struck him that this sort of thing was very bad for him. He clutched at his umbrella for want of any stouter weapon. Almost as he did so, a man lunged from out the darkness, and grasped him by the throat.

That grasp meant murder, and he knew it. A hundred trivialities flitted through his mind, as he had always been told they did in face of death. He managed to look round, though choking and gasping as he was, he could not cry for help. And now it came, as all else had come, apparently from nowhere – unaccountably.

A woman rushed up and flung herself on the arm that was strangling him. As in a dream he heard what she said.

"No, Jabez. No – let him go, let him go!"

"Miriam!"

The hand relaxed its grip, and its victim fell on the pavement.

"You here? Get out of it, can't you?"

"No, I will not. Leave the man alone I tell you. Would you murder him?"

"Yes – for your sake. Aren't you starving – aren't we both starving? Curse him. I'll have his watch anyhow. Ah, would you!" (There was evidence of some slight show of resistance on the part of Respectability, who was now gathering together his scattered senses.) "Do that and I'll squeeze the life out of you!"

A flutter of skirts and a rush. Then the sound of the woman's voice – a refined voice – raised as in desperation.

"Jabez, Jabez! I'm on the parapet, Jabez, and I swear if you do not leave him I will throw myself into the river!"

"Miriam, come down I say, come down."

"Only if you leave him!"

"Damn him then; let him go to the devil!"

With this he kicked the worthy citizen, who retaliated by suddenly regaining power of speech, and calling loudly for aid.

Then the pilot-fish came in sight again.

"Nab his ticker!" he yelled.

"No, no; let him go!"

The woman leapt down, and held them both at bay.

"Go," she cried. "Go – the police!"

At which Respectability breathed a heartfelt "Amen."

"Slit 'is bloomin' whistle," said the small boy, who was as uncompromising as he was impolite. He made off followed by the shark. The worthy member of society, assisted by the woman, scrambled to his feet. Then the gloom suddenly became illumined by the rays from a lantern – an unmistakably official lantern.

"Hullo, wot's all this?"

"Constable!" gasped the rescued one, "constable, I have been violently assaulted, and robbed of –"

"No, not robbed," interrupted the woman called Miriam, pointing to his chain.

"Oh, it's *your* little game, is it?" said the one having authority, bringing his light to bear upon her. "Let's 'ave a look at you – a bad lot 'less I'm much mistaken. Better give 'er in charge, sir."

"No, no, my man, on the contrary, I am very much indebted to this good lady!"

"Lady, lady! Oh, yes, she's a real lady, she is, an' no mistake."

"At all events, officer, to her intervention I owe my life, so it will be well if you refrain from alluding to her in that way."

The woman ignored the policeman, and turned to the man she had saved.

"I must leave you now," she said calmly. "The constable will no doubt see you safely home – for a consideration."

X103 scowled. He did not like things put thus brutally. He was a trifle subdued too by the elderly gentleman's attitude, which despite his deplorable plight had not been devoid of pomposity, not to say dignity. He felt he was a little bit out of his beat. It was quite right that he should see the gentleman safely on his way home – it was more than probable, too, that he would be offered a suitable reward for so doing. It would not be for him to refuse such reward, no matter what form it might take. So mused X103. He still continued to direct his bull's-eye toward the woman. He could see her face clearly, so could the elderly gentleman, who, he had been quick to notice, wore a fur coat. It was a queer affair. The woman winced under his scrutiny.

"Red 'air, black eyes!" muttered the constable. "I'll swear she's a bad 'un."

The elderly gentleman did not again rebuke him. Even in such circumstances he was not one to hear what was not meant for his hearing. He thought the woman's face was a remarkable one, emaciated, pallid, and hunted in expression though it was. Those dark eyes seemed doubly large by contrast with the sunken cheeks – sunken for sure, by the ravages of direst want. The locks of auburn hair, which fell on either side of that low white forehead, could not hide the many lines of care and misery with which it was imprinted. She was gaunt and wasted too; her hands were as bird's claws, and she leaned heavily, almost lifelessly, against the stonework of the bridge. Starvation, outward and inward, was there in all its hideousness, having driven beauty far afield, and left the bare suggestion of what had been, as if to accentuate the more the horrible completeness of its work. Starvation was there in that uncertain, hesitating manner – starvation in the very shawl clutched strenuously with one hand to her bosom – starvation, which, having worn the body, strove now to break the spirit.

But the spirit was strong in the woman, and while she was mute, she was still defiant. She met the gaze of the policeman now, and though she met it in silence, her eyes declared convincingly – and

that to one whose daily way was choked with crime – that she knew not evil. The elderly gentleman understood it all.

"Constable," he said, "you will conduct this young lady" – he emphasised the word – "to the end of your beat. There you can hand her over to your comrade, and so on in turn until we reach the Pitt Hotel in Craven Street."

The man saluted.

But the woman spoke.

"I cannot go with you, sir," she said feebly, "for I must return at once."

"Return? – where to? Not to that man? – that Jabez!"

"To Jabez," she answered defiantly.

"But – but you will faint on the way – you are starved. At least allow me to do something for you – you, who have done so much for me. You will, you must take something to eat. I am afraid there is no cab to be found in this fog. Try and walk, Miss Miriam –"

She offered no further resistance, but drew her shawl more closely round her, and took the proffered arm of the man. X103 looked on somewhat grimly. It would be incorrect to say he was not nettled – he was distinctly, for by this arrangement he need not look for anything substantial. But X103 had not been in the force these many years without learning something of philosophy. So he vented his indignation and sense of general injury by putting to utter rout certain shadowy forms that had gathered round the halo of his lantern in the space of the last five minutes. They thought, no doubt, he was unnecessarily abrupt in his methods, but they dispersed without trouble, if a trifle reluctantly.

When the two had reached the far end of the bridge, constable X103 could not resist one parting shaft.

"She's a bad 'un, sir, take my word for it. I should send her off, sir, if I was you. She's bound to get you into trouble."

"It strikes me you will get yourself into trouble, my friend, if you don't hold your tongue. Ah, here is the man on the next beat. It is he, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. He'll see you into the Strand, sir."

"Very well then, here you are. Good night. Come, Miriam."

Saying which the respectable elderly gentleman passed a coin to X103, and proceeded to button-hole his fellow. They vanished into the thickness, and virtue rewarded turned his bull's-eye on to the palm of his hand.

"Ten bob in gold! I'm blowed! He's a good 'un after all, that old rib. Seemed to know her name, and use it pat enough. H'm!"

And in that last grunt there was a whole world of possibility.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE ARRANGEMENT

When, conceivably out of gratitude and pure philanthropy, this respectable elderly gentleman took this apparently disreputable, and, by no means elderly female, under his wing, and in the early morning hours appeared at the door of a sedate and wholly decorous hostelry, with a demand for a night's lodging for them both, he ran a very great risk of being misunderstood. They had been passed on from policeman to policeman with every care, though the pilotage dues were by no means inconsiderable. And, strange to say, they were admitted without parley.

Now Miriam had expected a vastly different reception. She was in no way oblivious to the appearance she presented, and was naturally inclined to exaggerate, rather than otherwise, its effect, notwithstanding the irreproachable bearing of her cavalier. The fact that she was received without demur by the landlady, made it, in her mind, only the more remarkable. She had a fair idea of the tendencies of her sex. But evidently the gentleman was known here, such knowledge being – it was equally evident – beyond question, for Mrs. Perks, to judge by the look of her, was not one to grant the benefit of any doubt. Her effect upon blue litmus paper would assuredly have been most striking and instantaneous. In spite of everything Miriam fell to thinking. But she was too weary and famished to cogitate for long. She decided to accept the circumstances as they were.

"Sir," said Mrs. Perks, addressing the elderly gentleman in the shrillest of voices, "if you only knew what I've suffered this blessed night – but that you never will. Oh, the awful 'orrors and ghastly visions I've 'ad of your 'avin' your throat cut from ear to ear, no less. Bein' a widder, and 'avin' no manly 'eart to lean on since Perks went below – that is 'is body I should say, for, as is well-known to you, Mr. Bartons, 'is soul soared straight upwards – I feel these things the more. Thank God you're 'ere, Mr. Bartons, safe and sound, and not 'acked about as I seed you in my mind's eye. 'Eaven be praised, I say, for it's long-sufferin' to us all!"

Then Mrs. Perks looked fixedly at Miriam, and stiffened herself into a very pillar of disapprobation. Then again she addressed Mr. Barton.

"And now, sir, p'raps you'll explain this."

"This," being, without doubt, indicative of Miriam, who, overcome as she was, had been unable to resist the grateful ease of a lounging chair close at hand.

So it was not going to be such plain sailing after all. The landlady had, it seemed, no intention of foregoing her more purely feminine prerogative. For a moment Miriam had it in her mind to make a clean bolt of it even then. But her deliverer stepped forward. She saw him now, as he stood in the light, for the first time clearly. A shrivelled-up diminished countenance it was she thought. He was quite bald, too, and his mouth was hard – almost ascetic. His looks belied him surely, for he had been all kindness and solicitude for her in her plight. Divested of his fur coat, his evening dress accentuated the leanness of his figure, as it does accentuate either one tendency or the other. He was quite short – hardly as tall as she herself. She wondered why he should so have troubled himself about her. To judge from his face, gratitude for what she had done for him would not go for much. Could it be that he had some ulterior motive? Hardly – unless – unless; but her weary brain refused to follow up the train of thought it had conceived.

As it turned out Mr. Barton made short work of the landlady and her required "explanation." Turning after her sharply, he crushed her volubility utterly by the adoption of a method nothing if not Socratic.

"Tell me, Mrs. Perks," he said, "how long have you known me?"

"Lawks a mercy, Mr. Bartons, sir, what a question! Why, maid, and wife, and widder, 'aven't I known you these forty years?"

"Quite so. And during that time have you discovered me to have any strong inclination towards your sex?"

"You 'ates 'em, Mr. Bartons, sir – 'ates 'em, I know you does, and small blame to you. It ain't much as I thinks of 'em myself – it's mostly 'ussies they are."

Then again Mrs. Perks' eyes rested on the unhappy Miriam. She was too attractive altogether, despite her pitiful state, to please the good widow.

"That being so then, Mrs. Perks, you must allow me to say, 'don't be a fool!' Had I not had you in my mind as a thoroughly reliable and sensible woman, I should not have brought this young lady here."

Mrs. Perks snorted. It was not quite so sonorous a snort as that with which the policeman had accompanied his repetition of the word "lady," but it meant exactly the same thing. There was a world of contempt in it. Mr. Barton continued:

"But I feel sure, Mrs. Perks, I have not been mistaken in my estimate of your sound common-sense. Let me tell you that this *lady* has preserved my life – yes, Mrs. Perks, my life, and my purse. There are, I may say, other reasons for my bringing her here, but that I think should suffice for you. She has saved my life, Mrs. Perks. You will be so good therefore as to send something to eat, and a bottle of wine here, and to prepare the young lady's room."

"Oh, Mr. Bartons, so you *was* in danger! I know'd it. I felt sure of it." She pressed the candlestick she carried so close to her that for a moment her curl papers were in imminent danger of conflagration. "Didn't I see a windin' sheet in the wick o' the candle? didn't I 'ear the 'owlin' of a dog? Yes, Mr. Bartons, I did, and wot's more, when I tossed a coin to see if it was true, it came up 'eads, which, as is well-known, means death."

"Well, I am really very sorry to be the cause of dispersing such overwhelming and convincing phenomena, Mrs. Perks; but, as you see, I'm alive, and what's more I am exceedingly hungry. Now run along, there's a good soul, and let us have something to eat."

With a final wave of her candlestick, Mrs. Perks retreated, muttering,

"If you was a kinder-'earted sort, Mr. Bartons, I could understand it; but you ain't. It's well-known as a flint's putty to you, and I'm puzzled at your goin's on, I am. Kindness – no, don't tell me; it ain't no kindness. She ain't got no weddin'-ring neither. But food and drink they wants anyhow, so food and drink they must 'ave, I suppose."

Mr. Barton poked the remnant of the fire. There was an unpleasant expression in his eye, as he looked at the exhausted woman before him. Mrs. Perks was unusually trying to-night. Miriam was leaning back now. Her eyes were closed and her head drooped. She was an intensely pitiable object. But there was no pity in Mr. Barton's expression as he looked at her – no glimmer of it. He was scrutinising her searchingly, cruelly. His gaze was something more than intense. She woke with a start.

"Don't speak," he said, as he saw her lips part. "Not a word – you are much too weak to talk. After you have had something, then I'll talk to you."

