

Thorne Guy

The Soul Stealer



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

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CHAPTER I

MR. EUSTACE CHARLIEWOOD, MAN ABOUT TOWN

Upon a brilliant morning in the height of the winter, Mr. Eustace Charliewood walked slowly up Bond Street.

The sun was shining brightly, and there was a keen, invigorating snap in the air which sent the well-dressed people who were beginning to throng the pavements, walking briskly and cheerily.

The great shops of one of the richest thoroughfares in the world were brilliant with luxuries, the tall commissionaires who stood by the heavy glass doors were continually opening them for the entrance of fashionable women.

It was, in short, a typical winter's morning in Bond Street when everything seemed gay, sumptuous and debonair.

Mr. Eustace Charliewood was greeted several times by various friends as he walked slowly up the street. But his manner in reply was rather languid, and his clean-shaven cheeks lacked the colour that the eager air had given to most of the pedestrians.

He was a tall, well-built man, with light close-cropped hair and a large intelligent face. His eyes were light blue in colour, not very direct in expression, and were beginning to be surrounded by the fine wrinkles that middle age and a life of pleasure imprint. The nose was aquiline, the mouth clean cut and rather full.

In age one would have put Mr. Charliewood down as four and forty, in status a man accustomed to move in good society, though probably more frequently the society of the club than that of the drawing-room.

When he was nearly at the mouth of New Bond Street, Mr. Charliewood stopped at a small and expensive-looking hairdresser's and perfumer's, passed through its revolving glass doors and bowed to a stately young lady with wonderfully-arranged coils of shining hair, who sat behind a little glass counter covered with cut-glass bottles of scent and ivory manicure sets.

"Good-morning, Miss Carling," he said easily and in a pleasant voice. "Is Proctor disengaged?"

"Yes, Mr. Charliewood," the girl answered, "he's quite ready for you if you'll go up-stairs."

"Quite well, my dear?" Mr. Charliewood said, with his hand upon the door which led inwards to the toilette saloons.

"Perfectly, thank you, Mr. Charliewood. But you're looking a little seedy this morning."

He made a gesture with his glove which he had just taken off.

"Ah well," he said, "very late last night, Miss Carling. It's the price one has to pay, you know! But Proctor will soon put me right."

"Hope so, I'm sure," she answered, wagging a slim finger at him. "Oh, you men about town!"

He smiled back at her, entered the saloon and mounted some thickly carpeted stairs upon the left.

At the top of the stairs a glass door opened into a little ante-room, furnished with a few arm-chairs and small tables on which *Punch* and other journals were lying. Beyond, another door stood half open, and at the noise of Mr. Charliewood's entrance a short, clean-shaved, Jewish-looking man came through it and began to help the visitor out of his dark-blue overcoat lined and trimmed with astrachan fur.

Together the two men went into the inner room, where Mr. Charliewood took off his coat and collar and sat down upon a padded chair in front of a marble basin and a long mirror.

He saw himself in the glass, a handsome, tired face, the hair too light to show the greyness at the temples, but hinting at that and growing a little thin upon the top. The whole face, distinguished as it was, bore an impress of weariness and dissipation, the face of a man who lived for material enjoyment, and did so without cessation.

As he looked at his face, bearing undeniable marks of a late sitting the night before, he smiled to think that in an hour or so he would be turned out very different in appearance by the Jewish-looking man in the frock coat who now began to busy himself with certain apparatus.

The up-stairs room at Proctor's toilette club was a select haunt of many young-middle aged men about town. The new American invention known as "Vibro Massage" was in use there, and Proctor reaped a large harvest by "freshening up" gentlemen who were living not wisely but too well, incidentally performing many other services for his clients. The masseur pushed a wheeled pedestal up to the side of the chair, the top of which was a large octagonal box of mahogany. Upon the side were various electric switches, and from the centre of the box a thick silk-covered wire terminated in a gleaming apparatus of vulcanite and steel which the operator held in his hand.

Proctor tucked a towel round his client's neck, rubbed some sweet-smelling cream all over his face and turned a switch in the side of the pedestal.

Immediately an electric motor began to purr inside, like a great cat, and the masseur brought the machine in his right hand, which looked not unlike a telephone receiver, down upon the skin of the subject's face.

What was happening was just this. A little vulcanite hammer at the end of the machine was vibrating some six thousand times a minute and pounding and kneading the flesh, so swiftly and silently that Charliewood felt nothing more than a faint thrill as the hammer was guided skilfully over the pouches beneath the eyes, and beat out the flabbiness from the cheeks.

After some five minutes, Proctor switched off the motor and began to screw a larger and differently-shaped vulcanite instrument to the end of the hand apparatus.

Mr. Charliewood lay back, in a moment of intense physical ease. By means of the electrodes the recruiting force had vibrated gently through the nerves. New animation had come into the blood and tissues of the tired face, and already that sensation of youthful buoyancy, which is the surest indication of good health, was returning to his dissipated mask.

"Now then, sir," said Proctor, "I've screwed on a saddle-shaped electrode, and I'll go up and down the spine, if you please; kindly stand up."

Once more the motor hummed, and Mr. Charliewood felt an indescribable thrill of pleasure as the operator applied straight and angular strokes of the rapidly vibrating instrument up and down his broad back, impinging upon the central nerve system of the body and filling him with vigour.

"By Jove, Proctor," he said, when the operation was over at last, and the man was brushing his hair and spraying bay rum upon his face – "by Jove, this is one of the best things I've ever struck! In the old days one had to have a small bottle of Pol Roger about half-past eleven if one had been sitting up late at cards the night before. Beastly bad for the liver it was. But I never come out of this room without feeling absolutely fit."

"Ah, sir," said Mr. Proctor, "it's astonishing what the treatment can do, and it's astonishing what a lot of gentlemen come to me every day at all hours. My appointment book is simply filled, sir, filled! And no gentleman need be afraid now of doing exactly as he likes, till what hour he likes, as long as he is prepared to come to me to put him right in the morning."

After making an appointment for two days ahead, Mr. Charliewood passed out into the ante-room once more. During the time while he had been massaged another client had entered and was waiting there, lounging upon a sofa and smoking a cigarette.

He was a tall, youngish looking man, of about the same height and build as Mr. Charliewood, clean-shaved, and with dark red hair. He looked up languidly as Proctor helped Charliewood into his fur coat. The first arrival hardly noticed him, but bade the masseur a good-day, and went out jauntily into Bond Street with a nod and a smile for the pretty girl who sat behind the counter of the shop.

It was a different person who walked down Bond Street towards Piccadilly – a Mr. Charliewood who looked younger in some indefinite way, who walked with sprightliness, and over whose lips played a slight and satisfied smile.

It was not far down Bond Street – now more bright and animated than ever – to Mr. Charliewood's club in St. James's Street, a small but well-known establishment which had the reputation of being more select than it really was.

Swinging his neatly-rolled umbrella and humming a tune to himself under his breath, he ran up the steps and entered. A waiter helped him off with his overcoat, and he turned into the smoking-room to look at the letters which the porter had handed him, and to get himself in a right frame of mind for the important function of lunch.

In a minute or two, with a sherry and bitters by his side and a Parascho cigarette between his lips he seemed the personification of correctness, good-humour, and mild enjoyment.

Very little was known about Eustace Charliewood outside his social life. He lived in Chambers in Jermyn Street, but few people were ever invited there, and it was obvious that he must use what was actually his home as very little more than a place in which to sleep and to take breakfast. He was of good family, there was no doubt about that, being a member of the Norfolk Charliewoods, and a second son of old Sir Miles Charliewood, of King's Lynn. Some people said that Eustace Charliewood was not received by his family; there had been some quarrel many years before. This rumour gained general belief, as Charliewood never seemed to be asked to go down to his father's place for the shooting, or, indeed, upon any occasion whatever. There was nothing against Eustace Charliewood. Nobody could associate his name with any unpleasant scandal, or point out to him as being in any way worse than half a hundred men of his own position and way of life. Yet he was not very generally popular – people just liked him, said "Oh, Eustace Charliewood isn't half a bad sort!" and left it at that. Perhaps a certain mystery about him and about his sources of income annoyed those people who would like to see their neighbour's bank-book once a week.

Charliewood lived fairly well, and everybody said, "How on earth does he manage it?" the general opinion being that his father and elder brother paid him an allowance to keep him outside the life of the family.

About one o'clock Mr. Charliewood went into the club dining-room. The head waiter hurried up to him, and there was a somewhat protracted and extremely confidential conversation as to the important question of lunch. As the waiter would often remark to his underlings, "It's always a pleasure to do for a gentleman like Mr. Charliewood, because he gives real thought to his meals, chooses his wine with care and his food with discrimination, not like them young men we get up from Hoxford and Cambridge, who'll eat anything you put before 'em, and smacks their lips knowing over a corked bottle of wine."

"Very well," Mr. Charliewood said, "Robert, the clear soup, a portion of the sole with mushrooms, a grilled kidney and a morsel of Camembert. That will do very well. A half bottle of the '82 Neirsteiner and a Grand Marnier with my coffee."

