

FOR SATAN'S SAKE

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PROLOGUE.—PART I

HOW AGONISTES ENTERED MONELPISIA

As I, Paul Penruddock, replaced the fatal bottle after draining its contents, a mental reaction followed ; and the longing for death, which prompted me to swallow the draught, was succeeded by a terror so great that my blood seemed to freeze, while my limbs trembled in violent agitation.

A sound as of a woman in distress—a wail that told of the destruction of hope, even of a broken heart, burst upon my terrified ears ; and I thought I saw a white draped figure flit past me into the darkness beyond.

So utterly were my nerves shattered, that I could barely drag myself to my bed, where I lay panting, the victim of a thousand conflicting emotions. I realised that my unnatural act had outlawed me from God and man ; that, alone, I should have to bear the responsibility of my deed. It was this sense of coming isolation which overawed me.

I believe, during that brief period, I would willingly have lived to struggle for a wretched existence in the slums of London, rather than die thus, and be exiled from my fellow-men. Yet in spite of this regret, no desire for Divine pardon entered my mind. The love of all things good and beautiful, once so strong within my breast, now lay cold and dead. I had ceased to be an idealist. The bitterness of a lifetime of disappointment, crowned by the miseries of the last few days, had annihilated all my love or reverence for my Creator.

If was death I dreaded. Friendless though I was, a waif of the world on the brink of starvation, without shelter, I would have clung to earth now with the grave so close at hand.

The nature of my offence stared me in the face with dawning clearness. The catastrophe, which in my recklessness I had invited, appalled me by its proximity ; its magnitude made me shudder ; I questioned in my alarm how death

would come—and when? Would it bring pain? How long should I take to die? And whither should I go—afterwards?

A wave of choking despair swept over me. Phantoms of nightmare gibbered at me from the dark corners of my room; they stretched their crooked fingers as if to rend my still living flesh in pieces. Faces too hideous for human thought floated over me, and pressed their loathsome lips against my own. The room, empty a moment before, was crowded with grotesque forms, the very incarnation of mocking devilry; the madness of malice gleamed in their colourless eyes as they crouched or lay upon the floor, waiting for the coming of Death.

At length it came. One of their number, even more hideous than the rest, crawled from amongst them, its bony haunches white with leprosy; and my whole being was filled with violent nausea as I watched its loathsome body drawing nearer and nearer.

The climax of horror arrived. The foul monster clambered over the foot of the bed, and sat glaring into my eyes.

Could any countenance have been more wickedly bestial? Could any long-buried corpse have rivalled it in offensiveness? With the fascination one feels in the presence of something outrageously repulsive. I could not withdraw my gaze from its face.

It sat for a brief space, gloating over my terror; then slowly commenced to drag itself over the bedclothes towards my head. As it brushed my feet I felt an icy chill shoot upwards. I saw its brown swollen hands creep over the counterpane, felt its hot, fetid breath burning in my nostrils.

All this torture did I undergo, and more besides. At last the claw-like fingers closed upon my throat, the sharp kness pressed upon my chest; and I realised that I was in the very throes of Death.

The agony of that last struggle for breath is indescribable. In that short time I suffered more acutely than is all the rest of my life put together. But, as Big Ben solemnly tolled out the hour of midnight, Death conquered and squatted over the body of its victim.

The flickering lights no longer played upon the grimy ceilings; the figures by the bedside vanished, and the black-

ness of darkness supervened. I relapsed into a dreamless sleep—my soul left the useless carcase, and sped whither I know not. No longer did the cares of life oppress me ; no longer did I clutch at its fleeting pleasures. I was insensible to all that belonged to the world.

Rest, great and all-compelling, seemed at last to have overtaken my weary soul.

How long I remained in this state I know not. In the return from unconsciousness, there are two steps ; the first mental, the second physical ; first the organs of the dormant brain awake to motion ; then the limbs become once more sentient, as the message from the reviving brain bids them reassert themselves.

Before that final coma, I had been Paul Penruddock ; when next I possessed knowledge of anything, a vast change had taken place. Two riddles presented themselves to be solved.

Who am I? Where am I?

One fact was evident ; I was no longer an inhabitant of York Road, London. Nor was I even an inhabitant of the earth.