She obeyed. She felt as if all power of resistance of mind or body were leaving her. He looked at her critically again. How wasted she was! The cheeks were completely sunken. The lips were blue rather than red. Her whole expression was one of weariness. Yet withal it was a beautiful face – it had been of surpassing beauty. Intellectual, too, and refined in every line. And Barton had studied many faces in his life – and he saw more in this one than was apparent to the casual observer. He rubbed his hands in satisfaction at the result of his inspection. Indeed, he could not repress an audible expression of it – a kind of fiendish chuckle.

It roused Miriam again. She opened her eyes with something like fear in them. A feeling had come over her of intense apprehension. She felt, indeed, as though she were in the clutches of some enemy – an enemy not of herself alone, but an enemy of mankind – of humanity. That such a one could be before her in the shape and person of Mr. Richard Barton – this respectable, middle-aged gentleman – was impossible. The mere idea was preposterous. It was no doubt a symptom of her ill-nourished condition. Yet later on she remembered what she had felt at that moment.

Then appeared Mrs. Perks, bearing the supper-tray herself. She placed it on the table under the flaring gas-lamp, and was about to commence her chatter, when Barton interrupted her.

"You can return in an hour, Mrs. Perks."

"Ho, indeed, and when am I to 'ave my natural rest, Mr. Bartons, I should like to know, seein' as 'ow in an hour it'll be 'alf-past two? But I'll go, sir, though I must say as I can't 'old with such goin's on in my 'ouse."

"Your house – !"

"Well, if it ain't mine it ought to be, seein' as I work that 'ard that I'm just skin and bone!"

"Now understand me, Mrs. Perks, if you don't take yourself off without another word, you will not be even an inmate of this house to-morrow!"

The woman turned as pale as her sallow complexion would admit. She opened her lips to speak, but with a great effort refrained. She seemed to be within measurable distance of fainting. The man's expression as he fixed his eyes upon her had been horrible. She felt deadly sick. In the passage she paused, recovering herself somewhat, and shook her fist at the closed door. Then she got herself a glass of brandy – a thing she rarely did.

"That woman was born on my estate in Hampshire," explained Barton, drawing a chair to the table for Miriam. "You'd hardly think it perhaps, but she began as scullery-maid to my mother, and ended as housekeeper to me. I brought her to London, and placed her here in this house, which I may tell you is my own property. You understand now how I was able to bring you here. An old gentleman and an unknown woman! What decent hotel would have taken in the pair of us! He, he! I know my own knowing."

But Miriam made no protest. She ate and drank ravenously. Mr. Barton sipped his wine and watched her. Occasionally he gave utterance to the peculiar chuckle which had wakened her before. The same uncanny feeling came again upon her. She could not shake it off.

"I wish now I had left you to Jabez," she said suddenly.

"Indeed, why? – that is the sort of speech which I should not make if I were you, more especially whilst you are consuming meat and drink of mine. Why do you wish such a thing?"

"Because I think you are very wicked."

"Wicked – how? Surely I have fed you. I have ordered for you a comfortable bed, and, what's more, if you answer satisfactorily the questions I am going to put to you, I intend to procure for you a situation – how then am I wicked?"

"I don't know – but I feel that you are. You remind me of a rat, and I loathe rats! I can see that woman who has gone feels as I do."

"Perhaps. Still she obeys me."

Miriam rose and took up her shawl.

"I am going," she said curtly.

"Indeed. I think you will also obey me, Miriam. Sit down I say."

He pointed to a chair. She strove not to meet his eye, but his gaze compelled her. Their eyes met, and, for a moment, were in desperate conflict. Then the woman sat down. She was in a cold perspiration, and was trembling too.

"That's right – I thought you would. Go back to Jabez would you? – well, we shall see."

"I thank you for what you have given me, Mr. Barton; but I feel under no obligation to you, since I saved your life. The obligation, if any, is yours. But we will cry quits, if you please."

"Not at all – as you say, it is my turn now. Let the benefits come from me, and the – well, the gratitude from you."

"Mr. Barton, understand I wish nothing from you. Allow me to go."

"Where, back to Jabez – the man who murders strangers because you starve? No, my good young lady. It is for me to save your Jabez from the gallows by retaining you – that is if – By the way, what is your full name?" he asked abruptly.

His eyes were full upon her again. She felt herself unable to shake off their horrid fascination; all power of resistance seemed to leave her.

"My name is Miriam Crane," she said faintly.

"And what are you?"

"The daughter of a sea captain."

"H'm – respectable enough on the face of it. And how do you come to be in this plight?"

"When my mother died, my father left me in a seaport town in charge of a friend of his, having paid my board for a year. He was lost at sea, and I was turned out of doors by his friend. I came to London thinking to get some engagement as a governess."

"Oh, you are well educated then?"

"Sufficiently so to teach children. But without influence or references I could get nothing. My small stock of money soon went. I pawned everything I had, even my clothes. I even tried to make a living by selling flowers, but I could not. Everywhere I went, in everything I did, I was unlucky. I sank and sank until – "

"Until right down at the bottom I suppose you met this Jabez of yours. He is your lover?"

"He does love me," blazed forth Miriam, "but I am an honest woman."

"Naturally," Barton chuckled, "otherwise with your beauty you certainly would not be starving. Why are you so honest?"

"I believe in God," her eyes sought his searchingly. "You don't," she said.

"Perhaps not – nevertheless, I am honest too."

"That depends what you call honest," retorted Miriam. "You have plenty of money, no doubt, so you can't very well help behaving so as to keep your freedom. But for that – "

She hesitated, but gave him quite clearly to understand her meaning.

"'Perhaps' again," said Barton. "You mean to say that I have not sufficiently strong incentive to be anything else – that if I had, that if I were a poor man for instance, I should probably land in prison."

"I am quite sure you would."

"Dear me, you seem to have made up your mind about me very definitely – it hasn't taken you long either."

"I judge by your face. As I read it, it is a page of devil-print!"

Barton rubbed his hands. He seemed more tickled than anything else. Certainly he was in no wise offended.

"I believe I have found a real pearl in the gutter," he chuckled. Then he turned to her,

"Tell me now, why did you save me from your Jabez?"

"I did not know you then – perhaps if I had, your body would now be lying in the river."

"And my soul – what about that?"

"You should know – if you are a man and not an animal."

"You are mistaken, young lady – you think me a libertine, no doubt – "

"Oh, nothing of the kind – you are too hard even for that. If I had any doubt about it, I should not be here with you now."

"Well, well, let us hope that after a little longer acquaintance your opinion of me will improve. For the present I wish to befriend you all I can – that at least should be a point in my favour."

"But why – why, I ask, should you wish to befriend me? What is your object?"

"That you shall know when the times comes. Let us resume your very interesting story."

"You have heard it. I told you I met Jabez, and that he loves me. I suspected when he went out to-night that he was desperate – that he might steal, murder even, if by so doing he could obtain food for me – that is why I followed him, to save him, and, as it happened, I did save him, and you too."

"And the boy who acted a jackal to your lion – who is he?"

"Shorty – oh, he is a wicked little creature, who ought by rights to be in a reformatory."

"Indeed. Now please attend to me, Miss Crane. I am no philanthropist, nor am I a fool, and you yourself seem willing to acquit me of any amatory intentions. You will easily believe then that it is from no feeling of sentiment that I have brought you here to-night. One strong dose of that kind of thing has lasted me through life. I suffered badly at the hands of your sex once, but once only. I am never likely to suffer again. Nevertheless, I confess that if it had not been for your beauty, I should have left you there on the bridge."

"I am not beautiful," contradicted Miriam.

"No? – well, you must allow me to be judge of that. I repeat, my intentions are perfectly prosaic. I am no Don Juan of gutter-girls. I see in you exactly such a person as I need for the carrying through of a scheme I have in hand."

Miriam rose.

"I refuse to have anything to do with it," she said emphatically.

"Had you not better learn what it is first?"

"No. I am sure it is vile."

She made towards the door.

But his eyes caught hers, and she had to yield. What power had this man over her? It was horrible. She could make no effort of body or will against him. And he stood there grinning, as she thought the devil himself might grin at the capture of a spotless soul. She sank back weakly in a chair.

"You seem exhausted," said he. "I'll ring for Mrs. Perks. You must go to bed at once. We'll finish our little talk to-morrow. For the moment I will ask you only one more question. Who is Jabez?"

"I refuse to tell you."

"Tell me, who is Jabez, I say," he repeated, keeping his eyes upon her steadily.

And she told him. But when Mrs. Perks came in, she was lying in a dead faint.

PART I

CHAPTER I. MRS. DACRE DARROW

Mrs. Dacre Darrow was a much misunderstood woman – at least she said so frequently. Her husband, dead now some five years, had never been able to comprehend her sentimental nature; her uncle, Richard Barton, hard old cynic that he was, did not appreciate her tender heart; and the world at large could not, or would not, understand her. And so Mrs. Darrow posed as a martyr in her day and generation. The late Mr. Dacre Darrow had been a barrister and a failure. He had left her with no income and one child to rear. In this dilemma she had sought the Manor House at Lesser Thorpe, and had proposed to keep house for her Uncle Barton in return for her maintenance. Uncle Barton considered her proposition, and ended by installing both mother and son with three hundred a year in a small and quaint cottage on the outskirts of the park. This was too much altogether for Mrs. Darrow. Could a woman bear such brutal treatment silently? She thought not; nor, in fact, did she. On the contrary she abused Uncle Barton daily and hourly. When not thus occupied, she was as a rule busy in endeavouring to get money out of him, though this latter was, as she expressed it, heartbreaking work. It was rarely possible to extract from him anything beyond her stated income. Small wonder, then, that Mrs. Darrow regarded Uncle Barton as a brute and herself as a martyr.

"Just think, dear," she wailed to her friend, Hilda Marsh, "he has five thousand a year and that large empty house, yet he lets me live in this pokey cottage. Three hundred a year! It is hardly enough to buy one's clothes."

Hilda, occupying her favourite position before a mirror, made no reply. As the daughter of a poor doctor, and one of a large family, she considered Mrs. Darrow very well off. She could not sympathise with her in her constant grumbling. But she was wise in her generation, was Hilda, and did not argue with the widow, firstly because Mrs. Darrow never argued fairly, but dogmatised and invariably lost her temper; and secondly, because Hilda had more to lose than to gain from quarrelling with her. She was a pretty, vain, selfish girl, and calculating to boot. Mrs. Darrow's social influence in the parish was useful to her, so she trimmed her sails accordingly. At the present moment she was in the little drawing-room for afternoon tea. She patted a rebellious little curl into shape as in some sort of excuse for not replying to Mrs. Darrow's latest complaint against Uncle Barton. The widow continued to protest against the way in which she was being treated; and Hilda continued, so far as was possible, to avoid contention, to admire her own pretty face in the glass, until tea was brought in. Then, and then only, did Mrs. Darrow, ever fond of her comforts and blest with the best of good appetites, brisk up. But true to her indolent disposition, she asked Hilda to make the tea.

"You do it so well, dear," she said coaxingly; "I taught you, didn't I?"

"Yes, Julia, of course you taught me, that is why I can make it to your satisfaction," said Hilda, sitting down to the bamboo table.

She called Mrs. Darrow Julia at the widow's express request, for – in Mrs. Darrow's opinion – such familiarity tended to diminish the difference in their ages. How she arrived at this conclusion was known only to Mrs. Darrow, who never condescended to explain her reasons for either speech or action. It was so, because it was so, and there was an end of it. And invariably the adoption of so uncompromising an attitude was successful. By its means she managed to emerge triumphant from her fiercest altercations. By alternately shifting her ground and refusing to give any reasons, she always reduced her opponent to a moral pulp. In effect, her tactics were undeniable.

Hilda's attractions were of that order which suited her present occupation. She looked well at a tea-table. She wore white, touched here and there with the palest of blue, and her hands moved ever so deftly among the egg-shell china cups and saucers, with their sprawling dragons of green and red. She was essentially the Dresden china type herself. A dainty figure, a transparent complexion, dark blue eyes, and hair the colour of ripe corn: such were the outward and visible attributes of Hilda Marsh. She looked like an angel, and was frequently taken for one – more especially by men. Her beauty was that of a peach, and, like a peach, she possessed a very hard kernel. Not even Mr. Barton had a more obdurate heart. However, she succeeded in hiding this from all save her own family, and they, being anxious for Hilda to make a good match, were so kind as to remain silent on the subject. Moreover, Hilda – her angelic qualities being reserved wholly for the public, and not at all discernible by the domestic hearth – was, in the eyes of her family, a personage to be got rid of. That seemed clear, since she was a great grief at home. Hers was a case in which the face is most certainly not a correct index to the mind.