Having decided this important question, Mr. Charliewood looked round the room to see if any of his particular friends were there. He caught the eye of a tall, young-looking man with a silly face and very carefully dressed. This was young Lord Landsend, a peer of twenty-one summers, who had recently been elected to the Baobab Tree Club, and who had a profound admiration for the worldly wisdom of his fellow member.

The young man got up from his table and came over to Mr. Charliewood.

"I say, Charlie," he said, "I'm going to motor down to Richmond this afternoon, just to get an appetite for dinner; will you come?"

Charliewood was about to agree, when a waiter brought him a telegram upon a silver tray. He opened it, read it, crushed the flimsy pink Government paper in his hand and said —

"Awfully sorry, Landsend, but I've just had a wire making an appointment which I must keep." He smiled as he did so.

"Ah," said the young gentleman, with a giggle, prodding his friend in the shoulder with a thin, unsteady finger. "Ah, naughty, naughty!"

With that he returned to his place, and Mr. Charliewood lunched alone.

Once he smoothed out the telegram again, and read it with a slight frown and an anxious expression in his eyes. It ran as follows —

Be here three this afternoon without fail.

Gouldesbrough.

When Mr. Charliewood had paid his bill and left the dining-room, the head waiter remarked with a sigh and a shake of the head that his pet member did not seem to enjoy his food to-day. "Which is odd, Thomas," concluded that oracle, "because a finer sole-oh-von-blong I never see served in the Club."

Charliewood got into a cab, gave the driver the name and address of a house in Regent's Park, lit a cigar and sat back in deep thought. He smoked rather rapidly, seeing nothing of the moving panorama of the streets through which the gondola of London bore him swiftly and noiselessly. His face wore a sullen and rather troubled expression, not at all the expression one would have imagined likely in a man who had been summoned to pay an afternoon call upon so famous and popular a celebrity as Sir William Gouldesbrough, F.R.S.

There are some people who are eminent in science, literature, or art, and whose eminence is only appreciated by a small number of learned people and stamped by an almost unregarded official approbation. These are the people who, however good their services may be, are never in any sense popular names, until many years after they are dead and their labours for humanity have passed into history and so become recognized by the crowd. But there are other celebrities who are popular and known to the "Man in the street." Sir William Gouldesbrough belonged to the latter class. Everybody knew the name of the famous scientist. His picture was constantly in the papers. His name was a household word, and with all his arduous and successful scientific work, he still found time to be a frequent figure in society, and a man without whom no large social function, whether public or private, was considered to be complete. He was the sort of person, in short, of whom one read in the newspapers — "and among the other distinguished guests were Sir Henry Irving, Sir Alma Tadema, Mr. Rudyard Kipling, and Sir William Gouldesbrough."

He had caught the popular attention by the fact that he was still a comparatively young man of five and forty. He had caught the ear and attention of the scientific world by his extraordinary researches into the lesser known powers of electric currents. Moreover, and it is an unusual combination, he was not only an investigator of the lesser known attributes of electricity who could be ranked with Tessler, Edison, or Marconi, but he was a psychologist and pathologist of European reputation. He was said by those who knew to have probed more deeply into mental processes than almost any man of his time, and for two or three years now every one who was on the inside track of things knew that Sir William Gouldesbrough was on the verge of some stupendous discovery which was to astonish the world as nothing else had astonished it in modern years.

Eustace Charliewood appeared to be an intimate friend of this great man. He was often at his house, they were frequently seen together, and the reason for this strange combination was always a fruitful subject of gossip.

Serious people could not understand what Gouldesbrough saw in a mere pleasant-mannered and idle clubman, of no particular distinction or importance. Frivolous society people could not understand how Mr. Charliewood cared to spend his time with a man who took life seriously and was always bothering about stupid electricity, while in the same breath they rather admired Charliewood for being intimate with such a very important person in England as Sir William Gouldesbrough undoubtedly was.

For two or three years now this curious friendship had been a piquant subject of discussion, and both Sir William's and Mr. Charliewood's most intimate friends had spent many pleasant hours in inventing this or that base and disgraceful reason for such a combination.

Yet as the cab rolled smoothly up Portland Place Mr. Charliewood did not look happy. He threw his cigar away with a petulant gesture, and watched a street arab dive for it among the traffic with a sneer of disgust.

He unbuttoned his heavy astrachan coat; it felt tight across his chest, and he realized that his nerves were still unstrung, despite the efforts of the morning. Then he took a cheque-book from his pocket and turned over the counterfoils till he came to the last balance. He frowned again, put it away, and once more leant back with a sigh of resignation.

In a few more minutes the cab drew up at a brick wall which encircled a large house of red brick, a house built in the Georgian period.

Only the top of the place could be seen from the street, as the wall was somewhat unusually high, while the only means of entrance was a green door let into the brickwork, with a brass bell-pull at one side.

In a moment or two the door opened to Charliewood's ring, and a man-servant of the discreet and ordinary type stood there waiting.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "Sir William expects you."

Charliewood entered and walked along a wide gravel path towards the portico of the house, chatting casually to the butler as he went.

It could now be seen that Sir William Gouldesbrough's residence was a typical mansion of George the First's reign. The brick was mellowed to a pleasant autumnal tint, the windows, with their white frames and small panes, were set in mathematical lines down the façade, a flight of stone steps led up to the square pillared porch, on each side of which a clumsy stone lion with a distinctly German expression was crouching. The heavy panelled door was open, and together the guest and the butler passed into the hall.

It was a large place with a tessellated floor and high white painted doors all round. Two or three great bronze urns stood upon marble pedestals. There was a big leather couch of a heavy and old-fashioned pattern, and a stuffed bear standing on its hind legs, some eight feet high, and with a balancing pole in its paws, formed a hat rack.

The hall was lit from a square domed sky-light in the roof, which showed that it was surrounded by a gallery, up to which led a broad flight of stairs with carved balustrades.

The whole place indeed was old-fashioned and sombre. After the coziness of the smart little club in St. James's Street, and the brightness and glitter of the centre of the West End of town, Charliewood felt, as indeed he always did, a sense of dislike and depression.

It was all so heavy, massive, ugly, and old-fashioned. One expected to see grim and sober gentlemen in knee-breeches and powdered hair coming silently out of this or that ponderous doorway – lean, respectable and uncomfortable ghosts of a period now vanished for ever.

"Will you go straight on to the study, sir?" the butler said. "Sir William expects you."

Charliewood did not take off his coat, as if he thought that the interview to which he was summoned need not be unduly prolonged. But with his hat and umbrella in his hand he crossed the hall to its farthest left angle beyond the projecting staircase, and opened a green baize door.

He found himself in a short passage heavily carpeted, at the end of which was another door. This he opened and came at once into Sir William Gouldesbrough's study.

Directly he entered, he saw that his friend was sitting in an arm-chair by the side of a large writing-table.

Something unfamiliar in his host's attitude, and the chair in which he was sitting, struck him at once.

He looked again and saw that the chair was slightly raised from the ground upon a low dais, and was of peculiar construction.

In a moment more he started with surprise to see that there was something extremely odd about Sir William's head.

A gleam of sunlight was pouring into the room through a long window which opened on to the lawn at the back of the house. It fell full upon the upper portion of the scientist's body, and with a muffled expression of surprise, Mr. Charliewood saw that Sir William was wearing a sort of helmet, a curved shining head-dress of brass, like the cup of an acorn, from the top of which a thick black cord rose upwards to a china plug set in the wall not far away.

"Good heavens, Gouldesbrough!" he said in uncontrollable surprise, "what – "

As he spoke Sir William turned and held up one hand, motioning him to silence.

The handsome and intellectual face that was so well known to the public was fixed and set into attention, and did not relax or change at Charliewood's ejaculation.

The warning hand remained held up, and that was all.

Charliewood stood frozen to the floor in wonder and uneasiness, utterly at a loss to understand what was going on. The tremor of his nerves began again, his whole body felt like a pincushion into which innumerable pins were being pushed.

Then, with extreme suddenness, he experienced another shock.

Somewhere in the room, quite close to him, an electric bell, like the sudden alarm of a clock on a dark dawn, whirred a shrill summons.

The big man jumped where he stood.

At the unexpected rattle of the bell, Sir William put his hand up to his head, touched something that clicked, and lifted the heavy metal cap from it. He placed it carefully down upon the writing-table, passed his hand over his face for a moment with a tired gesture, and then turned to his guest.

"How do you do?" he said. "Glad to see you, Charliewood."

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED ENTRANCE OF TWO LADIES

For a moment or two Eustace Charliewood did not return his host's greeting. He was not only surprised by the curious proceeding of which he had been a witness, but he felt a certain chill also.

"What the deuce are you up to now, Gouldsbrough?" he said in an uneasy voice. "Another of your beastly experiments? I wish you wouldn't startle a fellow in this way."

Sir William looked keenly at the big man whose face had become curiously pallid.

There was a tremendous contrast in the two people in the room. Gouldsbrough was a very handsome man, as handsome as Charliewood himself had been in younger days, but it was with an entirely different beauty. His face was clean shaved, also, but it was dark, clear-cut and ascetic. The eyes were dark blue, singularly bright and direct in glance, and shaded by heavy brows. The whole face and poise of the tall lean body spoke of power, knowledge, and resolution.