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Darrow, soothed somewhat now with a strong cup of tea and a particularly indigestible muffin, "if I wasn't the best-tempered woman in the world how I should complain of my hard lot!"

"What is the matter now, Julia?"

"Matter! oh, nothing worse than usual. Only that Uncle Barton has engaged a governess for Dicky, and I have had no choice in the matter. Oh, it's nothing." Mrs. Darrow stirred her tea violently. "Of course, I'm a mere cipher in my own house."

"Mr. Barton pays for the governess," suggested Hilda.

"And why shouldn't he? It's his duty to educate Dicky, and give the poor boy a chance in the world. My life is over, Hilda, and I live only for my boy."

This was one of Mrs. Darrow's stock pieces of sentiment, and she produced it with surprisingly dramatic effect on every occasion. It sounded well, and cost nothing, for she never troubled about Dicky, save when he was necessary to a tableau on public days, and her reputation of being a devoted mother was to be enhanced thereby. Although her husband had been dead five years, she still mourned him in black silk, amply trimmed with crape, and was careful to use nothing but the most aggressively black-edged paper. Even her handkerchiefs mourned in a deep border, and her cap of delicate white cambric called loudly on the world to witness what a model widow she was. In addition to these mute evidences of eternal sorrow, Mrs. Darrow gave tongue to her woes vigorously. She really did not know, she said, how she bore it. Indeed, if it were not for her dear child she would wish to die. No woman had ever suffered what she had suffered – and much more to the same effect, all of which was very genteel and laudable, and meant to be correctly indicative of her noble state of mind.

"Uncle Barton is coming to tell me about the new governess, Hilda; I expect him every minute."

Hilda rose quickly.

"In that case, dear, I had better go. Mr. Barton has no love for me."

"He has no love for anyone. I never knew so selfish and stingy a creature. Don't go. I want you to stay and talk to me. Perhaps Gerald may come too."

"Mr. Arkel's coming is nothing to me," replied Hilda, tossing her pretty head.

"Really! I thought you liked him!"

"So I do; but then you see I like many people – Major Dundas for instance."

"John!" Mrs. Darrow became reflective. "Oh, yes; John is very nice, but not nearly so good looking as Gerald. Besides, Gerald is Uncle Barton's heir!"

"That may or may not be; we don't know. But this I do know," said Hilda pettishly, "that should either of Uncle Barton's nephews become engaged to me, that one will not be the heir."

"I don't see why not?"

"Mr. Barton doesn't like me, that's why. Perhaps he'll even go the length of marrying the new governess to Major Dundas or Mr. Arkel to spite me." Then, after a pause, "What kind of woman is she?"

Mrs. Darrow threw out her hands with a wail.

"My dear, how should I know? I am quite in the dark. I have been told absolutely nothing about the woman. But if she is not a thoroughly satisfactory person, I'll have her out of this very soon, I can tell you. I'm not going to be imposed upon in my own house by any spy."

"What is her name?"

"Miriam Crane. It sounds Jewish. I hate Jews."

"Is she pretty?"

"He doesn't say. But knowing how Uncle Barton hates our sex, I quite expect he has chosen some raw-boned, prim, board-school monster, just to spite me. I am sure she's horrid. Her name sounds horrid."

"Then she shan't teach me!"

The interruption came from behind the window curtain, and Hilda laughed gaily.

"Hiding in there, Dicky? Come and have a piece of cake."

"You horrid child," cried his mother, as the pale-faced Dicky emerged from his retreat. "What a turn you gave me! Why can't you sit on a chair like a Christian instead of poking in window corners? What have you been doing?"

"Reading 'Robinson Crusoe.'"

"You should be at your lessons; really, I never knew so idle a child. You're breaking my heart with your horrid ways, you know you are! I'm sure I'm the most afflicted woman in the world. If I didn't bear up I don't know what would become of you!"

Dicky, well used to his mother's wailing, took no notice whatever, but under the wing of Hilda devoted himself to the demolition of cake to a most alarming extent. He was a delicate, nervous child, wan and peevish; far too tall and old-fashioned for his age. Under judicious management as to diet, work, play, and exercise, he would have developed into a charming little fellow; but Mrs. Darrow, with her ill-disciplined mind, was the worst possible parent to be charged with the up-bringing of such a child. She overwhelmed him with caresses one moment, declaring that he was her all, boxed his ears the next, and lamented that she was burdened with him; so that Dicky came as near hating his mother as a child of ten well could, and Mrs. Darrow, instinctively feeling this, bewailed his lack of affection and sought to scold him into loving her. If ever Uncle Barton did a wise thing in his life, it was when he engaged a governess for the neglected boy, though of course everything depended upon the personality of the governess. So far Mrs. Darrow was in the dark, and out of sheer contradiction to Uncle Barton was prepared to make herself highly unpleasant to the new-comer, and nobody could be more disagreeable than Mrs. Dacre Darrow, as the parish of Lesser Thorpe knew to its cost. She was a past-mistress in the arts of scandal-mongering, nagging, and back-biting. The strength for a right-down hatred was not in her.

"If my new governess isn't pretty, like Hilda, I don't want her," said Dicky, when his mother had wailed herself into a state of momentary passiveness. "I don't like ugly people."

"Would you like me to teach you, Dicky?" laughed Hilda.

"Oh, yes; we could read 'Robinson Crusoe' together!"

"I'm afraid that's not a lesson book, Dicky."

But Dicky insisted that Defoe was better than any lesson book.

"Lesson books make my head ache," he said; "and I learn a lot of hard words in 'Robinson Crusoe' without thinking. Why can't lesson books be nice like that?"

"You little imp," burst out his mother furiously; "the idea of talking about what you like. You'll be taught by a black woman if I choose; and I'll burn all those rubbishy story-books."

Thus did Mrs. Darrow, who had read nothing but society journals and fashion magazines, blend discipline with criticism.

"I never saw such a child," she wailed; "he's not a bit like me. Oh, Dicky, Dicky, why haven't you your mother's sweet disposition and sweet temper?"

Before Dicky could reply to this truly overwhelming question, to which but one answer was expected, a dried-up little man appeared at the French window opening on to the lawn, and stepped into the room. Hilda half rose to fly from her arch enemy, but being caught, decided it would be undignified to retreat. So she resumed her seat and talked in low tones to Dicky. Mrs. Darrow still lay on her sofa, and welcomed the stranger in the faintest of low tones, meant to be expressive of great weakness.

"How are you, Uncle Barton," she said. "I can hardly speak, I am so ill."

"I know, I know," rasped out the cynic grimly. "I heard you talking to Dicky, no wonder you can't chatter now."

"I must do my duty to my child," cried Mrs. Darrow with more energy, "even though my health suffers."

Mr. Barton surveyed the plump recumbent figure with grim humour.

"You feel your parental duties too much, Julia, they will wear you out. How do you do, Miss Marsh? I see you and Julia have been spoiling your digestions with strong tea. Muffins too! Oh, Lord, think of your complexions!"

Hilda laughed, and glanced into a near mirror. Her complexion was her strong point, and she had no fear of its being criticised even by disagreeable Mr. Barton.

"I'm afraid my appetite is stronger than my vanity," she said.

"Then you must have the appetite of an ostrich," growled Barton, sitting down near his niece; "but Julia, poor dear, eats nothing."

"That I don't," murmured Mrs. Darrow. "I peck like a bird."

"What kind of a bird – a canary, or an albatross?"

"Uncle Barton!" cried the outraged Julia in capital letters.

"There, there, it's all right. Anyone can see you eat nothing. You are all skin and bone. Dicky, come here, sir. Your new governess will be here in ten minutes."

"In ten minutes!" screeched Mrs. Darrow, bounding from the sofa with more energy than might have been expected. "She can't – she mustn't. I'm not ready to receive her. Oh, Uncle Barton!" – the irrepressible feminine curiosity would out – "what is she like?"

"Very ugly, small, dark-haired, dark-skinned."

"I knew it. I knew you would choose an ugly woman!"

Barton chuckled.

"Only as a foil to yourself, my dear. Now then, Dicky, what is the matter?"

"I don't like an ugly governess," whimpered Dicky. "Can't Hilda teach me?"

"I don't know about that, Dick. If beauty is the essential factor in your teacher, then certainly Miss Marsh is more than qualified. What do you say, Miss Marsh? Will you undertake this young gentleman's education?"

Hilda shook her head, and laughed herself into a pretty state of confusion. It certainly became her.

"I'm not clever enough," said she, wincing under Barton's regard.

"H'm. That's a pity, otherwise you might have had this fifty pounds a year."

"What?" screamed Mrs. Darrow, "do you intend to give this creature fifty pounds?"

"Why not? She's worth it."

"Who is she?"

"Dicky's governess – Miss Crane."

"But who is she? – where does she come from?"

"London. You had better make further inquiries of her in person, for there's the fly driving up to the gate."

Dignity, or rather her exhibition of it, prevented Mrs. Darrow rushing to the window. She seated herself like a queen on the sofa, and spread out her sable skirts, so as to receive the ugly governess with the true keep-your-distance hospitality of the British matron. At the same time she remonstrated with Uncle Barton for his rash and unnecessary generosity.

"If you gave her twenty pounds a year it would be more than enough," she said snappishly. "I could do well with the other thirty."

"No doubt. But you don't teach Dicky, you see."

"I'm his mother."

"So I believe. But you don't want me to pay you for that, I suppose? Well, here is my Gorgon."

Hilda remained to see the new governess. Like Mrs. Darrow, she was devoured by curiosity; centred on this occasion solely upon the new-comer's physical attractions – or lack of them. It was quite possible of course that this creature might be better looking than Mr. Barton's eyes could judge. With Mrs. Darrow she continually glanced towards the door, and Barton chuckled. As his chuckle was invariably a prelude to something disagreeable, even Mrs. Darrow felt uneasy at the sound.

Outside, in the narrow passage, could be heard voices, and the bumping of heavy luggage being got in. Then the door opened, and the little maid-servant announced, "Miss Crane." Immediately afterwards the new governess entered the room.

"Why, she's pretty!" cried Dicky in surprise.

Barton led Miriam to the throne whereon, bitterly disappointed, Mrs. Darrow sat in state.

"Julia, this is Miss Miriam Crane. Miss Crane, my niece, Mrs. Dacre Darrow."

The widow gave her hand and murmured some commonplace; but from that moment she hated Miriam with all the fervour her petty nature was capable of. Barton looked at the three women taking stock of each other, and chuckled again.

CHAPTER II.

A RED RAG TO A BULL

Miriam, having been thus formally introduced into the parish of Lesser Thorpe by no less a personage than the lord of the manor himself, speedily settled down to her official duties in Pine Cottage. The cottage was typical of its kind – a very fairy cottage, a jumble of angles and gables, casements and rusticity, with a thatched roof, and walls overgrown with roses. Now, in the month of June, the roses were in full bloom, and the place was brilliant with them. It lay a short distance off the village road, half clasped to the breast of the pine forest, whence it took its name. The little garden a-bloom in front was encircled by a white paling fence and a quickset hedge. At the back an orchard of apple and plum trees stretched until it seemed to lose itself in the woods beyond. A charming Arcadian place it was, for which, be it remembered, Mrs. Darrow paid no rent. Yet she continually grumbled at being compelled to live in it.

"I ought to be in my proper place at the Manor House," she confided to Miss Crane, "but Uncle Barton is so selfish; don't you think so?"

"Really," replied Miriam, knowing that all she said would be repeated by this she-Judas, "I don't know, my acquaintance with Mr. Barton is so slight."

"Where did you meet him?"

"In London, at a governess' institution at Kensington. He inquired for someone to teach your son, Mrs. Darrow, and as I seemed likely to suit him, he engaged me."

It will be noticed that Miriam suppressed Waterloo Bridge, the Pitt Hotel, and Mrs. Perks. This was by Barton's express desire, and indeed by her own; for she had no wish to reveal her past to Mrs. Darrow, who, as she had quickly perceived, bore her no love. Indeed, the widow was at no great pains to conceal her dislike for Miriam. She was horribly jealous of her, notwithstanding her expressed opinion that no woman with red hair could be considered even passable. She feared her, too, because she judged her to be a spy of Uncle Barton's; and, moreover, in her own mind she was distinctly conscious of an existent air of mystery about the governess which she was in no way able to explain. On her part, Miriam rarely referred to the past, in spite of Mrs. Darrow's hints in that direction, and her reticence in this respect only put that lady the more on the alert. She had already made up her mind that Miriam was an adventuress, and watched her, constantly hoping that in some way she would commit herself. But Miss Crane was too discreet for that. She paid strict attention to her duties, made herself in every way agreeable, and soon became popular in the parish. The discovery that she possessed a contralto voice of excellent quality, coupled with musical accomplishment far before that of anyone else in Lesser Thorpe, did nothing to lessen her popularity, whereat Mrs. Darrow of course hated her more than ever. In all the world there is nothing so consistently relentless as the hatred of a petty-minded vain woman. In her own estimation Mrs. Darrow was a truly noble creature, but then her introspection was notoriously short-sighted, and was invariably made through the medium of rose-coloured spectacles. She admitted to herself that she detested Miriam, and the stronger her detestation became, the more she smiled.

With Dicky, the new governess speedily made friends. He was an impressionable lad, and was at once attracted by her beauty and fascinated by the music of her voice. He became her slave, much to the disgust of his mother, who thought that no one should be loved or admired but herself. On all possible occasions she thwarted Miriam's wise regulations for the boy's comfort and health; but an appeal to Uncle Barton soon put this right. Mrs. Darrow was inclined to rebel, and but that her cynical relative held the purse, would most assuredly have done so. When Mr. Barton intimated that Miriam was to have full control of the boy, the widow grumbled and wept copiously. Such an opportunity for hysterical display was not likely to pass her. But eventually she gave in, and extorted from the old man a new dress in recompense for her submission. She promised not to interfere with Dicky's

education, but entered a protest against Miss Crane's mode of action. In a word she was as spiteful as she dared be, but not knowing exactly on what footing Miriam stood with Barton, she judged it wiser to keep her venomous tongue within bounds.

"Of course Miss Crane is very clever, Uncle Barton, but – " she began tentatively.

"She ought to be clever," interrupted the old man. "I don't pay her a pound a week for nothing. Go on, Julia, but what – ?"

"She is too severe; she starves the child. The poor boy is allowed no tea, very little meat, and not even a biscuit between meals. She insists upon his taking cold baths, although he is far too delicate for them; and every day she nearly walks him off his feet. Then she won't teach him his lessons in the schoolroom, but is ridiculous enough to make him read to her in the garden."

"What a mistaken *régime*, Julia, yet under it Dicky is growing and improving every day. Any other complaints?"

"She doesn't make him study enough."

"Ah, she teaches him from the book of nature you see, and so relieves his congested brain – quite right. I don't believe in cramming a delicate lad like that. You let him read what he liked, Julia, and the poor little chap was positively getting literary indigestion."

"Well, at all events, I don't approve of Miss Crane."

"I never thought you would."

"She dresses ridiculously – quite above her station."

"Oh, but you see, she is a pretty woman, eh?"

Mrs. Darrow tossed her head disdainfully.

"Pretty, indeed! with that red hair and pasty complexion! It is extraordinary how you men like these unhealthy women." Then, after a pause, "But she doesn't like you!"

"H'm! who does?"

"I do" – this with a most fascinating smile. "I love you!"

"Ah!" Barton chuckled. "You are so tender-hearted. I tell you what, Julia, I am beginning to think I did very wrong to interfere with Dicky's education at all. As his mother you have more right to manage him than I. I've a good mind to send away Miss Crane, and you can engage a twenty-pound governess – to be paid out of your income."

"Oh no, don't send Miss Crane away. I really think, with a hint or two from me, she will do very well. But she is peculiar, to say the least of it. Tell me, uncle, who is Miss Crane?"

"She is Miss Crane, that is all I know."

"Has she a past?"

"Seeing that she is some twenty-five years of age, naturally."

"Yes, but – " Mrs. Darrow hesitated, not quite knowing how to put it. "Well, as you seem to think, she is not bad-looking, and there is John, you know, and Gerald."

"Well?"

"They may fall in love with her."

"What – both of them? At all events they have not seen her yet, so suppose we postpone discussion of that contingency?"

"Well!" Mrs. Darrow's expression and gestures spoke volumes, "I warn you; don't say I haven't warned you. Mark me, there is something queer about Miss Crane. I am not a suspicious woman, and I like to think well of everybody; but Miss Crane – well, you take my word for it, she'll astonish us all some day! Queer, yes, I should think she *was* queer!"

Barton shrugged his shoulders, and went off without making reply, and for the moment Mrs. Darrow was baffled. But she still continued to suspect Miriam – Heaven only knows of what – and to keep a close watch on her every action. It gave quite a new zest to her life, this new pursuit. And shortly all the parish, that is, the female portion of it, was in Mrs. Darrow's confidence; and Miriam was watched not alone by one, but by a hundred envious eyes, and debated about at a dozen tea-

tables. But all this espionage resulted in nothing, and the suspect went serenely on her way, as did Una through the Forest of a Thousand Dangers. The toads spat venom, but the snakes could not bite.

"Dicky," said Miss Crane one warm and sunny morning, "I want you to put on your cap and take me up the village."

"No lessons this morning?" Dicky jumped up with joy, after the manner of boyhood.

"No lessons this morning," laughed Miriam, "some fresh air, dear, instead. I'm not going to have you grow up a pale-faced bookworm."

"I love my books," said Dicky, as they left the cottage, not without a disapproving word from Mrs. Darrow.

"I know you do, Dicky, almost too well. But you must get your health first, and then the rest can follow."

The boy understood. He was thoroughly in sympathy with Miriam. And without being aware of it, he was learning a great deal from her, apart altogether from his studies. She told him stories, interested him in the wonders of earth and sky – things which so frequently escape the careless – and taught him generally how to use his eyes. In the very hedges, Dicky found a new world of flower and berry, and tiny active insect life. She pointed out to him the fluttering dragon-flies, the beetle rolling his ball of mud; she revealed to him the miracle of a grain of wheat, showing him how it bears upon it the image of a man with folded arms. The boy had imagination, and did not need to be told twice. Suggestion was everything to him. He was a dreamer – a poet in embryo. Indeed, Miriam soon found that he had far too vivid an imagination, so much so that she felt obliged to discourage any extreme stimulation of it.

"Observe more, and think less, Dicky," she said. "I want you to notice lots of things that you see every day and don't notice now, perhaps because you do see them every day; there are lots of interesting things you know in the fields and the hedges – lots of little worlds and their inhabitants, all as busy as can be, and to be seen if we only look for them."

"I believe you lived in the country," said Dicky admiringly, "you know such a lot of jolly things, Miss Crane."

"I did live in the country once, Dicky," Miriam sighed. "But that was long, long ago. I lived by the sea at one time – there are wonderful things in the sea, dear."

"I've read 'Midshipman Easy,' and I should like awfully to be a sailor."

Miriam laughed.

"That is not exactly what I meant. Never mind, come along, there's the church; I want to walk across the meadow to it."

"Oh, that's jolly, I want to see the bull."

"What bull, Dicky?"

"Oh, an awful bull – he gores people."

"Oh, Dicky" – Miriam looked apprehensive – "perhaps we had better go round by the road. Don't, Dicky, don't."

The boy had jumped over the stile into the meadow.

"I only want to see if he's there," he cried, and scampered over the grass – a little grey figure with a red scarf. Suddenly he stopped short and looked down the meadow. Miriam looked also, to see the bull dashing along towards the boy, who was too terrified to move. Reproaching herself for not having prevented his bolting away from her, she jumped into the meadow herself and ran to the rescue, and managed to reach him before the bull did, for on seeing another figure the animal stopped short with a comical air of surprise, and pawing the ground began to bellow loudly. With a white face but a courageous heart Miriam caught Dicky to her breast, and began slowly to retreat towards the hedge, still facing the beast. By this time the frail little lad was sobbing hysterically. The bull tossed his head and came nearer – so near that Miriam could have screamed. Putting down the child for a moment, she opened her parasol, and ran straight at the animal. Aghast and disconcerted he

turned, whereupon she picked up Dicky and raced for the stile – fatal mistake! As soon as he saw her flying, the bull followed fast. She was nearing the hedge, but the animal was close behind her, and she screamed aloud, giving herself up for lost.

"Hullo!" cried a fresh young voice, "run hard – hard – for your life!"

A man jumped over the hedge, and flourishing a stick, got between the pursuer and pursued. As he passed Miriam, he tore the loose cape she wore from her shoulders, and threw it at the infuriated animal as he came lunging along head downward. It caught on his horns, fell over his eyes, and the next moment, quite blinded, he stumbled on his knees. The man caught up with Miriam, and putting his arm round her, half pushed, half carried her to the stile. In a minute the three were over it and in safety, while the bull, having freed his head from the shawl, stood looking at his escaped victims and bellowing his disappointment. It was a dishevelled trio which dropped down on the grass beside the stile, out of breath, and with violently beating hearts.

"Thank God!" gasped Miriam, taking Dicky on her lap to soothe him.

"You have lost your cape though," said their preserver.

"Better than losing my life. I have to thank you for that. Hush, Dicky," and she calmed the nervous child.

"I think you did most of the saving," said the young man admiringly. "I came in at the finish, so I must decline the glory. I never saw a neater and pluckier thing."

"Oh, Cousin Gerald," sobbed Dicky, "I'm glad the bull didn't gore you. You were just like a torry-door of Spain. I've seen them in pictures."

"Am I to take that as a compliment, Dicky? What do you say, Miss Crane?"

"Oh, I think it is a very great compliment, Mr. Arkel."

The young man – he was a handsome, fair-haired young fellow in a grey tweed suit – looked at her with a quizzical expression.

"You know my name, and I know yours. I think we can dispense with further formalities under the circumstances – or perhaps you will look after the social observances, Dicky, and introduce me to this lady."

Dicky did so most gravely.

"Miss Crane, this is Uncle Barton's nephew, Cousin Gerald; Cousin Gerald, this is my new governess, Miss Crane."

Gerald Arkel jumped up, swung off his cap, and made a bow. There was a very keen admiration in his eye as he looked at Miriam. Indeed, so marked was his stare that she became a trifle uneasy, the more so when he observed that her face was familiar.

"Surely I have seen you before," he said with a puzzled look.

"Oh, no," Miriam forced herself to say. "I don't think so. Are you staying in Lesser Thorpe?" she asked hurriedly, to divert his attention.

"Yes, with my uncle at the Manor House. He came out with me this morning. I left him fossicking about one of his fences. He'll be here soon."

A chuckle close at hand revealed that Mr. Barton was not only near at hand, but had been close enough to hear the entire conversation. He looked inquisitively from Miriam to his nephew. Gerald took no notice of his scrutiny, but Miriam coloured up, and lifting Dicky from her lap, rose to meet the old man. She led him aside ostensibly to show him the scene of the disaster, but in reality to ask him a question.

"Why do you look at me so, Mr. Barton? Is that – is that –"

"Yes!" Mr. Barton chuckled in his hateful manner. "Yes, that is the man – now you know."

CHAPTER III. POVERTY HALL

What Miriam meant by her mysterious question, and what Mr. Barton meant by his mysterious answer, was known only to themselves. They seemed to understand one another without recourse to words for the situation – whatever the situation might be – adjusted itself between them on a swift interchange of glances. Mr. Barton was regarded by the parish at large as being as deep as a well; had the parish seen him with Mrs. Darrow's governess at the moment, it might have considered him even deeper. But the young man whom these glances mostly concerned, saw nothing of the by-play which was to influence his future. He chatted with Dicky, and commended him for his prowess in having run into the meadow to reconnoitre the whereabouts of the bull. Gerald knew better than to scold the boy for his folly; he knew what a sensitive, nervous child Dicky was, and chose this way of soothing him by applauding what he knew had been his intention, so that the little lad plucked up his courage, and recovered his nerve – so far as his feeble body could do so. Poor Dicky, he had a weak heart, overstrung nerves, and an injudicious mother; and between them, was fast being ruined body and soul, when Miriam came to save him. But for that strange meeting on Waterloo Bridge, Dicky's chances of life would not have been what they were. But then that same meeting is responsible for so much of moment, as will be seen hereafter – and all because Mr. Barton took one turning instead of another, and so lost himself in a fog. If ever Providence worked to great ends by small means, it was when Mr. Richard Barton, Squire of Lesser Thorpe, was made to mistake Waterloo Bridge for the Bridge of Westminster.

"I am so glad you are here again, Cousin Gerald," said Dicky, patting the young man's slim hand. "You'll tell me stories, won't you, and play cricket with me, and I've got such a jolly governess," finished Dicky incoherently.

Gerald laughed in his pleasant fashion.

"I'll tell you any amount of stories, and I'll play cricket, and I'll adore your governess, Dicky."