One man was of the earth, earthy; the other seemed far removed from sensual and material things. Yet, perhaps, a deep student of character, and one who had gone far into the hidden springs of action within the human soul, would have preferred the weak, easy-going sensualist, with all his meannesses and viciousness, to the hard and agate intellect, the indomitable and lawless will that sometimes shone out upon the face of the scientist like a lit lamp.

Charliewood sat down in obedience to a motion of his host's hand. He sat down with a sigh, for he knew that he had been summoned to Sir William Gouldsbrough's house to perform yet another duty which was certain to be distasteful and furtive.

Yes! there was no hope for it now. For the last few years the man about town had been under the dominion of a stronger will than his, of a more cunning, of a more ruthless brain. Little by little he had become entangled within the net that Gouldsbrough had spread for him. And the lure had been then and afterwards a lure of money – the one thing Charliewood worshipped in the world.

The history of the growth of his secret servitude to this famous man was a long one. Money had been lent to him, he had signed this or that paper, he had found his other large debts bought up by the scientist, and at the end of three years he had found himself willy nilly, body and soul, the servant of this man, who could ruin him in a single moment and cast him down out of his comfortable life for ever and a day.

No living soul knew or suspected that there was any such bond as this between the two men. Even Charliewood's enemies never guessed the truth – that he was a sort of jackal, a spy to do his master's bidding, to execute this or that secret commission, to go and come as he was ordered.

As yet all the services which Charliewood had rendered to Sir William, and for which, be it said, he was excellently paid, were those which, though they bordered upon the dishonourable and treacherous, never actually overstepped the borders.

Gouldsbrough employed Charliewood to find out this or that, to make acquaintance with one person or another, to lay the foundation, in fact, of an edifice which he himself would afterwards build upon information supplied by the clubman. There was no crime in any of these proceedings, no robbery or black-mail. And what happened after he had done his work Charliewood neither knew nor cared. Of one thing, however, he was certain, that whatever the scientist's motives might be – and he did not seek to probe them – they were not those of the ordinary criminal or indeed ever bordered upon the criminal at all. All that Charliewood knew, and realized with impotence and bitterness, was that he had allowed himself to become a mere tool and spy of this man's, a prober of secrets, a walker in tortuous by-paths.

"What did you wire to me for?" Charliewood said in a sulky voice. "What do you want me to do now?"

Sir William looked quickly at his guest, and there was a momentary gleam of ill-temper in his eyes, but he answered smoothly enough.

"My dear Charliewood, I wish you wouldn't take that tone. Surely we have been associated too long together for you to speak to me in that way now. It has suited your convenience to do certain things for me, and it has suited my convenience to make it worth your while to do them. There is the whole matter. Please let's be friendly, as we always have been."

Charliewood shrugged his shoulders.

"You know very well, Gouldesbrough," he said, "that I am in your hands and have got to do anything you ask me in reason. However, I don't want to insist on that aspect of the question if you don't. What did you wire to me for?"

"Well," Sir William said, passing a cigar-box over to the other, though he did not smoke himself, "there is a certain man that I am interested in. I don't know him personally, though I know something about him. I want to know him, and I want to know everything I can about him too."

"I suppose," Charliewood answered, "that there is no difficulty for you in getting to know anybody you want to?" He said it with a slight sneer.

"Oh, of course not," Sir William answered, "but still in this case I want you to get to know him first. You can easily do this if you wish, you are sure to have some mutual acquaintances. When you get to know him make yourself as pleasant as you can be to him – and nobody can do that more gracefully than yourself, my dear boy. Become his intimate friend, if possible, and let me know as much as you can about his habits and objects in life. I don't want you to spare any expense in this matter if it is necessary to spend money, and of course you will draw upon me for all you require in the matter."

Charliewood held up his cigar and looked steadily at the crust of white ash which was forming at the end.

"What's the man's name?" he asked without moving his eyes.

"His name," said Sir William lightly, "is Rathbone, a Mr. Guy Rathbone. He is a barrister and has chambers in the Temple. A youngish man, I understand, of about seven and twenty."

At the name Charliewood gave a momentary start. He allowed a slight smile to come upon his lips, and it was not a pleasant smile.

Gouldesbrough saw it, flushed a little and moved uneasily, feeling that although this man was his servant there were yet disadvantages in employing him, and that he also could sting when he liked.

Directly Sir William had mentioned the name of the person on whose actions and life, not to put too fine a point on it, he was ordering his henchman to become a spy, Charliewood knew the reason. He realized in an instant what was the nature of the interest Sir William Gouldesbrough took in Mr. Guy Rathbone, barrister-at-law.

The famous scientist, long, it was said in society, a man quite impervious to the attractions of the other sex and the passion of love, had but a few months ago become engaged.

Wealthy as he was, distinguished, handsome and attractive in his manner, there had not been wanting ladies who would have very gladly shared and appropriated all these advantages. Like any other unmarried man in his desirable position, the scientist had been somewhat pursued in many drawing-rooms. Of late, however, the pursuit had slackened. Match-making mothers and unappropriated daughters seemed to have realized that here was a citadel they could not storm. Six months ago, therefore, society had been all the more startled to hear of Sir William's engagement to Miss Marjorie Poole, the only daughter of old Lady Poole of Curzon Street.

Marjorie Poole was the daughter of a rather poor baronet who had died some years before, the title going to a cousin. Lady Poole was left with a house in Curzon Street and a sufficient income for her own life, but that was all. And among many of the women who hunt society for a husband for their daughters, as a fisherman whips a stream for trout, the dowager was one of the most conspicuous.

It was said that she had angled for Sir William with an alertness and unwearying pursuit which was at last crowned by success. More charitable people, and especially those who knew and liked Miss Poole, said that the girl would never have lent herself to any schemes of her mother's unless she had been genuinely fond of the man to whom she was engaged. There had been much talk and speculation over the engagement at first, a speculation which had in its turn died away, and which during the last few weeks had been again revived by certain incidents.

Eustace Charliewood, whose whole life and business it was to gather and retail society gossip, was very well aware of the reason which made people once more wag their heads and hint this or that about the Goulesbrough engagement.

Mr. Guy Rathbone had appeared upon the scene, a young barrister of good family but of no particular fortune. Several times Mr. Rathbone had been seen skating with Miss Poole at Prince's. At this or that dance – Sir William Goulesbrough did not go to dances – Rathbone had danced a good deal with Miss Poole. Many envious and linc-like eyes had watched them for some weeks, and men were beginning to say in the clubs that "young Rathbone is going to put the scientific Johnny's nose out of joint."

It was this knowledge which caused the little sneering smile to appear on Charliewood's face, and it gave him pleasure to detect the human weakness of jealousy in the inscrutable man who held him so tightly in his grip.

"Well, all right," Charliewood said at length. "I'll do what you want."

"That's a good fellow," Sir William answered, smiling genially, his whole face lighting up and becoming markedly attractive as it did so, "you've always been a good friend to me, Charliewood."

"My banking account is very low just at present," the other went on.

"Then I'll write you a cheque at once," Sir William answered, getting up from his chair and going to the writing-table in the corner of the room.

Charliewood's face cleared a little. Then he noticed his cigar had been burning all down one side. He dropped it into an ash-tray and put his hand in his coat pocket to find a cigarette.

He took out an ordinary silver case, when his eye fell upon the crest engraved upon the cover. He started and looked again, turning it so that the light fell full upon it.

The crest of the Charliewood family was a hand with a battle-axe and the motto, "Ne Morare," and in the usual custom it was engraved upon Charliewood's own case.

But this was not the Charliewood crest. It was a wyvern charged on a shield, and the motto consisted of the single word "GARDEZ."

He gave a startled exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Sir William said, turning round sharply.

"I've got some other fellow's cigarette-case," Charliewood answered in amazement, opening it as he did so.

There was only one cigarette in the case, but there were several visiting-cards in one compartment, and moreover the name of the owner was cut in the inside of the lid.

The case dropped from Charliewood's fingers with a clatter, and he grew quite pale.

"What is it?" his host inquired again.

"Have you been playing some infernal trick on me, Goulesbrough?" Charliewood said.

"No; why?"

"Because this cigarette-case, by some strange chance, is the cigarette-case of the man we've been talking about, this Guy Rathbone!"

He stood up, thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of the fur coat as he did so. Then he pulled out a letter, stamped and addressed and obviously ready for the post.

"Good heavens!" he said, "here's something else. It's a letter for the post."

"Who is it addressed to?" Sir William asked in a curious voice.

Charliewood looked at it and started again.

"As I live," he answered, "it's addressed to Miss Poole, 100A, Curzon Street!"

There was a curious silence for a moment or two. Both men looked at each other, and mingled astonishment and alarm were on the face of either. The whole thing seemed uncanny. They seemed, while concocting something like a plot, to have trodden unawares into another.

Suddenly Charliewood stamped his foot upon the ground and peeled off his overcoat.