"Oh, you mustn't. Hilda will be so angry."

With his usual precocity, Dicky saw more than he was meant to see, and said more than he should have said. Gerald flushed somewhat, and picking up the boy placed him on his shoulder.

"You talk too much, young man," said he gaily. "Miss Crane," with an anxious look lest she should have overheard Dicky's indiscretion, "shall I carry this rascal home for you?"

"Isn't he too heavy, Mr. Arkel?"

"Heavy?" The echo came from Barton. "Why, Gerald is a champion athlete, and plays with cannonballs like feathers. He is Apollo and Hercules both in one."

"At present he is Mercury carrying a soul to the Elysian fields," cried Gerald, and strode off with Dicky, who was delighted with this classical allusion which, from that reading which Miriam so deplored, he was quite able to appreciate.

"I am Achilles! I am Ulysses!" shouted Dicky in ecstasy. "Hermes takes me to Pluto and Queen Persephone. Ai! Ai! Ai!" and Dicky lamented in classical style.

Barton looked after the pair.

"You ought to be satisfied," said he to Miriam. "He is a handsome fellow, though he is a fool."

"He neither looks like a fool, nor talks like one, Mr. Barton."

What reply the cynic would have made to this curt contradiction it is impossible to say; but at that moment a shadow fell on the grass near them. Only the shadow – the shadow of a man; yet Barton whipped round with the sudden snarl of a startled wild beast. His snarl was even more hateful than his chuckle, and Miriam winced as she also turned to see the substance of the shadow. Even now, well-nourished, rested, and having recovered her nerve, as she had, she still dreaded Barton. There was something so uncanny about him – something akin to the satyr – to Pan, the inspirer of

causeless terrors – that she could never overcome a creeping of the flesh, a sinking of the heart when in his presence. Mr. Hyde, of fictitious fame, was not more hateful.

The new-comer was a tall lean man, so tall, so lean, that he might be defined in the terms of Euclid as a line, having length without breadth. His legs were long, his arms were long, even his head was long; and clothed in a suit of solemn black, which reflected no lustre, he came as a blot on the sunny landscape. His eyes were small and close together; they looked everywhere but at the person he was addressing, past you, about you, but never by any chance at you; and – as Miriam heard, not then, but long afterwards – he had a deep, booming, cracked voice, such as might come from a flawed and rusty bell. She did not know the man at the time; she had cause to know him later; and he always appeared in the same noiseless, stealthy, slinking way. If Barton was a rat, this man was akin to the serpent.

And the queerness of the thing was that he did not speak to Barton, nor did Barton speak to him. The two evil creatures – Miriam instinctively felt that both were evil – looked at one another; then Barton, without a word to the governess, passed away with the stranger, for all the world as if the latter were the devil come for his soul. Perhaps Miss Crane was unduly impressionable – perhaps she had not altogether recovered her state of health – but she shuddered and grew pale to the lips as those two black figures dwindled into the distance. Involuntarily she glanced at the grass as though it had been scorched by their tread. Who was the stranger? who was Barton? She knew as much about one as she did about the other.

"I must go back," she muttered, clenching her hands. "I will not bend to that man's power. It was bad in London – it is worse here. And Gerald Arkel – " her thoughts made no further use of words, and her eyes followed the stalwart figure of the young man as he bounded towards the village, evidently playing at being a horse for Dicky's greater delight. With a sigh Miriam walked rapidly after them. She did not look again in the direction of Mr. Barton and his attendant demon.

When she came up with them, Dicky was a mediæval knight, and Gerald his war steed. Miriam could not forbear admiring the kindly nature of the man. But his kindness and love of play were characteristic of Gerald Arkel. He was gay, indolent, and of a sunny disposition; everybody else's best friend and his own worst enemy. He had never done a stroke of work, and apparently never intended to, since he regarded himself as his uncle's heir. Handsome and light-hearted, overflowing with animal spirits, full of exuberant vitality, he was one of those rare beings who seem created to enjoy life. Yet he was weak and self-indulgent, and without the necessary will or self-control to guide his wayward course. Miriam learned those weaknesses later – learned them, pitied and tolerated them by the love which grew up in her heart. As yet she admired him only. Young Apollo, young Hercules, a splendid specimen of manhood; but love came in the end, and with it much sorrow. Not that Miriam would have minded the sorrow so much; her life from her cradle had been one long trouble, and she was well seasoned to it. The wonder was that her evil fortunes had left no shadow, no line on her brow; for now as she walked beside Mr. Arkel, and found him so pleasant and sympathetic a character, she chatted gaily, and was, to all appearance, every whit as light-hearted as he, whose life had been one long flood of sunshine.

"I am afraid you will find this place dull, Miss Crane," said Gerald.

"I find it peaceful, Mr. Arkel, and that is enough for me."

"You have had trouble?" he asked with quick sympathy.

"My parents died while I was in my teens," explained Miriam, "and I was left a penniless orphan. Yes, I have had trouble. Shadow has been as much my portion as sunshine appears to have been yours."

Gerald set down Dicky, and took his hand.

"Oh, I have had my troubles too," said he easily, "but I don't feel them much. Perhaps my nature is too shallow."

"Or too sunny, Mr. Arkel – if a nature can be too sunny. Did you ever read Hawthorne's 'Marble Faun'? – I believe it is called 'Transformation' in the English edition."

"No." Gerald stared at the apparent irrelevancy of this question. "Why?"

"Because you are so very much like one of the characters in it – a child of nature, called Donatello. You are just the kind of man children love and animals trust."

"Oh, I get on pretty well with everyone," cried Gerald, tossing back his bright hair, "and everyone gets on with me."

"Ah, you are 'simpatico,' as the Italians say."

Arkel turned an expressive eye on Miriam. He was very sympathetic, especially towards pretty women; and with one exception, this governess was the prettiest he had ever seen. Yet the adjective was not one he would have chosen deliberately as adequately descriptive of Miss Crane. He would have said beautiful rather – imperious, regal; the word "pretty" was but the outcome of his habit of loose expression. He knew quite well that it could not correctly be applied to her. She was no white-frocked, pink and white miss, with coquetry in every step she took over the cobble stones of the village street. Such a one though, was now close upon them, and as Arkel recognised her, he raised his hat, and his eyes and lips smiled in greeting.

"Miss Marsh, where are you going?"

"Home," replied Hilda, swiftly glancing at the speaker and the governess. "How are you, Miss Crane? Dicky, don't wink, it's vulgar. I didn't know you were here, Mr. Arkel."

"Arrived yesterday," responded that young gentleman. "Uncle Barton asked me down for a week. Why, I don't know! but I was glad to come." He fixed his bright eyes on Hilda, and a colour came into his cheeks. "I was very glad to come," he repeated.

"Of course, I know how fond you are of Mr. Barton."

"If you will excuse me," said Miriam, unwilling to be an inconvenient third, "I will go – come, Dicky."

"I must go too. I will leave you with Mr. Arkel," and before either Arkel or Miriam could parry so very pointed a thrust, Hilda tripped away with a smiling face and – it must be confessed – an angry heart. Although, of course, she knew nothing of the episode which had been the means of bringing them together, her instinct told her that Gerald and Miss Crane were in strong sympathy one with the other.

Like an ass between two bundles of hay – the simile, though uncomplimentary, will serve – Gerald looked after Hilda, and then glanced at the governess. She had already moved away, and was walking on rather fast with Dicky dancing beside her. Courtesy demanded that he should follow her, but a tugging at his heart-strings drew him in Hilda's direction. With characteristic self-indulgence, Mr. Arkel obeyed his own inclination rather than the other thing, and tried to catch up with Hilda. But a side-glance informing her of this pursuit, Miss Marsh thereupon resolved to punish this young man for his all too-patent admiration of the governess – "that red-haired minx," as she called her.

Just as Gerald came up with her, and was on the point of speaking, Hilda, in pretended ignorance of his presence, shot into a broken-down gate, through a desolate garden, and into a dilapidated house. From behind a torn curtain which partially veiled a dirty window, she had the satisfaction of seeing him retreat with a somewhat sulky expression on his usually bright face.

"Serve you right," she said to herself. "You'll find I am not the one to take you from that carroty horror;" which remark was vulgar, unjust, and spiteful – so spiteful that it could only be prompted by one feeling.

Hilda's home was a tumble-down old house set in a neglected garden. Mr. Marsh was a physician – that is to say he was allowed by the laws of his country to prescribe drugs and generally to administer in a medical way to a small practice. Things were so with him that he had long since given up any idea of a peaceful existence; and it was always a matter of supreme amazement to him that his patients sought to prolong their lives at the cost of swallowing the doses he prescribed for them. For himself,

he paid an infinitesimal sum yearly by way of rent for Poverty Hall, as his residence was dubbed in the village; earned enough to feed and clothe those dependent upon him in the most penurious way, and managed, as he phrased it, "to drag them up somehow." Two of the boys were doing for themselves in London, and had dropped out of ken, since they neither sent money nor wrote to their father; three were at school, where Dr. Marsh found it hard work to keep them, and since someone must pay, the four sisters remained at home, and were furnished by Hilda with a scratch education, she being the only one of the girls who had received a good one. Hilda detested teaching her sisters, and gave them as little of her time as she well could without falling foul of her father. For the rest she was like a lily of the fields, and neither toiled nor spun. Mrs. Marsh – she was of ample habit – did the toiling and the spinning, with the assistance of the exhausted menial aforesaid. When not scrubbing, or baking, or mending, she indulged in the most mawkish class of fiction, and complained querulously of her lot the while. Yet even the Marsh family had their idea of a millennium – when Hilda would marry a rich man, and the rich man would rain gold on Poverty Hall. That was why Hilda was pampered and much was pardoned to her. She was the Circassian beauty destined for the seraglio of some millionaire sultan; and the proceeds of her sale was to set up the family for life.

"Where have you been, Hilda?" asked her mother, looking up from a novel. The room was a chaos of dirt and dust, and in the midst of it all sat Mrs. Marsh, a very she-Marius amongst the ruins of Carthage, placidly but thoroughly enjoying the sentimentality of her hero and heroine. The carpet was ragged, the blind was askew; the table was littered with plates dirty from the mid-day meal, and the furniture was more or less dilapidated. Thus did Mrs. Marsh, in an old dressing-gown, with hair unkempt, delight to read of the erratic course of true love and Belgravian luxury, oblivious utterly to her surroundings.

"I'm sure, Hilda, I wish you hadn't gone out," she lamented. "Who is to clear the table if you're not here?"

"Oh, bother!" cried Hilda all graciously, "where are the girls?"

"They took some bread and jam and went out with the boys," said Mrs. Marsh vaguely. "I don't know exactly where – they were going to have a picnic, I think. You really must help, Hilda. Gwendoline" (Mary Jane was not to be tolerated) "has too much to do as it is. Your father will soon be home, and will want something; and I'm that tired! Oh dear me, how tired I am!"

"Well, I can't help it, mother. You will have to manage with Gwendoline as best you can. I must get my blue dress cleaned and altered. Mrs. Darrow has asked me to dinner to-morrow night."

"Who is to be there?" asked Mrs. Marsh with a ray of interest in her tired blue eyes.

"Mr. Barton, Mr. Arkel, and Major Dundas. I suppose that horrid governess will be there too. She was with Mr. Arkel just now."

"How did she come to know him?"

"Oh, she's a sly creature. She has managed to make his acquaintance somehow, and I can see the fool is quite taken already with her airs and graces."

"Hilda!" said her mother apprehensively, for Mr. Arkel was the second string to Hilda's bow, and it was supposed would inherit the Manor House. "That must not be."

"Oh, so far as I am concerned, they can please themselves. If Mr. Arkel prefers red hair and freckles, he can do so. Major Dundas may have better taste."

"But he is not rich, dear – he will never be."

"How do you know that?" retorted Hilda, who made a rule of contradicting her mother on principle. "Mr. Barton may make him his heir instead of Gerald Arkel. Or for that matter, I shouldn't be surprised if the horrid old thing left his money to an asylum."

"Be sure of that before you marry either of them," said the anxious mother. "Unless," with a touch of romance, "you are in love with –"

"Love!" Hilda echoed the word with fine contempt. "I want money, not love. Either Major Dundas or Gerald would make a good enough husband. I like Gerald the best – he is better looking

and not so dull as the Major. But I'd marry anyone – even old Barton, much as I hate him, to get out of this pig-sty."

"It is your only home," said Mrs. Marsh with dignity.

"That's exactly why I want to get out of it, mother. If that red-haired governess tries any of her pranks, trust me, I won't spare her."

"Whatever do you mean, Hilda?"

"Never you mind, mother," Miss Marsh nodded mysteriously. "I've been talking with Mrs. Darrow, and she says – well, don't bother about it just now. But Miss Crane – if that *is* what her name is – is no saint, believe me. I'm not altogether sure that she's respectable."

"Hilda!" Mrs. Marsh's middle-class virtue was up in arms. "If that is so, you must not associate with her. Our house is lowly (she might have added dirty), lowly, but genteel."

"Now don't you bother, ma. Leave the governess to me. If you talk you'll spoil all."

"All what?" cried Mrs. Marsh, frantic with curiosity.

"H'm, h'm," Hilda nodded again. "Come upstairs, ma, and look over my dresses. I must look particularly well to-morrow night."

"But the clearing and washing-up, Hilda?"

"Oh, the girls can do that when they come in; pigs! It's little enough they do!"

"Your father will want something hot," suggested Mrs. Marsh with compunction.

"Will he! Well, there's cold corned beef and pickles; he can warm them if he likes."

So Mrs. Marsh went upstairs, novel, dressing-gown and all, and spent a happy hour with Hilda over chiffrons. Dr. Marsh came home to a cold dinner, and was truly pathetic in the restraint of his language. The picnic-party arrived back hungry and boisterous, to find that as the baker had not called, there was no bread in the house. They lamented, Mrs. Marsh nagged, her husband's patience gave way, and the whole house was as pleasant as Bedlam. Hilda, the cause of the trouble, kept out of it in her room – the only clean room in the house – and stitched away at her costume. She thought of Miriam and smiled. It was not a sweet smile.

"So you're going to spoil my chance, are you, you horrid creature!" she thought. "I'll push you back into the mud you came from – or I'll know the reason why."

If Miriam could have seen her then, she might have felt still more uneasy. What could Miss Marsh know of her past? Perhaps Mrs. Darrow, always poking and prying, could have explained.

CHAPTER IV. MR. BARTON'S VISITOR

As a rule Mrs. Darrow was not very hospitable – unless there was something to be gained from the exercise of such hospitality. She revelled in the afternoon tea, because it cost little – a few spoonfuls of "Lipton" and some slices of thin bread and butter – and afforded ample opportunity for that small talk, which was the essence of her life, since it enabled her to keep *au fait* with her neighbours' delinquencies. She had been known to go so far as a hot luncheon for certain high and mighty people whom it suited her book to conciliate; but never by any chance had she been known to give a dinner. Now – for some weighty reason, known only to herself – she had actually requested no less than five people to rally round her in the stuffy little dining-room of Pine Cottage – Major Dundas, Mr. Arkel, and Uncle Barton, to pair with Miriam, Hilda, and herself. When Mr. Barton was informed of this festivity, he not only point-blank refused to go himself, but he positively forbade his nephews, who were staying at the Manor House, to represent him.

"So you can have a hen-party, Julia," he croaked, "and abuse better people than yourself."

Mrs. Darrow sought refuge in her handkerchief, and shed a few careful tears – I say careful, because she was made up for the day, an operation which entailed the labour of an hour or more.

"Oh, Uncle Barton," she sobbed, "why won't you come?"

"Now why, I should like to know, are you so thunderingly generous all of a sudden. There must be something very much amiss, surely, or going to be!"

The widow raised her eyes to the blue sky – this conversation took place in the open air – to call Heaven to witness how she was misjudged.

"As if I was a miser," she complained, "instead of one whose whole thought is for my fellow creatures."

"At other people's expense – quite so," said Barton. He really was a disagreeable old creature. "Come, Julia, tell me the truth. Why are you giving this dinner?"

"I'm afraid Miss Crane is dull, and I thought it would liven her up a little."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Barton, not believing her in the least. "Then you and she and Miss Marsh had better come to dinner at the Manor House. There is nothing for Miss Crane or anyone else to enjoy in being poisoned by your cook."

Mrs. Darrow calculated that she could gain her end – whatever it was – just as well at Uncle Barton's expense as at her own. But although she accepted with avidity, she wept still as a tribute to her dignity.

"Of course, if you insist upon it, I will come," she said; "but my poor little dinner would have been quite a treat for you all. I intended to assist cook."

"Did you? worse and worse! Well, will you come to-morrow evening at seven?"

Mrs. Darrow bowed her head.

"And I hope you won't mind giving me a cheque, Uncle Barton. Miss Crane eats a great deal; she comes expensive."

Barton chuckled.

"What, at your Barmecidian banquets? I tell you what, Julia, my dear, if you will tell me the truth to-morrow night I will give you something." And he walked off.

As Mrs. Darrow knew, and as Uncle Barton knew she knew, it was impossible for her to tell the truth without offending him. He guessed that her purpose was spiteful, and one in some way connected with Miriam; and he was right. The widow had discovered – as she thought – something to Miriam's disadvantage, and wanted to explode her bombshell in as public a manner as possible. Up to the present she had told only Hilda about her discovery, and Hilda, being no less spiteful against the unfortunate governess, was hoping to witness her discomfiture before Major Dundas and Gerald. This

being so, Mrs. Darrow knew that if she told the truth Barton would refuse to pay for the confession of so mean a purpose. Therefore she saw the promised cheque eluding her, and calculating – in her own logical way – that up to the present Miriam had cost her a possible ten pounds, allowed her feelings full vent for the time being. She glared after Uncle Barton's retreating figure; and would have shaken her fist at it had she not known from previous experience that he had eyes at the back of his head.

"Horrid old man," she murmured. "I'll make you and your red-haired creature pay for this!"

That evening and all the next day she was particularly sweet to Miriam; so much so that Miss Crane, used to her by this time, began to think there was something in the wind. She wondered if Mrs. Darrow could have made any discovery likely to cause trouble, and recalled all her words and actions for the past week. But she could think of nothing injudicious that she had said or done. Nevertheless, she was on her guard against Mrs. Darrow. She readily accepted the invitation to the Manor House, because she wanted a private conversation with Mr. Barton. Hilda also was informed that the little dinner would take place at the Manor House, and was pleased by the change. She intended that a day should come when the Manor should be hers by marriage, and in the meantime she was in nowise averse to seeing as much as possible of her future home. When she married Major Dundas, or Mr. Arkel – whichever of them might inherit the Nabob's vineyard – she intended to make many and great changes in the gloomy old mansion. Hilda's aerial castles invariably took the architectural form of Lesser Thorpe Manor House.

The next evening after the primitive fashion of this Arcadia, the three ladies, with lace scarves over their heads, and cloaks over their evening dress, walked up the avenue and arrived at the great porch precisely at seven. In the warm light of the July evening Miriam admired the noble oaks, the trim gardens, the velvet swards; and most of all, she admired the great house, with its windows aglow from the beams of the setting sun. It was elevated on a rise, surrounded by stone terraces, and stood out majestically against a background of pine-trees, with its many gables, high roofs, and stacks of twisted chimneys. In the Tudor style of architecture, built in Tudor days, mellowed by centuries, and overgrown with ivy, it might well have been the palace of some Sleeping Beauty buried in the midst of its sombre woods. The evening was still and warm; there was no wind, and a quiet melancholy seemed to brood over the great pile. It was a haven of rest to the weary, and irresistibly attractive to Miriam, who had been buffeted so long on stormy seas. Hilda caught her expression at that moment, and did not fail to interpret it in her own fashion, looking an angel the while.

"You want to marry Gerald and have all this, do you?" she thought. "Well then, you shall not, if I can help it. When he knows who you are, and what you are, there won't be much chance for you, my lady!"

In the drawing-room Mr. Barton received his guests, and Miriam, in spite of her self-control, could not help wincing. Since that never-to-be-forgotten night on Waterloo Bridge, or rather at the Pitt Hotel, she had not seen him in evening dress; and the sight of him now recalled those past horrors with horrible distinctness. The shrivelled little figure, the cruel clean-shaven face, the bald head and rat-like eyes, made up an object of utter detestation to Miriam. With her recovered health had come a resolve to throw off the mesmeric influence he had exercised over her when she had been weak and starving. In some degree she had succeeded, but although fear had gone, repulsion remained, and Miriam regretted bitterly that she had been beguiled into the clutches of this modern ogre. That night she resolved to seek her freedom.

"Good evening, ladies," said the Squire in his grating voice. "You know these two gentlemen, so there is no need for a formal introduction."

"I know Mr. Arkel," said Miriam composedly, since Barton's eyes were upon her, "but not Major Dundas."

"John!" gushed Mrs. Darrow – "not know Cousin John? This is he, Miss Crane, my cousin in the army. John, my dear friend, Miss Crane."

Barton lifted his brows on hearing this very warm allusion to Miriam; but Major Dundas, not knowing Mrs. Darrow's little ways, accepted it in good faith, and bowed gravely, being a man of but few words. He was tall and stalwart, with a countenance which, though anything but handsome, was wholly pleasant, and was so well groomed and generally smart and trim in his appearance, that altogether he bore an air of supreme distinction. With formal courtesy Miriam acknowledged his bow, but in spite of herself she found her eyes wandering towards Gerald's bright face and charming smile. He shook her by the hand, made some commonplace remark, and almost immediately turned to speak with Hilda, whom he greeted with unmistakable eagerness. It was easy to see in what direction Mr. Gerald Arkel's affections lay for the time being. The object of them looked this evening more than ever like a Dresden china shepherdess, and sparkled all over her pretty face as Gerald came up to her. Barton evidently did not approve of the state of things existing between the two young people, for he frowned and bit his lip. On her part Miriam felt an unaccountable pang at the way in which Gerald ignored her for Hilda. Since meeting him she had thought more of his gallant rescue of her, and more of his charming manner than was quite good for her. Although she was as yet unaware of it even then Gerald was gaining possession of her heart. She watched him furtively all the evening, and could be seen to brighten up distinctly when he spoke to her, a circumstance which seemed to cause the observant Squire the greatest satisfaction.

"Come, come; dinner, dinner," said Barton, cutting short Mrs. Darrow's small beer chronicles. "Julia, take my arm. Gerald, Miss Marsh is waiting. Miss Crane, I am sure Major Dundas will be delighted."

"Charmed," murmured the Major with all gravity.

He could not but admire this tall and beautiful woman, and was impressed, as Dicky had been, by the music of her voice. Miriam, in a plain black silk dress, showing her beautiful neck and shoulders and her shapely arms, looked as regal as a queen. Her red hair twisted in smooth shining coils crowned her as with a diadem, and Hilda's girlish prettiness paled before her graver splendour. As for Mrs. Darrow, art had done its utmost, but it could not make her either fresh or young. When she looked at Miriam she seemed to be conscious of this, and her feelings may be left to the imagination, but she promised herself a full revenge before the evening was over.

"Doesn't Miss Crane look charming to-night?" she whispered to her uncle.

"Charming," assented that genial gentleman. "Like Semiramis or Cleopatra; and she doesn't owe anything to art either."

Mrs. Darrow grew red beneath her rouge.

"Oh, I dare say she has painted in her time!"

"What do you mean?" asked Barton sharply.

"Well, if you don't know, of course I don't," was Mrs. Darrow's ambiguous reply; and as the occasion was unpropitious, Barton did not press for an explanation. Still, he guessed that her remark had something more behind it, and the look he gave her in consequence caused Mrs. Darrow to devote herself exclusively to the soup for the next few minutes. In that glance of disapproval she saw the final disappearance of the cheque.

"I hope you like Thorpe, Miss Crane," said the Major in his ponderous way.

"Very much indeed. I like the quiet and peace."

"Really! Have you then had so stormy a life?"

"Oh no," Miriam laughed, and her merriment extracted a glare from Mrs. Darrow. "But I have lived a great deal in London, and the country is so restful after the roar of the city. Of course you prefer town?"

"No indeed; I was cut out by nature I believe for a country squire. I'm fond of soldiering of course," added the Major quickly, "but when I retire it will be to a place like this. I am more of a country bumpkin than my uncle. He's always running up to town."

"Is he?" murmured Miriam, thinking of Mrs. Perks and the hotel in Craven Street. "Why is that?"

"Oh, I don't know; he hunts after books and that sort of thing. My uncle is quite a student, you know."

Miriam did not think from what she knew of Mr. Barton that book hunting took up a very considerable portion of his time when in London; but evidently the simple Major believed the fiction in all good faith. But his next remark startled her.

"His taste in books is so peculiar," resumed Dundas, "and rather morbid; he collects all books dealing with crime."

Miss Crane paled, and hastily sipped her wine.

"With crime?"