"I've got it," he cried. "Why, of course I've seen the very man myself this morning. This is his coat, not mine. I went to a hairdresser's this morning and left my coat in the ante-room while I was going through a massage treatment. When I came out there was a man waiting there for his turn, and I must have taken his coat in exchange for mine. And the man was this Mr. Guy Rathbone, of course. You know these dark blue coats lined with astrachan are quite ordinary, everybody is wearing them this year. And I noticed, by Jove, that the thing seemed a little tight in the cab! It's about the oddest coincidence that I've ever come across in my life!"

Sir William bowed his head in thought for a minute or two.

"Well, this is the very best opportunity you could have, my dear fellow," he said, "of making the man's acquaintance. Of course you can take him back the coat and the cigarette-case at once."

"And the letter?" Charliewood said swiftly. "The letter to Miss Poole?"

Sir William looked curiously at his guest.

"I think," he said slowly, "that I'll just spend half-an-hour with this letter first. Then you can take it away with the other things. I assure you that it will look just the same as it does now."

Charliewood shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way," he said contemptuously, "but don't ask *me* to open any letters to a lady, that's all."

Sir William flushed up and was about to make an angry reply, when the door of the study was suddenly thrown open and they saw the butler standing there.

There was a rustle of skirts in the passage.

"Lady Poole and Miss Poole, sir," said the butler.

CHAPTER III

NEWS OF A REVOLUTION

Marjorie and Lady Poole came into the room. For two at least of the people there it was an agonizing moment. But a second before, Sir William Gouldesbrough had been proposing to steal and open a letter written by another man to his *fiancée*. But a second before, Mr. Eustace Charliewood, the well-known society man, had sullenly acquiesced in the proposal. And now here was Marjorie Poole confronting them.

"We thought we'd come to tea, William," Lady Poole said effusively, going forward to shake hands with her future son-in-law. "Ah, Mr. Charliewood, how do you do?" She gave him a bright nod, and he turned to Marjorie, while her mother was shaking hands with the scientist.

Charliewood's face was flushed a deep red, and his hand trembled so that the tall girl looked at him in some surprise.

Marjorie Poole was a maiden for whom many men had sighed. The oval face with its pure olive complexion, the large brown eyes, clear as a forest pool, the coiled masses of hair, the colour of deeply ripened corn, made up a personality of singular distinction and charm. She was the sort of girl of whom people asked, "Who is she?" And if younger sons and other people who knew that they could never win and wear her, said that she was a little too reserved and cold, it was only a prejudiced way of expressing her complete grace and ease of manner.

"How are you, Mr. Charliewood?" she said in a clear, bell-like voice. "I haven't seen you since the Carr's dance."

"Well, to tell the truth, Miss Poole," Charliewood answered with a voice that had a singular tremor in it, "you startled me out of my wits when you came in. Just a moment before, Sir William had mentioned your name, and we were both thinking of you when, as quick as one of those ridiculous entrances on the stage, pat upon the very word, the butler threw open the door and you came in."

"Oh, a stage entrance!" Marjorie answered. "I don't like stage entrances;" and turning away she went up to her *fiancé*, making it quite clear that, whatever her opinions about the conventions of the boards might be, she did not like Mr. Charliewood.

The big, light-haired man stayed for a moment or two, made a few conventional remarks, and then wished his host farewell.

As he crossed the hall he began mechanically to put on the heavy astrachan coat upon his arm, then, with a muttered curse which surprised the butler, he took it off again and hurriedly left the house.

"Well, and how are you, William?" said Lady Poole, sitting down by the fire. "Are you going to give us some tea? We have been paying calls, and I told Marjorie that we would just come on and see how you were, in case you might be in. And how is the electricity going? Why don't you invent a flying-machine? I'm sure it would be more useful than the things you do invent. How charming it would be to step out of one's bedroom window into one's aëriel brougham and tell the man to fly to the Savoy!"

Gouldesbrough did not immediately reply, but old Lady Poole was used to this.

She was a tall, florid old thing, richly dressed, with an ample and expansive manner. Now that Sir William had proposed and the forthcoming marriage was an accepted thing, the good lady felt her duty was done. Having satisfied herself of Sir William's position, his banking account and his general eligibility, she cared for nothing else, and she had grown quite accustomed to the little snubs she received from his hands from time to time.

Gouldesbrough was looking at Marjorie. His deep blue eyes had leapt up from their usual intense calm into flame. The thin-cut lips were slightly parted, the whole man had become humanized and real in a single moment.

The sinister suggestion had dropped from him as a cloak is thrown off, and he remembered nothing of the plot he had been hatching, but only saw before him the radiant girl he adored with all the force of his nature and all the passion of a dark but powerful soul, to which love had never come before.

"How are you, dearest?" he said anxiously. "Do you know that I haven't heard from you or seen you for nearly four days? Tell me all that you have been doing, all that you have been thinking."

"Four days, is it?" Lady Poole broke in. "Well, you know, my dear William, you will have plenty of time with Marjorie in the future, you mustn't attempt to monopolize her just at present. There have been so many engagements, and I'm sure you have been entirely happy with the electricity, haven't you? Such a comfort, I think, to have a hobby. It gives a real interest in life. And I'm sure, when a hobby like yours has proved so successful, it's an additional advantage. I have known so many men who have been miserable because they have never had anything to do to amuse them. And unless they take up wood-carving or fretwork or something, time hangs so heavily, and they become a nuisance to their wives. Poor Sir Frederick only took up tact as a hobby. Though that was very useful at a party, it was horribly boring in private life. One always felt he understood one too well!"

Up to the present Marjorie had said nothing. She seemed slightly restless, and the smile that played about her lips was faint and abstracted. Her thoughts seemed elsewhere, and the scrutiny of the deep blue eyes seemed slightly to unnerve her.

At that moment the butler entered, followed by a footman carrying a tea-table.

Marjorie sank down with a sigh of relief.

"I'm so tired," she said in a quiet voice. "Mother's been dragging me about to all sorts of places. William, why do you have that horrid man, Eustace Charliewood, here? He always seems about the house like a big tame cat. I detest him."

Gouldsbrough winced at the words. He had put his hand into the side-pocket of his coat, and his fingers had fallen upon a certain letter. Ah! why, indeed, did he have Charliewood for a friend?

His answer was singularly unconvincing, and the girl looked at him in surprise. He was not wont to speak thus, with so little directness.

"Oh, I don't know, dear," he answered. "He's useful, you know. He attends to a lot of things for me that I'm too busy to look after myself."

Again Marjorie did not answer.

"What have you been doing, William?" she said at length, stirring the tea in her cup.

"I've been thinking about you principally," he answered.

She frowned a little. "Oh, I don't mean in that way," she answered quickly. "Tell me about real things, important things. What are you working at now? How is your work going?"

He noticed that something like enthusiasm had crept into her voice – that she took a real interest in his science. His heart throbbed with anger. It was not thus that he wished to hear her speak. It was he himself, not his work, that he longed with all his heart and soul this stately damsel should care about.

But, resolute always in will, completely master of himself and his emotion, he turned at once and began to give her the information which she sought.

And as he spoke his voice soon began to change. It rang with power. It became vibrant, thrilling. There was a sense of inordinate strength and confidence in it.

While old Lady Poole leant back in her chair with closed eyes and a gentle smile playing about her lips, enjoying, in fact, a short and well-earned nap, the great scientist's passionate voice boomed out into the room and held Marjorie fascinated.

She leant forward, listening to him with strained attention – her lips a little parted, her face alight with interest, with eagerness.

"You want to hear, dearest," he said, "you want to hear? And to whom would I rather tell my news? At whose feet would I rather lay the results of all I am and have done? Listen! Even to you I

cannot tell everything. Even to you I cannot give the full results of the problems I have been working at for so many years. But I can tell you enough to hold your attention, to interest you, as you have never been interested before."

He began to speak very slowly.

"I have done something at last, after years of patient working and thought, which it is not too much to say will revolutionize the whole of modern life – will revolutionize the whole of life, indeed, as it has never been changed before. All the other things I have done and made, all the results of my scientific work have been but off-shoots of this great central idea, which has been mine since I first began. The other things that have won me fame and fortune were discovered upon the way towards the central object of my life. And now, at last, I find myself in full possession of the truth of all my theories. In a month or two from now my work will be perfected, then the whole world will know what I have done. And the whole world will tremble, and there will be fear and wonder in the minds of men and women, and they will look at each other as if they recognized that humanity at last was waking out of a sleep and a dream."

"Is it so marvellous as all that?" she said almost in a whisper, awed by the earnestness of his manner.

"I am no maker of phrases," he replied, "nor am I eloquent. I cannot tell you how marvellous it is. The one great citadel against which human ingenuity and time have beaten in vain since our first forefathers, is stormed at last! In my hands will shortly be the keys of the human soul. No man or woman will have a secret from me. The whole relation of society will be changed utterly."

"What is it? What is it?" she asked with a light in her eyes. "Have you done what mother said in jest? Have you indeed finally conquered the air?"

He waved his hand with a scornful gesture.