"Yes, memoirs of Vidocq – Stories of Robbery and Murder, The Newgate Chronicle, and Jonathan Wilde; his library is filled with gruesome volumes of that kind. Did you ever hear of Selwyn the wit, the friend of Horace Walpole, Miss Crane?"

"No," murmured Miriam, self-possessed but colourless to the lips.

"His great delight was to see men hanged. My uncle seems to have the same queer taste. If public executions were in vogue I believe he would attend every one."

"John," called out the Squire, "what are you saying to Miss Crane? You're making her nervous, surely; she has lost all her colour."

"No, no," cried Miriam; "I am quite well."

"What a brute I am," said Dundas aloud; "but the fact is I was talking of your penchant for crime."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Darrow vivaciously; "it's really horrid of Uncle Barton to be so fond of these things."

"Crime!" chuckled the Squire; "and what do you call crime? I'm a student of human nature in the depths, if that's what you mean. I like to search out the springs of action – to learn what moves man, the machine."

"In short, you are a realist, uncle," said Gerald.

"Oh, I don't know. I find the lower orders vastly more amusing than the higher, if you call that realism. I like to explore the slums and the thieves' kitchens, and talk to the detectives; and I like to hear of crimes that are impenetrable." And here his eyes rested on Miriam. She drank more wine.

"But I thought no crime was impenetrable nowadays," said Hilda.

"Indeed, my dear Miss Marsh, a great number are. Those crimes which are reported in the newspapers, those murderers who are hanged, constitute the minority. The clever crimes, the really interesting criminals, are never discovered."

Mrs. Darrow here entered a protest. She would not sleep she said if Uncle Barton thus rode his gruesome hobby, which was really a skeleton horse, or something horrid. She did think such things should not be spoken about in the presence of ladies; Miss Crane was quite pale with horror, so she would leave the gentlemen to discuss their wine and crime together, and carry the ladies off to the drawing-room – a determination which she at once put into execution. When the door closed on them, Mr. Barton became moody and silent. He left Gerald and Dundas to pass the bottle and do the talking; and knowing his sombre humours they left him to himself.

Shortly there entered a plethoric butler, purple of hue, as though all the blood in him had turned to port wine. He bent over his master and whispered.

"Eh? What do you say?" said Barton, rousing himself from a brown study.

"A gentleman to see you, sir!" whispered the man in a husky voice.

"Who is it?"

"The gentleman who was here before, sir."

"Confound you – how can I recognise anyone from that description? What's his name?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. He told me to mention the name Jabez."

"Jabez!" Barton jumped up with the alacrity of a man half his age. "Gerald! John! go into the drawing-room and entertain the ladies. I shall be engaged for the next half-hour in the library." And he vanished with the plethoric butler.

"Hullo! What's up with Uncle B.?" said Gerald.

Dundas shrugged his shoulders.

"One of his mysterious interviews, I suppose. He is a mystery in himself is Uncle Barton."

CHAPTER V. BEHIND THE SCENES

In the drawing-room, Mrs. Darrow, feeling it incumbent upon her to provide entertainment for those assembled, decided she could not do better than relate to them the history of her married life – how good and devoted she had been to a brutal husband, how she had been unable to buy a rag of clothing for quite six months at a time, and consequently had been obliged to go unfashionably clothed. How she could have married at least a dozen men who were dying for her. But how foolishly she had chosen the only one who never appreciated her, and much more to the same effect. Such a theme she held, more especially when adequately set forth and expatiated upon, must be all absorbing.

Hilda, it was true, had heard a vastly different version of her friend's connubial existence. She knew, in fact, that the late Mr. Darrow had been something more than glad to leave this sphere. But for the present that mattered not at all.

Mrs. Darrow told her tale, and told it very well, and although neither of her audience was in the least degree convinced by it, undoubtedly many people would have been. Right in the midst of a sentimental outburst, in which she was declaring how now she lived solely for the sake of her darling child, being otherwise quite prepared to join the late Mr. Darrow in Heaven, the two young men entered.

"Already!" – the good lady was in no wise disconcerted at having thus abruptly to strike another note. – "Ah! our company is more attractive then than your wine and cigars?"

"Can you doubt it?" said Gerald, making his way over towards Hilda.

Thus deserted, Mrs. Darrow captured the Major, who, too polite to evade her, forthwith buckled to, and did his best to fall in with her very obvious desire for conversation, if not for controversy. Miriam, without a cavalier was thus left to her own devices. She scanned a photograph album which was at her hand.

"Where is Uncle Barton?" asked Mrs. Darrow. "He should be here, if only to entertain dear Miss Crane."

"I don't wish to be entertained, thank you," said Miriam, noting the petty spite. "I think if you don't mind I'll take a walk in the fresh air, it is so close here," she said, and, without waiting for approval or otherwise from Mrs. Darrow, she stepped through the French window which opened on to the terrace.

"Well, I'm sure!" ejaculated the widow. "What coolness! Don't go, John, I have so much to say to you."

"But doesn't it seem rather unkind to leave Miss Crane alone?" said the Major, who was already somewhat under the spell of Miriam's beauty.

"Oh, she likes being alone," smiled Mrs. Darrow – "she has the most mysterious love for solitude. What she thinks about I don't know!"

"Who is she, Julia?"

"Ah! that's just it" – she wagged her head solemnly – "nobody knows. There is something very queer about her. She is a *protégée* of Uncle Barton's of course, and I shouldn't be the least surprised to hear that he had picked her up on one of those excursions amongst the criminals in London, he's so fond of!"

"Julia, you shouldn't say that. Miss Crane is, I consider, a most charming young lady."

"Red hair – I'm glad you think that charming, John!"

"Are you speaking of Miss Crane?" said Gerald, rising from his seat by Hilda. "She's a plucky woman that – did you hear how she saved Dicky's life?"

"Dicky told me what happened," replied Mrs. Darrow sharply. "I rather think it was you, Gerald, who saved both her and my darling child."

"Oh, nonsense – I came in at the tag end," and Gerald related the whole adventure, glorifying Miriam's bravery in a manner which made Hilda long to box his ears. But the only outward and visible indication of these turbulent sensations within her breast was as usual the sweetest of sweet smiles.

Mrs. Darrow, having nothing to lose, was less careful.

"Bravery! – fudge!" she said politely. "I believe the whole thing was acting."

"I don't agree with you," said Gerald drily. "The bull certainly was acting, though hardly in the sense you mean."

"Then if it wasn't, she certainly isn't fit to be entrusted with Dicky's life. If I had lost my boy! – just think of it! I should have died. He is my life, my sole comfort on this earth – the image of my darling departed," &c., &c. —

To all of which both Gerald and the Major, acting upon that wisdom born of experience, agreed, though, needless to say, they retained their own opinions of the young lady under discussion.

In the meantime, Miss Crane, not ill-pleased to be out of the society of her enemies, paced meditatively on the terrace. The night was warm, cloudless, and silent – save for the wild singing of the nightingales in the woods. The gush of melody so piercingly sorrowful threw Miriam into a melancholy mood. In truth she had much to mourn for – much to regret, and the future was so full of doubt, its path so crowded with pitfalls and snares, that she could foresee nothing to cheer her there. Walking up and down, a black solitary figure in the white light of the moon, she was in herself the true embodiment of her sad and lonely life. From her earliest childhood she had known sorrow, and, on her of late had fallen too, the shadow of disgrace, yet she was as pure as the unsullied moonlight. For this beautiful, sad woman was a bearer in more than an ordinary degree of other people's burdens. She had many foes, but no friend – unless Barton could be called one – and he, as she knew only too well had befriended her only to use her as a tool. From her present environment there seemed to be no escape, unless she faced her benefactor boldly, and refused to obey turn. But for more reasons than one, she was unwilling to take the extreme course.

Her walk to the end of the terrace brought her abreast of the lighted windows of the library. Just as she was near them – about ten minutes after she had left the drawing-room – one of them opened. She shrank back in the shadow, and saw Barton step forth with a tall lean man, the very man she had seen on the previous day. The pair talked in low whispers for a moment or so – then the man fluttered down the terrace steps like a huge bat, and disappeared in the shade of the trees overhanging the avenue. Barton looked after him, and shook his fist, an action at which Miriam wondered in so hard and seemingly impervious a man. His back was towards her, and not wishing to be found eavesdropping – although truly she had heard no word – she stepped out again into the moonlight.

At the sound of her light tread Barton spun round like a beast at bay; but when he saw who it was he smiled and saluted her. He was too sure of his power over her to fear anything she might have overheard. But Miriam had heard nothing, and said as much in reply to his sharp question.

"I was just taking a walk in the cool air," she explained. "The others are enjoying themselves very well without me. I am only the governess, you know – and a great thing in a governess is to know when her room is preferable to her company, isn't it?"

"Oh, I know; but I wonder what they would say if they knew something else. A governess! Oh, Lord!"

And Barton chuckled as he looked at the beautiful woman whose face was so pale in the moonlight.

Perfectly calm, since she felt able now to resist Barton's mesmeric power, Miriam stepped into the library.

"Come in here, Mr. Barton," said she imperiously, "I must speak to you."

Somewhat surprised at her tone, Barton followed her, and, having made fast the window, looked at her in the yellow lamplight.

Miriam, with her hands loosely clasped on her black dress, looked, in her turn, without flinching, at this man who considered himself her master. His eyes – wicked as they were – fell before that clear resolute gaze.

"Well, what is it?" he asked roughly, and threw himself into a chair.

Still standing, Miriam replied to this question quietly and with curtness.

"I wish to go away."

"Indeed! You wish to go away – why?"

"Because I am not happy here, and I am doing no good."

"Indeed, I think you are doing a great deal of good," replied Barton, with a gentleness far from common with him. "You are making a man of Dicky. You have rescued him from the influence of his foolish mother. Come, Miriam, let us sit down and talk this over."

"I am fond of Dicky," said Miriam, taking a seat; "he is a good child and very lovable. If it were only Dicky I should not mind. But his mother is jealous of me. She hates me; so does that Marsh girl. They would do me an injury if they could. Besides," added she, looking very earnestly at Barton, "I do not quite understand you – why did you rescue me in London, and bring me down here?"

Barton rose, and began to pace to and fro. He prefaced his speech with his customary chuckle.

"Oh, it was no philanthropy, believe me," he said. "If you had been a plain woman, you might have gone your way. I told you that before. As it was, I saw that you were not – in fact, not only were you a beautiful woman, which was necessary to my plans, but you were a good one into the bargain. I knew that, notwithstanding your somewhat equivocal position when we met on Waterloo Bridge. So I brought you here. You know why."

"I know what you said – that you wished me to marry some one in whom you were interested, and the other day you pointed out Mr. Arkel as the gentleman. But why do you wish me to marry him?"

"I'll tell you that later. But, say, have I not been good to you – bad man as you think me to be?"

"In a manner you have, but I cannot disguise from myself that what you have done has been to your own ends. You have given me money for myself and Jabez, and you have obtained me this situation – "

"You forget – there is something else. Did I not promise you two hundred pounds if you succeeded in marrying Gerald, and taking him away from that shallow hussy?"

"Yes, and I accepted your offer, so that Jabez might go to America, and there start afresh – it was for his sake I did it."

"He is not worthy of it, believe me."

Miriam made a gesture of despair.

"Perhaps not; but knowing what you do you cannot wonder at my anxiety to help him all I can – yes, even if to do it, I have to marry at your bidding."

"But Gerald is a handsome fellow, Miriam. I can't see what you have to complain of!"

"This," she replied passionately, "that my feelings threaten to upset your scheme – that is what I complain of. If this marriage were one of cold calculation, if I had but to play my *rôle* of adventuress, and marry your nephew, perhaps I could do it, and perhaps from a sense of duty I could make him a better wife than Miss Marsh is likely to do. But I – " She paused, and dropped her voice to a lower tone. "But I already have a – a very sincere regard for Mr. Arkel."

"All the better; it will be so much the easier for you to carry out your part of the bargain."

"No," Miriam rose grandly. "As an instrument for the sake of Jabez, I was willing to be used, but as a woman – a woman who feels, who, as I tell you, already has a feeling of respect, of regard, of – No, Mr. Barton, I will not consent to marry him, unless – unless, perchance, things should come about differently."

"What about Jabez then, and his new life in America?"

Miriam's head sank, and she clasped her hands together with a gesture of pain.