"Greater far – greater than that," he answered. "Such a vulgar and mechanical triumph is not one I would seek. In a material age it is perhaps a great thing for this or that scientist to invent a means of transit quicker and surer than another. But what is it, after all? Mere accurate scientific knowledge supplemented by inventive power. No! Such inventions as the steam-engine, printing, gun-powder, are great in their way, but they have only revolutionized the surface of things; the human soul remains as it was before. What I now know is a far, far loftier and more marvellous thing."

In his excitement he had risen and was bending over her.

Now she also rose, and stared into his face with one hand upon his arm.

"Oh, tell me," she said, "what in life can be so strange, so terrible in its effects as this you speak of?"

"Listen," he answered once more. "You know what light is? You know that it can be split up into its component parts by means of the prism in the spectroscope?"

"Every child knows that to-day," she answered.

"Good!" he replied. And he went on. "I am putting this in the very simplest possible language. I want you to see the broadest, barest, simplest outlines. Do you know anything of the human mind? What should you say hypnotism was, for instance, in ordinary words?"

"Surely," she replied, "it is the power of one brain acting upon another."

"Exactly," he said, "and in what way? How is a brain, not physically touching another brain, able to influence it?"

"By magnetism," she replied, "by" – she hesitated for a word – "by a sort of current passing from one brain to another."

He held out both his hands in front of him. They were clasped, and she saw that his wrists were shaking. He was terribly excited.

"Yes," he went on, his voice dropping lower and lower and becoming even more intense, "you have said exactly the truth. The brain is a marvellous instrument, a sensitive instrument, an electric instrument which is constantly giving out strange, subtle, and hitherto uninvestigated currents. It is

like the transmitter at the top of Signor Marconi's wireless telegraphy station. Something unseen goes out into the air, and far away over the Mother of Oceans something answers to its influence. That is exactly what happens with the human brain. Countless experiments have proved it, the scientists of the world are agreed."

"Then – ?" she said.

"Supposing I had discovered how to collect these rays or vibrations, for that is the better word, these delicate vibrations which come from the human brain?"

"I think I begin to see," Marjorie said slowly, painfully, as if the words were forced from her and she spoke them under great emotion. "I think I begin to see a little light."

"Ah," he answered, "you are always above ordinary women. There is no one in the world like you. Your brain is keen, subtle, strong. You were destined for me from the first."

Once more, even in the midst of her excitement, a shade passed over her face. She touched him on the arm again.

"Go on! Tell me! Not this, not that. Tell me about the work!"

"I," he repeated, "I alone of all men in the world have learnt how to collect the invisible vibrations of thought itself. Now, remember what I told you at first. I mentioned Light, the way in which Light can be passed through a prism, split up into its component parts, and give the secret of its composition to the eye of the scientist. Not only can *I* collect the mysterious vibrations of the human brain, but *I* can pass them through a spectroscope more marvellous than any instrument ever dreamt of in the history of the world. I can take the vibrations of thought, and discover their consistency, their strength, their meaning."

She stared at him incredulously. "Even yet," she said, "I fail to see the ultimate adaptation of all this. I realize that you have discovered a hitherto unproved truth about the mechanism of thought. That is an achievement which will send your name ringing down the avenues of the future. But there seems to be something behind all you are telling me. You have more to say. What is the *practical* outcome of all this, this theoretical fact?"

"It is this," he answered. "I hold in my hands the power to know what this or that person, be it a king upon his throne, a girl on her wedding day, or a criminal in the dock, is thinking at any given moment."

She started from him with a little cry. "Oh no," she said, and her face had grown very white indeed. "Oh no, God would not allow it. It is a power only God has."

He laughed, and in his laugh she heard something that made her shrink back still further. It was a laugh such as Lucifer might have laughed, who defied a Power which he would not acknowledge to be greater than his.

"You will never do that," she said, "wonderful as you are."

"Marjorie," he answered, "I am a man with a brain that theorizes, but never ventures upon a statement that cannot be proved by fact. If I tell you this, if I hint broadly at the outcome of my life's work, I am doing so, believe me, because I have chapter and verse for all I say, because I can prove that it has passed from the dim realms of theory and of hope into the brilliant daylight of actual achievement!"

She stared at him. His words were too much for her mind to grasp immediately.

It was an intense moment.

But, as in real life intense moments generally are, it was broken by a curious interruption.

A voice came thickly from the arm-chair by the fire, where old Lady Poole had been reclining in placid sleep. It was the strange voice of one who sleeps, without expression, but perfectly distinct.

"I will not have it, cook – (indistinguishable murmur) – explained when I engaged you – will *not* have men in the kitchen!"

Sir William and Marjorie looked at each other for a moment with blank faces. Then, all overstrung as they were, the absurdity of the occurrence struck them at the same moment, and they began to laugh softly together.

It was a little pleasant and very human interlude in the middle of these high matters, and at that moment the great man felt that he was nearer to Marjorie than he had been before at any other moment of the afternoon. She no longer hung entranced upon his impassioned and wonderful words, she laughed with him quite quietly and simply.

Lady Poole snored deeply, and no longer vocalized the drama of her domestic dream.

Suddenly Marjorie turned back once more to Sir William.

"It's only mother dreaming about one of the servants we have had to send away," she said. "What a stupid interruption! Now, go on, go on!"

Her voice recalled him to his marvellous story.

"Tell me what is the actual achievement," she said.

"It is this. When you speak into a telephone the vibrations of your voice agitate a sensitive membrane, and by means of electricity the vibrations are conveyed to almost any distance. When Madame Melba sings into the gramophone, her voice agitates the membrane, which in its turn agitates a needle, which in its turn again makes certain marks upon a waxen disc."

"Yes, go on, go on!"

"When I put a certain instrument upon the head of a man or a woman, when I surround the field of emanation by a shield which captures the vibrations, they are conducted to a receiver more delicate and sensitive than anything which has ever been achieved by scientific process before. That receiver collects these vibrations and can transmit them, just in the manner of a telephone or telegraph wire, for almost any distance."

"And at the other end?" Marjorie asked.

"It has been a difficulty of ten long, anxious, unwearying years."

"And now?"

"Now that difficulty has been finally overcome."

"Therefore?"

"What a person thinks in London can be sent in vibrations along a wire to Paris."

"I see. I understand! But when there they can only be transmitted to another brain, of course. You mean that you have invented a more marvellous system of telegraphy than has ever been invented before. For instance, I could sit here in this room and communicate with you with absolute freedom in Paris. How wonderful that is! What a triumphant achievement! But – but, William, marvellous as it is, you do not substantiate what you said just now. The secrets of thought may be yours, but only when the sender wills it."

"Ah," he answered, with a deep note of meaning coming into his voice. "If I had only discovered what you say, I should have discovered much. But I have gone far, far away from this. I have done much, much more. And in that lies the supreme value of my work."

Once more they were standing together, strained with wonder, with amazement and triumph passing between them like the shuttle of a loom; once more she was caught up into high realms of excitement and dawning knowledge, the gates of which had never opened to her brain before.

"To come back to the phonograph," Sir William said. "The marks are made upon the waxen disc, and they are afterwards reproduced in sound, recorded upon metal plates to remain for ever as a definite reproduction of the human voice. Now, and here I come to the final point of all, I have discovered a means by which thought can be turned into actual vision, into an actual expression of itself for every one to read. What I mean is this. I have discovered the process, and I have invented the machine by which, as a person thinks, the thought can be conveyed to any distance along the wire, can be received at the other end by an instrument which splits it up into this or that vibration. And these vibrations actuate upon a machine by the spectroscope, by the bioscope, which show them upon

a screen in the form of either pictures or of words as the thoughts of the thinker are at that moment sent out by the brain in words or pictures."

"Then what does this mean?"

"It means that once my apparatus, whether by consent of the subject or by force, is employed to collect the thought vibrations, then no secrets can be hidden. The human soul must reveal itself. Human personality is robbed of its only defence. There will be no need to try the criminal of the future. He must confess in spite of himself. The inviolability of thought is destroyed. The lonely citadel of self exists no longer. The pious hypocrite must give his secret to the world, and sins and sinners must confess to man what only God knew before."

Marjorie sat down in her chair and covered her face with her hands. Various emotions thronged and pulsed through her brain. The stupendous thing that this man had done filled her with awe for his powers, with terror almost, but with a great exultation also. She did not love him, she knew well that she had never loved him, but she realized her influence over him. She knew that this supreme intellect was hers to do with as she would. She knew that if he was indeed, as he said, master of the world, she was mistress of his mind, she was the mistress of him. The mysterious force of his love, greater than any other earthly force which he could capture or control, had made him, who could make the minds of others his slaves and instruments, the slave of her.

Yes! Love! That, after all, was the greatest force in the whole world. Here was a more conclusive proof than perhaps any woman had ever had before in the history of humanity.

Love! Even while the inmost secrets of nature were wrested from her by such a man as this, love was still his master, love was still the motive power of the world.

And as she thought that, she forgot for a moment all her fears and all her wonder, in a final realization of what all the poets had sung and all the scientists striven to destroy. Her blood thrilled and pulsed with the knowledge, but it did not thrill or pulse for the man whose revelations had confirmed her in it. The man whom she had promised to marry was the man who had confirmed her in the knowledge of the truth. And all he had said and done filled her with a strange joy such as she had never known before.

At that moment Sir William came towards her. He had switched on the electric light, and the room was now brilliantly illuminated. In his hand he held a large oval thing of brass, bright and shining.

At that moment, also, old Lady Poole woke up with a start.

"Dear me," she said, "I must have taken forty winks. Well, I suppose, my dear children, that I have proved my absolute inability to be *de trop*! What are you doing, William?"

"It's a little experiment," Sir William said, "one of my inventions, Lady Poole. Marjorie, I want you to take off your hat."

Marjorie did so. With careful and loving hands the great man placed the metal helmet upon her head. The girl let him do so as if she were in a dream. Then Sir William pressed a button in the wall. In a few seconds there was an answering and sudden ring of an electric bell in the study.

"Now, Marjorie!" Sir William said, "now, all I have told you is being actually proved."

He looked at her face, which flowered beneath the grotesque and shining cap of metal.

"Now, Marjorie, everything you are thinking is being definitely recorded in another place."

For a moment or two the significance of his words did not penetrate to her mind.

Then she realized them.

Lady Poole and the scientist saw the rapt expression fade away like a lamp that is turned out. Horror flashed out upon it, horror and fear. Her hands went up to her head; she swept off the brilliant helmet and flung it with a crash upon the ground.

Then she swayed for a moment and sank into a deep swoon.

She had been thinking of Mr. Guy Rathbone, barrister-at-law, and what her thoughts were, who can say?

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND LOVER ARRIVES

On the evening of the day in which she had fainted, Marjorie Poole sat alone in the drawing-room of her mother's house in Curzon Street.

It was a large, handsome place, furnished in the Empire style with mirrors framed in delicate white arabesques, and much gilding woven into the pattern. The carpet was a great purple expanse covered with laurel wreaths of darker purple.

There was but little furniture in the big, beautiful place, but it was all airy, fantastic and perfect of its kind. There was a general air of repose, of size and comely proportion in this delightful room. Here, an old French clock clicked merrily, there were two or three inlaid cabinets, and upon the walls were a few copies of some of Watteau's delightful scenes in the old courtly gardens of Versailles.

Marjorie wore a long tea-gown, and she was sitting quite alone in the brilliantly lit place, with a book in her hand. The book was in her hand indeed, but she was not reading it. Her eyes were fixed upon the opposite wall, though they saw nothing there. Her thoughts were busy and her face was pale.

She had recovered from her swoon in a minute or two, and found her mother fussing round her and her lover generally skilful in doing all that was necessary. And a short time afterwards she had driven home with Lady Poole.

What she had heard, the very strain of hearing and being so intensely interested in it, had taken her strength away. Then had come the words when Sir William told her that the very thoughts that she was thinking at that moment were being in some mysterious way recorded and known. And she knew that she had been thinking of another man, thinking of him as an engaged girl should never think.

But as she had returned to consciousness, Sir William had told her kindly and simply that if she had feared her thoughts, whatever they might be, were known to him, she need fear no longer. "There was no one," he said, "observing any record of vibrations from your dear mind. Do you think that I should have allowed that, Marjorie? How could you think it of me?"

She had driven home relieved but very weary, and feeling how complex life was, how irrevocable the mistakes one made from impulse or lack of judgment really were.

Ambition! Yes, it was that that had brought her to where she was now. Her heart had never been touched by any one. She never thought herself capable of a great love for a man. From all her suitors she had chosen the one who most satisfied her intellectual aspirations, who seemed to her the one that could give her the highest place, not only in the meaningless ranks of society, but in and among those who are the elect and real leaders of the world.

And now? Well, now she was waiting because Guy Rathbone was coming to the house.

A letter from him had arrived just before dinner. She had expected it by an earlier post, the post by which all his letters usually came, and she had been impatient at its non-arrival. But it had come at last, and she was sitting in the drawing-room waiting for him now.

He was on intimate terms in that house, and came and went almost as he would, old Lady Poole liking to have young people round her, and feeling that now Marjorie's future was satisfactorily settled, there was no need to bar her doors to people she was fond of, but who, before the engagement, she would have regarded as dangerous.

Even as Marjorie was thinking of him, the butler showed Guy Rathbone into the room.

Marjorie got up, flushing a little as she saw him.

"Mother's very tired," she said; "she's not well to-night, and so she's gone to bed. Perhaps you'd rather not stay."

He sat down, after shaking hands, without an answer in words. He looked at her, and that was his answer.

He was a tall young man, as tall as Sir William, but more largely built, with the form and figure not of the student but rather of the athlete. His face was clean-shaven, frank, open and boyishly good-looking; but a pair of heavy eyebrows hung over eyes that were alert and bright, robbing the upper part of his face of a too juvenile suggestion. His head was covered with dark red curls, and he had the walk and movements of perfect health and great physical power, that had once led a dyspeptic friend at the Oxford and Cambridge Club to remark of him, that "Rathbone is the sort of fellow who always suggests that he could eat all the elephants of India and pick his teeth with the spire of Strasburg Cathedral afterwards."

There was force about him, the force of clean, happy youth, health, and a good brain. It was not the concentrated force and power of Sir William, but it was force nevertheless.

And as he came into the room, Marjorie felt her whole heart go out to him, leaping towards him in his young and manly beauty. She knew that here indeed was the one man that would satisfy her life for ever and a day. He was not famous, he was clever without having a great intellect, but for some reason or other he was the man for her. She knew it, and she feared that he was beginning to know she knew it.

He was sitting in the chair, when he turned and looked her straight in the face.

"I have come to-night," he said, "to say something very serious, very serious indeed. I am glad Lady Poole isn't here, just for to-night, Marjorie."

"I've told you you oughtn't to say Marjorie," she said.

"Well," he answered, "you've called me Guy for a good long time now, and one good turn deserves another."

He smiled, showing a perfect and even row of teeth, a smile so simple, hearty and spontaneous that once more that furiously beating heart of hers seems striving to burst its physical bonds and leap to him.

Then he passed his hand through his hair, and his face immediately became full of perplexity and doubt.

"I should have been here before," he said, "only I was detained. I met a man who happened to take my overcoat to-day in mistake for his own from the hairdresser's. He turned out to be a decent sort of chap, and I couldn't get rid of him at once. But that's by the way. I've come here to say something which is awfully difficult to say. I've fought it out with myself, and I've wondered if I should be a bounder in saying it. I'm afraid I'm going to say something that a gentleman oughtn't to say. I don't know. I really don't know. But something within tells me that if I don't say it I should be doing something which I should regret all my life long. But you must forgive me, and if after what I've said to you you feel that I oughtn't to have done so, I do beg you will forgive me, Marjorie. Will you forgive me?"

Her voice was very low. "Yes," she said in almost a whisper.

"You are engaged to another man," he said. "I don't know him, I have never seen him. I know he is a great swell and very important. A year ago, if anybody had told me that I was going to talk to a girl who was engaged to another man as I'm going to talk to you, I should probably have knocked him down. Shows one never knows, doesn't it, Marjorie?"

She began to breathe quickly. Her breast rose and fell, her agitation was very manifest. The tears were beginning to well up in her eyes. She hated herself for this visible emotion; she did her best to control it, but it was utterly impossible, and she knew that she was telling him even now what she knew also he most desired to hear.

He got up from his chair, big, forceful, manly and young, and was by her side in a moment.

"Marjorie," he said, "dear, sweet girl, I can't help telling you, however wrong it may be. I love you, I love you deeply and dearly. I am quite certain, I don't know how, but I'm certain, and nothing in the world could persuade me I wasn't, that I'm the man who was made for you, and that you're

the girl who was made for me. I can't put it poetically, I don't know how to say it beautifully, as the Johnnies say it in the novels and on the stage, but, darling, I love you."

There was a catch and a break in his voice; a sob had come into it.

Then he went on. "Do you know, Marjorie, I can't help thinking somehow that you must have made a mistake – " He was kneeling now by the side of her chair. His arms stole round her, she made no motion to forbid it. It was a moment of absolute surrender, a surrender which she had no power to withstand.

And now he held her in his strong arms, his kisses fell upon her lips, her head was on his shoulder, she was sobbing quietly and happily. With no word of avowal spoken, she gave herself to him at that moment. He had felt, and his whole body was shaken with joy and triumph, that come what might, she was his in spirit if indeed she could never be his in any other way.

It was a great moment for those two young lives. Young man and maid, knowing themselves and each other for the first time. It wasn't romantic, exactly, there was nothing very striking about it, perhaps, but it was sweet – ah! unutterably sweet!

He was walking about the room.

"You must tell him," he said, "dearest. You'll have to go through so much more than I shall, and it cuts me to the heart to think of it. You'll have to face all the opposition of everybody, of your people, of society and the world generally. And I can't help; you'll have to go through this alone. It's a bitter thought that I can't help you. Dear, dare you fight through this for me? Are you strong enough? are you brave enough?"

She went up to him, and placed both her hands upon his shoulders, looking straight into his face.