"I don't know – I must think – I must consider myself as well as Jabez. He has brought me low enough as it is without my sacrificing my last shred of womanly pride for his sake – anything but that. I would do much for him. Yes, I may as well confess it, I love Mr. Arkel; whatever you may think of me, I love him. I suppose it is because you are such a stone – because I hardly look upon you as flesh and blood – that I can bring myself to say this to you. But it is true, true. You cannot understand the birth of such a feeling in a woman's heart. But she knows it, and cannot mistake it. I love Gerald Arkel. But I would not marry him unless he loved me – no, not for thousands! That is why I say I wish to leave, Mr. Barton."

"But, my good young woman, this is most extraordinary – you have hardly seen the man. I should have thought you had a mind above the fascination of good looks."

"His looks have nothing to do with it. But pray spare me. You cannot understand. Consider my position, Mr. Barton. I have laid bare my soul to you. I should love him were he ever so ugly – perhaps, who knows, he may come to love me, though I can hardly believe such happiness will ever be mine – there, now you know!"

"Would you tell him your past?"

"Yes, even at the risk of his shrinking from me in horror. I am not a wicked woman, you know that, whatever my past may have been."

"Quite so. That is exactly why I want you to marry Gerald."

"But why, why? – me, a nobody, why should you want *me* to marry him?"

Barton's brow gathered. He resumed his seat.

"I will tell you why in a very few words," he said grimly and savagely. There was a look almost of insanity in his eyes. "It is because I seek revenge – revenge against the woman who ruined my life – his mother!"

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. DARROW'S BOMBSHELL

For a moment Miriam stood aghast at the man's abandoned confession of his feelings. How anyone could nurse such venom in his breast it was beyond her to conceive.

"It is very terrible, this idea of yours, Mr. Barton," she said; "to me very horrible! Do you mean to say that you would make the living suffer for an imaginary wrong done you by the dead? for I cannot but think it is imaginary."

Barton scowled, and gripped the arm of his chair.

"Miriam Crane," he said, "you don't know what you are talking about. Gerald's mother – my sister – ruined my life – ruined it as utterly and hopelessly as ever man's life was ruined. Thirty years ago I had the chance of marrying the woman I loved, of settling down and becoming a decent member of society, of having my wretched hereditary weaknesses curbed by a gentle wife – in a word, the chance of happiness was mine, and this fiend-woman, Flora, sister of my blood, put an end to it. For that, I hated her while she lived. I hate her memory a thousand times more now that she is dead. For me, her son represents her, and he must bear the punishment she escaped."

"But how – why? I do not understand. You seek to punish him by marrying him to me? I am surely not such a pariah as that?"

"Of course you do not understand – how should you? Later on perhaps you will understand many things that seem unintelligible to you now."

"I shall never understand that the innocent should suffer for the guilty."

"Oh, you know well that I pretend to be no saint. I tell you this son of hers, to me, represents her. I was not able to take vengeance upon her while she was alive – he must bear it now. Let that suffice – I need tell you no more; you now know my motive."

Miriam was perplexed. She looked searchingly at Barton. Was he mad? She thought he must surely be. She did not like the light in his eye.

"But," she said, "even so, I cannot see how his marriage with me is to act as the punishment you would have it. I cannot marry him against his will, even if I would; and if it were his wish to marry me, I – I – I think he would be happy."

"Exactly so; exactly so. His future lies in your hands. You can avert his punishment – that is to say he can avert it through you. Listen to me. You may love Gerald Arkel, but you do not know him. He is the weakest, blindest, most easily led of men. It is through his weakness that I intend he shall suffer. It shall be my strength – unless he be wise in time and grasp the chance fate offers him. I intend he shall be my heir. I need not name the sum he will inherit; but it will not be small. And it shall be his damnation, his ruin. By means of it he will sink to the depths of infamy – of degradation, to perdition utterly. So shall he expiate the bitter wrong that has ruined my life – so shall he suffer for the sin of his cursed mother. Still I am not merciless. He has two women now from whom to choose. If he choose the right one, well and good. Such an influence as yours over him is the only thing that can save him, for you are a good woman. That is why I brought you here. But if he choose the other – the brainless, shallow minx with whom he thinks he is in love, then will his downfall be more rapid a hundred times. Now you know his chance and yours."

"But – but." Miriam was more and more bewildered. "But why choose me – you know nothing about me really, and what you do know is not on the face of it very reputable. How can you be sure that I am what you seem to think me?"

"I am sure of it. I knew it the first moment I saw your face; but still, I did not trust to that. I made inquiries; nothing was overlooked. I was very careful – you forget I had ample time and opportunity whilst you were recovering your health at the hotel."

Miriam turned pale.

"But how could you do that? I told you nothing of myself. You had nothing to go upon."

"I had sufficient for my purpose. I had Jabez, you told me about him. I learned what you had been to him – how in the midst of all corruption you had kept yourself pure, how your strength of purpose and never-flinching spirit had been exercised for him, how you had encouraged him and helped him and stuck to him through all tribulation, even to starvation – for you were starving on that night, Miriam. All this I learned, and more, and so I determined that you were the woman who should stand for the salvation of this man, and I brought you here that you might marry him if you would, and save him from himself. You see, I am not altogether so bad as you think me."

"Indeed, I don't know what to say, Mr. Barton. It is all so very strange to me. Surely it would be better to leave your money where it would do good, not evil – to Major Dundas, for instance."

"As a matter of fact, the money is at this moment left to Major Dundas; but I intend to alter my will in Gerald's favour. At first I thought to punish him by leaving him nothing. But I soon found out my mistake. As a poor man, obliged to work for his living, Gerald Arkel would stand a fair chance of happiness. As a rich one and his own master, he stands none. And so I have determined to offer him at one and the same time his ruin and his salvation. Now do you begin to understand?"

Still Miriam knew not what to say. The whole scheme was to her so fantastic and so abominable, and at the same time so extraordinary, that its genesis seemed hardly human. It was impossible to believe the man was sane. She decided she could have nothing to do with it.

"I am afraid," she said coldly, "that so far as I am concerned your scheme is quite impossible. Indeed, I can understand your wishing to salve your conscience in the face of so abominable a design as you contemplate for the ruin of this young man's life; and God knows I would willingly save him if I could. But much as I am interested in him, much as I – I feel, that is I think – oh, I don't know what to say," she broke off in despair. "I must return to Jabez, Mr. Barton. Let me pass out of this life of yours. I will go out of it – I refuse to do your dirty work!"

"And so you call it dirty work to save a human soul?"

"I must go back to Jabez, I say."

"That is to poverty, to disgrace, and – to crime!"

"To poverty, yes. But not to crime, no, nor to disgrace. I will leave to-morrow, Mr. Barton."

"You shall not."

"I must – I will. I do not fear you now. No, I defy you!"

"Take care, young lady; you had better not defy me."

"And why not?" She winced, though she spoke haughtily enough.

With a sudden pounce the man seized her wrist and bent so close to her that his lips almost touched her ear. So low, too, did he speak, that she could with difficulty hear what he said. But enough she heard to make her colour come and go; and when he had finished, the beads of perspiration stood out upon her forehead.

"Who told you?" she gasped. "Who told you?"

"The man who left me just now. He tells me all I wish to know."

"What is his name?"

"He has no name – for you. Call him 'The Shadow,' if you will. It will serve as well as any other name. Now, do you go or stay?"

She leaned against the writing-table, breathing heavily. For more than a minute she stood thus, battling with herself. Then slowly she turned and looked at him.

"I will stay," she said. Then she fell helplessly into a chair and sobbed bitterly.

Barton looked at her with a sneer. He went to the side-board for a decanter and a glass. As in a dream she was conscious of his holding wine to her lips, and as in a dream she drank it, and heard him speak to her.

"Remember," he said, "on your implicit obedience depends the future. Thwart me, and –"

"Hush, hush!" she cried, looking round in fear lest already someone should have overheard. "I will do all I can."

"Very good. Now, if you feel better, we will return to the drawing-room."

At the door she laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"One moment, Mr. Barton; you will keep this man – this shadow, as you call him – from doing harm?"

"I will. He is as much my slave as you are."

And Miriam, although she shuddered, did not dare to contradict him. She was indeed his slave. His whispered communication had given her no choice. Again, from that moment, poor Miriam had taken up her burden.

For long after that, the impression left by this extraordinary interview was deep upon her. Circumstances altogether beyond her control compelled her to obey Barton; but she could by no means understand him. He puzzled her completely. She could not reconcile the man's wish to ruin Gerald with his apparently co-existent desire to give him a chance of escape from the trap prepared for him. It was so utterly inconsistent to her mind. She could only surmise that the man had a conscience, and that in this way he strove to quieten it. The desire for vicarious punishment which seemed to have taken possession of him was, to her thinking, as childish as it was reprehensible. She could not reconcile it with either a normal sense of morality or with sanity.

It was no doubt a species of mania. Besides, in many other ways Barton's actions were such as to cast the gravest doubts as to his mental state. His behaviour became more and more perplexing, and his actions almost invariably baseless and inconsequent. And it was not until long after, when the skeins of the various lives with which her own had become entangled, began to unravel themselves, that she understood what was now perfectly inexplicable to her. Then, knowing what she knew, she was no longer surprised.

"Wherever have you been, Miss Crane?" demanded Mrs. Darrow with some asperity, as she and the Squire entered.

"Oh, she has been talking to me on a little matter of business," interrupted Barton before Miriam could reply. "It's all right, Julia, there is nothing for you to disturb yourself about."

"Oh, really, I don't mind in the least," said Mrs. Darrow, seeing she had made a *faux pas*; "but now that Miss Crane has returned to us, perhaps she will be so good as to sing something?"

Miriam's first impulse was to decline, for her interview with Barton had shaken her nerve a good deal. But she saw the sinister look of curiosity on Mrs. Darrow's face, and she determined she would give that lady no further ground for suspicion.

"I will sing with pleasure," she said, moving towards the piano. "But I am afraid I have brought no music."

"Oh, I saw to that," said Mrs. Darrow producing a roll. "I was quite sure Uncle Barton would like to hear your voice, so I brought a few of your songs for you."

"A few of my songs?" repeated Miriam; "and where, pray, did you get them?"

"Oh, it was Dicky who found them, in your room, dear. The child brought them down to show me a picture on the title page of one of them which seemed to have attracted him."

"Indeed! Perhaps you will give me the music?"

Mrs. Darrow rose to fetch the parcel. Then she proceeded to open it and read out the titles of the songs. On Hilda's face there was the blindest of smiles, masking, if the truth had but been known, the keenest of interest. She knew that Mrs. Darrow's bombshell was now about to explode. To her, as to the wily widow, this was *the* incident of the evening – in fact, the whole *raison d'être* of it.

"I hear your voice is a contralto, Miss Crane," said the Major, admiring the contour of her head. "I am so glad; it's my favourite voice."

"Really, Major?" observed Hilda. "I should have thought you would like something more lively – to me a contralto, no matter how beautiful, is always rather doleful."

"There I can't agree with you," put in Gerald. "To my thinking the contralto is always full of pathos – it is the voice which goes straight to the heart."

"Now, you too surprise me, Mr. Arkel," replied Hilda, smiling ever so amiably. "I did not think you were so susceptible in the – what is it the doctors call it – the cardiac region?"

"I think you, of all people, should know me better than that," murmured Gerald, bending towards her.

"Nonsense; I admit no such superiority. But hush, let us hear what it is Miss Crane is going to sing to us!"

Ever suspicious at any kindness however trifling on the part of Julia, the Squire had moved up close to the piano, and was keeping a pretty close watch upon her. But Mrs. Darrow was all unconscious of his scrutiny, being too deeply absorbed in the effective lodgment of her bombshell to pay much attention to anything else.

"'The Sands of Dee,' 'The Clang of the Wooden Shoon,' 'Down the Long Avenue,'" rattled off Mrs. Darrow. Then, with the prettiest air of surprise, "Oh, and here is a comic song!"

"I think you must be mistaken," said Miriam coldly. "I do not sing comic songs."

"Now, now, Miss Crane, you know you are hiding your light under a bushel," cried Mrs. Darrow with horribly artificial mirth. "What's more, I expect you sing them delightfully. Come now, confess."

Miriam seated there at the piano might in truth have been carved out of marble, so cold and so perfectly calm was she.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, but I don't sing any songs of that kind at all."

"Oh, but really!" Mrs. Darrow was smoothing out the folio of music; "you can't say that, in the face of this. Surely this must be yours – 'It's a Funny Little Way I've Got!' M. Crane, Frivolity Music Hall!" She handed the sheet over to Miriam.

Barton bit his lip, and began to see at last what she was after. Mrs. Darrow proceeded.

"Really, Miss Crane, I don't think I deserved to be so deceived at your hands. You might at least have told me that you were a singer at that class of – entertainment."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.