"I have been wicked," she said, "I have been wrong. But perhaps there were excuses. Until one has felt love, real love, Guy, one doesn't realize its claims or the duties one owes it. I was ambitious. I liked William well enough. He interested me and stimulated me. I felt proud to think that I was to be the companion of a man who knew and had done so much. But now the mere thought of that companionship fills me with fear. Not fear of him, but fear of the treachery I should have done my nature and myself if I had married him. I don't know what will happen, but here and now, Guy, whatever may be the outcome, I tell you that I love you, and I swear to you, however wrong it may be, whatever violence I may be doing to my plighted troth, I tell you that, however great the unworthiness, I will be yours and yours alone. I know it's wrong, and yet, somehow, I feel it can't be wrong. I don't understand, but – but – " He took her in his arms once more and held her.

It was late, and he was going, and was bidding her farewell. He knelt before her and took her hand, bowing over it and kissing it.

"Good-night," he said, "my lady, my love, my bride! I am with you now, and shall be with you always in spirit until we are one – until the end of our lives. And whatever may be in store in the immediate future I shall be watching and waiting, I shall be guarding you and shielding you as well as I can, and if things come to the worst, I shall be ready, and we will count the world well lost, as other wise lovers have done, for the sacred cause and in the holy service of Love."

So he bowed over her slim white hand and kissed it, looking in his beauty and confidence and strength like any knight of old kneeling before the lady he was pledged to serve. And when he was gone, and she was alone in her room up-stairs, Marjorie was filled with a joy and exhilaration such as she had never known before. Yet there seemed hanging over the little rosy landscape, the brightly-lit landscape in which she moved, a dark and massive cloud.

She dreamt thus. She dreamt that this cloud grew blacker and blacker, and still more heavy, sinking lower and lower towards her. Then she saw her lover as a knight in armour cutting upwards with a gleaming sword until the cloud departed and rushed away, and all was once more bathed in sunlight. She knew the name of that sword. It was not Excalibur, it was Love.

CHAPTER V

A CONSPIRACY OF SCIENTISTS

Sir William Goulesbrough had been up very late the night before. He came down from his room on a grey morning a fortnight after the day on which he had told Marjorie something of his hopes. It was nearly twelve o'clock. He had not retired to rest until four upon the same morning. And when he had at last left the great laboratories built out of the back of the house, he had stumbled up to his room, a man drunk with an almost incredible success – a success of detail so perfect and complete that his intelligence staggered before the supreme triumph of his hopes.

But the remaining portion of the night, or rather during the beginning of the chill wintry dawn, he had lain alone in his great Georgian bedroom, watching the grey light filtering into the room, flood by flood, until the dark became something more terrible, something filled with vast moving shadows, with monstrous creatures which lurked in the corners of the room, with strange half lights that went and came, and gave the wan mirrors of the wardrobe, of the mantel-shelf, a ghost-like life only to withdraw, and then once more increase it.

And as this great and famous man lay in this vast lonely room without power of sleep, two terrible emotions surged and throbbed within him, – two emotions in their intensity too great for one mind to hold.

One was the final and detailed triumph of all he held dear in the world of science and in the department of his life's work. The other was the imminent and coming ruin of his heart's hope, and the love which had come to him, and which had seemed the most wonderful thing that life could give.

Yes, there he lay, a king of intellect, a veritable prince of the powers of the air, and all his triumph was but as dust and ashes and bitterness, because he knew that he was losing a smaller principality perhaps, but one he held dearer than all his other possessions.

Emperor of the great grey continent of science, he must now resign his lordship of the little rosy principality of Love.

So, as he came down-stairs close upon mid-day of the winter's morning – a tall distinguished figure in the long camel's-hair dressing-gown, with its suggestion of a monk's robe – the butler who was crossing the hall at the time was startled by the fixed pallor of his face.

The man went up to him.

"Excuse me, Sir William," he said, "but you're working too hard. You're not well, sir. You mustn't overdo it. I have got you a sole and mushrooms for breakfast, sir, but I should not advise you to touch it, now I've seen you. If you'll allow me to offer my advice, I should suggest a bowl of soup."

"Thank you, Delaine," Sir William answered. "But I don't think I could even take anything at present. Will you send my letters into the study?"

"Yes, Sir William," the man replied, "and I shall make so bold as to bring you a bowl of soup in half-an-hour, as well."

Goulesbrough crossed the great gloomy hall and entered the study.

A bright fire was glowing on the hearth, the place was all dusted, tidy and cheerful, even though the world outside was a blank wall of fog.

He stood up in the middle of the room. Tall, columnar, with a great dignity about him, had there been any one there to see. It was a dual dignity, the dignity of supreme success and the dignity of irremediable pain.

The butler came in with the letters upon a copper tray. There was a great pile of them, and as the man closed the door after he put the tray upon the writing-table, Sir William began to deal the letters like a pack of cards, throwing this and that one on the floor, with a shuffling movement of the wrist, and as he did so his eyes were horrid in their searching and their intensity. At last he came

to the one he sought. A letter addressed to him in a bold but feminine handwriting. As his fingers touched it a loud sob burst out into the silence of the room. With shaking fingers he tore it open, standing among the litter of the unopened letters, and began to read.

He read the letter right through, then walked to the mantel-piece, leaning his right arm upon it as if for support. But the tension was now a little relaxed. He had come down to find the worst, to meet the inevitable. He had met it, and there was now neither premonition of the moment of realization nor the last and torturing flicker of despairing hope.

This was the letter. It began without preface or address —

"You must have known this was coming. Everything in your manner has shown me that you knew it was coming. And for that, unhappy as I am, I am glad. I have a terrible confession to make to you. But you who are so great, you who know the human mind from your great height, as a conquering general surveys a country from a mountain-top, you will understand. When you asked me to marry you and I said 'Yes,' I was pleased and flattered, and I had a tremendous admiration and respect for you and for all you have done. Then when we came to know each other, I began to see the human side of you, and I had, and if you will let me say so, still have, a real affection for you. And had it not been that something more powerful than affection has come into my life, I would have been a true and faithful wife and companion to you.

"But you have seen, and you must know, that things are changed. Are we not all subject to the laws of destiny, the laws of chance? Is it not true that none of us on our way through the world can say by whom or how we shall be caught up out of ourselves and changed into what we could not be before? Oh, you know it all. You of all men know it!

"I need not here speak in detailed words, because from things you have seen you know well enough what I am about to say, of whom I would speak if I could. But it is enough, William, to tell you what you already know. That I love some one else, and that if I am true to myself, which is after all the first *duty* of all of us, I could never marry you. I can never be to you what you wish or what I would like to be as your wife. I am stricken down with the knowledge of the pain all this will give you, though, thank God, it is not a pain for which you are unprepared. I dare not ask your forgiveness, I can say nothing to console you. I have acted wickedly and wrongly, but I cannot do anything else but what I am doing.

"Forgive, if you can. Think kindly, if you can, of Marjorie."

Now he knew. He folded the letter gently, kissed it – an odd action for a man so strong – and put it in the inside pocket of his coat, which pressed next his heart.

Then he rang the bell.

"Ask Mr. Guest to come," he said.

"Very well, Sir William," the butler answered, "but Mr. Charliewood has just arrived."

"Then ask him in," Goulesbrough answered.

Charliewood came into the room.

"By Jove!" he said, "you look about as seedy as I've ever seen you look!"

Sir William went up to him and put his hand upon his shoulder.

"Look here," he said, "I've had a smack in the face this morning, Charliewood. You know what it is, I need not tell you. And look here, too, I'm going to ask you to help me as you've never helped me before. I'm afraid, old fellow, I've often been a nuisance to you, and often rather rubbed in the fact that you owe me money, and that you've had to do things for me. Forgive me now, if you will. I'm going to call upon you for active friendship."

"Oh," Charliewood answered, "we won't talk about friendship between you and me. I've done what I had to do and there's enough."

Sir William still held him by the shoulder. "You don't really feel that, Charliewood?" he said in a quiet voice, and as he did so the magnetism of his personality began to flow and flood upon the weaker man and influence him to kindness.

"Well, well," he said, "what is it now? I suppose we've been running round a vicious circle and we've come to the last lap?"

"That's just about it," Sir William answered. "Just let me say that this is the last service I shall ever ask from you. I'll give you back all the I.O.U.'s and things, and I'll give you enough money to put yourself absolutely right with the world, then we'll say good-bye."

Charliewood started. "That's awfully good of you," he said. "I don't think that I want to say good-bye. But still, what is it?"

"Rathbone," Sir William answered, pronouncing the name with marked difficulty.

"It's all over then?" Charliewood answered.

"Yes."

"I thought it would be. I have told you all that has been going on, and I knew it would be."

"She's written to me this morning," Goulesbrough said. "A kind letter, but a letter finishing it all."

Then the weaker, smaller man became, as so often happens in life, the tempter – the instrument which moves the lever of a man's career towards the dark sinister side of the dial.

Charliewood was touched and moved by the unexpected kindness in his patron's voice.

"Don't say it's finished," he said; "nothing is finished for a man like you, with a man like me to help him. Of course it's not finished. You have not always been all you might to me, William, but I'll help you now. I'll do anything you want me to do. Buck up, old boy! You will pass the post first by a couple of lengths yet."

"How?"

"Well, what were you going to ask me to do?"

They looked each other in the face with glowing eyes and pale countenances, while a horrible excitement shone out upon them both.

At that moment the door opened very quietly, and an extraordinary person came into the room.

He was a short, fat, youthful-looking man, with a large, pink, and quite hairless face. The face was extremely intelligent, noticeably so, but it was streaked and furrowed with dissipation. It told the story not of the man who enjoyed the sensuous things of life in company, and as part of a merry progress towards the grave, but it betrayed the secret sot, the cunning sensualist private and at home.

This man was Mr. Guest, Sir William's faithful assistant in science, a man who had no initiative power, who could rarely invent a project or discover a scientific fact, but a man who, when once he was put upon the lines he ought to go, could follow them as the most intelligent sleuth-hound in the scientific world.

Wilson Guest was perhaps the greatest living physicist in Europe. He was of inestimable value to his chief, and he was content to remain between the high red-brick walls of the old house in Regent's Park, provided with all he needed for his own amusements, and instigated to further triumphs under the ægis of his master.

"Well, what is it?" said this fat, youthful and rather horrible-looking person.

"We've come to grips of the great fact, Guest," Sir William answered, still with his hand upon Charliewood's shoulder.

The pink creature laughed a hollow and merciless laugh.

"I knew it would come to this," he said, "since you have added another interest to your scientific interests, Goulesbrough. Why have you called me in to a consultation?"

Goulesbrough's whole face changed; it became malignant, the face of a devil.

"I'm going to win," he said. "I've had a knock-down blow, but I'm going to get up and win still! Mr. Rathbone must disappear. That can be easily arranged with the resources at our command."

Guest gave a horrible chuckle.

"And when we've got him?" he said.

"He must disappear for always," Gouldesbrough answered.

"Quite easy," Guest replied. "Quite easy, William. But, *not until we've done with him, shall he?*"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, isn't it the last condition of our experiments that we should have some one a slave, a dead man to the world, to use as we shall think fit? Here's your man. Do what you like to him afterwards. Let's make your rival a stepping-stone to your final success."

Then the three men looked at each other in fear.

Charliewood and Sir William Gouldesbrough were pale as linen, but the short, fat man was pink still, and laughed and chuckled nervously.

CHAPTER VI

"WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?"

Mr. Eustace Charliewood's chambers were in Jermyn Street. But few of his many friends had ever seen the interior of them. Such entertaining as the man about town did – and he was always one of those who were entertained, rather than one of those who offer hospitality – was done at his club.

The man who looked after the place and valeted his master was therefore the more surprised when Charliewood had called him up one morning after breakfast.

"Look here, William," Charliewood had said, "I've got a gentleman coming to dinner. We've some business to talk over, so I shan't dine him at the club. I suppose you can manage a little dinner here?"

"Certainly, sir, if necessary," the man answered. "Of course you're not in the habit of dining at home, and you've not got your own things. That is if you mean a proper little dinner, sir."

"I do, I do, William," his master answered hurriedly.

"But, there, that needn't matter," the man answered, "we can have everything in if you like, sir."

"That will be best," Charliewood answered. "I leave everything to you, William. Except," he added as an afterthought, "the menu. I want a small dinner, William, but quite good. Shall we say a little *bisque* for the soup? Then perhaps a small Normandy sole. Afterwards a chicken cooked *en casserole*. As an *entrée* some white truffles stewed in Sillery – you can get them in glass jars from Falkland & Masons – and then a morsel of Brie and some coffee. That will do, I think."

"And about the wine, sir?" said William, astonished at these unaccustomed preparations, and inwardly resolving that Mr. Eustace Charliewood had discovered a very brightly plumed pigeon to pluck.

"Oh, about the wine! Well, I think I'll see to that myself. I'll have it sent up from the club. You've an ice-pail for the champagne, haven't you, William?"

"Yes, sir, we certainly have *that*."

"Very good then. We'll say at eight then."

William bowed and withdrew.

All that day the various members of this or that fast and exclusive club round about St. James's Street, noticed that Eustace Charliewood was out of form. His conversation and his greetings were not so imperturbably cheerful and suave as usual. He took no interest in the absorbing question as to whether young Harry Rayke – the Earl of Spaydes' son – would after all propose to Lithia Varallete, the well-known musical comedy girl. The head waiter of the Baobab Club noticed Mr. Charliewood was off his food, and everybody with whom the man about town came in contact said that "Richard was by no means himself."

As the evening drew on, a dark, foggy evening, which promised as night came to be darker and foggier still, Charliewood's agitation increased, though just now there was no one to see it.

He walked down St. James's Street, past Marlborough House, and briskly promenaded the wide and splendid avenue which now exists in front of Buckingham Palace. The fog made him cough, the raw air was most unpleasant, and it was no hour for exercise. But, despite the cold and misery of it all, Charliewood continued his tramp backwards and forwards.

When he returned to his chambers in Jermyn Street, about seven o'clock, he found that his clothes were wet with perspiration, and only a hot bath before dressing for dinner and a couple of bromide tabloids in a wine-glass full of milk seemed to bring him back to his ordinary condition.

When, however, he went into his little dining-room, to all outward appearances he was the usual Eustace Charliewood of the pavements and club-rooms of the West End.

The room was comfortable. A bright fire glowed upon the hearth, shining upon the high-class sporting prints, the subdued wall-paper, the comfortable padded chairs, and the shelves loaded with bachelor nick-nacks and sporting trophies of his youth.

In one corner was a little round table set for two, gleaming with glass and silver and lit by electric lights covered with crimson shades.

It was all very warm and inviting. He looked round it with satisfaction for a moment.

Then, suddenly, as he stood on the hearth-rug, he put his plump, white hand with the heavy seal ring upon it, up to his throat. The apple moved up and down convulsively, and for a single moment the whole being of the man was filled with overmastering fear of the future and horror and loathing for himself.

The spasm passed as quickly as it came, the drug he had taken asserted its grip upon the twitching nerves, the man whose whole life was discreet adventure, who was a soldier of social fortune, who daily faced perils, became once more himself.

That is to say, to put it in two words, his better angel, who had held possession of him for a moment, fled sorrowfully away, while the especial spirit deputed to look after the other side of him happened to chance that way, and remembering he had often found a hospitable reception from Mr. Eustace Charliewood, looked in, found his old quarters duly swept and garnished, and settled down.

Charliewood's rooms were on the ground floor. In a minute or two, it was about a quarter to eight, he heard someone upon the steps outside, in Jermyn Street, and then the electric bell whirr down below in the kitchen.

He rushed out into the hall. It generally took William some time to mount from the lower regions, which were deep in the bowels of the earth, and no doubt Mr. Charliewood kindly desired to spare the butler the trouble of opening the door.

So, at least, William thought, as he mounted the kitchen stairs and came out into the hall to find Mr. Charliewood already helping his guest off with his coat and showing him into the dining-room. William did not know that there were any special reasons in Mr. Charliewood's mind for not having his guest's name announced and possibly remembered by the servant.

"Well, my dear Rathbone, how are you?" Charliewood said, and no face could have been kinder or more inviting and pleasant to see than the face of the host. "Awfully good of you to come and take me like this, but I thought we should be more comfortable here than at the Club. There are one or two things I want to talk over. I'll do you as well as I can, but I can't answer for anything. You must take pot luck!"

Guy Rathbone looked round the charming room and laughed – a full-blooded, happy laugh.

"I wish you could see my chambers in the Temple," he said. "But you fellows who live up this end do yourselves so jolly well!"

"I suppose one does overdo it," Charliewood answered, "in the way of little comforts and things. It's a mistake, no doubt, but one gets used to it and was brought up to it, and so just goes on, dependent upon things that a sensible man could easily do without. Now, sit down and have a sherry and bitters. Dinner will be up in a minute. And try one of these cigarettes. It's a bad plan to smoke before dinner, I know, as a rule, but these little things just go with the sherry and bitters, and they are special. I get them over from Rio. They're made of black Brazilian tobacco, as you see; they're only half as long as your finger, and instead of being wrapped in filthy, poisonous rice paper, they're covered with maize leaves."

Rathbone sank into the luxurious chair which his host pointed out to him, took the sherry, in its heavily cut glass, and lit one of the cigarettes. He stretched out his feet towards the fire and enjoyed a moment of intense physical ease. The flames and the shaded electric lights shone upon his fine and happy face, twinkled upon the stud in his shirt front, and showed him for what he was at that moment – a young gentleman intensely enjoying everything that life had to give.

In a moment or two more dinner was served.

"You needn't wait, William," Charliewood said, as they sat down to the *hors d'œuvre*. "Just put the soup on and I'll ring when we're ready."

"So good of you to ask me," Rathbone said. "I should have gone to the Oxford and Cambridge Club, had a beef-steak, looked at the evening papers, and then returned to chambers to write letters. Rather a dismal proceeding on a night like this!"

"Hadn't you anything on to-night, then?" Charliewood asked carelessly.

"Not a single thing," Rathbone answered. "I've been cutting all my engagements during the last week or two, telling people I was going out of town. I've got a special reason for working very hard just now."

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