I was lying, passive in the arms of a huge grey man ; and was being borne by him, at a terrific speed, through space. Our course was upwards, and, so far as I could ascertain, straight towards the sun, the size of which seemed every moment to increase. But, although the heat must have been intensified in proportion, I experienced no unpleasant sensation.

This fact first conveyed to me the knowledge of one of the changes through which I had passed. In full possession of the organs of sight, hearing, and smell, I was proof against pain. This was not unfavourable, and I felt something like self-congratulation at the thought.

Then I glanced at my captor's face. It was that of a man convulsed with evil passions and wholly abandoned to vice. Yet it did not displease me ; in fact, I regarded him with admiration, and wondered if my countenance were now cast in a similar mould. His skin, eyes, and hair, were all of one hue—grey.

His eyes never met mine, but always looked upward at

the blaze of the sun. At first I feared to follow his gaze, but, emboldened by his example, I raised my eyes at last, and met the fierce, blood-red rays direct. And I found I need not flinch, but could view steadily the glaring, molten mass, straight into which we were rapidly flying.

Nearer and nearer we drew, till we came to the open mouth of a vast crater. In my ears there rang the roar of a million furnaces, many tongues of fire licked my limbs; yet I was borne onward, unscathed. Now we plunged downwards into this fiery pit; flames twirled and leaped around us, playing sportively over our bodies, but their touch attracted no attention from my captor, and in silence we still descended. As we sank deeper, the fire grew feebler and fainter, till at length we left it behind and the remainder of our journey was shrouded in darkness.

How long we continued to fall I knew not then, and have never learnt, often as my thoughts have wandered to that mad descent. It may have been hours, or days, or years; the flight of time had ceased to convey any meaning to me.

When we did alight, I perceived that we were in a rough and rocky passage, excessively dark. Had it not been for a kind of phosphorescent glow which hung about my companion I could not have seen where to walk. As it was, I only contrived to grope along, following him very closely. The vast silence of the place filled me with a great sense of fear.

I expected every moment to be clutched by unseen hands, or to see hideous forms arise in the dimness. Nor were my fear wholly unrealised. Foul reptiles splashed into dark pools on our approach, while more than one pair of eyes peered out from huge crevices. Whether the owners of those eyes bore any resemblance to the human form I was unable to discern; but an occasional glimpse of formidable claws and insect-like antennæ led me to draw a negative inference.

Once a thing like an enormous centipede rattled over the stones at my feet, and snapped its pincers at my legs as it passed. Again, a kind of flying cockroach the size of a wren settled on my thigh; and I felt—although always without pain—how the fangs dug into my skin. Had I possessed all earthly sense of suffering I should scarcely

have shrunk away in greater horror; the touch and aspect of the creature was vile in the extreme. After many efforts, however, it seemed to realise its inability to cause me pain; it uttered a croaking sound of dissatisfaction, and, spitting out a quantity of rank, saliva, flapped away.

After this incident I staggered on in trepidation; and it was with feelings of the greatest relief that I saw the other entrance to this subterranean passage widen in front of us.

We emerged upon an immense sandy plain, which stretched as far as the eye could see. This desert was lighted by flaming rocks scattered here and there over its monotonous expanse. My guide struck a track at last, and on and on we went, still in silence.

After this plain was traversed, we plunged into a forest. There, obstacles of every kind lay across our path; but we both glided through them as easily as mortals pass through an open doorway. So on and on we tramped; and my guide never spoke.

On leaving this wood we found ourselves in a broad avenue, lined on either side by stately trees, belonging, as I knew, to no earthly species. Hanging on some of the branches were human skulls, from which emanated flickers of light.

Now for the first time my guide turned and addressed me, speaking thus—

“This place is the Avenue of Gloom, and will henceforth be thine abode; for thou art no longer mortal, but soul, only, like unto them that flit about thee. On earth thou wert Paul Penruddock—now thou art Agonostes—and to me thou art indebted for thy transformation.”

He paused, as if expecting a reply, and unwilling to offend him, I answered, “I am grateful, O noble stranger, for all, thou hast performed on my behalf; for wholly wretched was my state on earth, and my altered condition at least cannot be for the worse.”

In a voice quivering with suppressed passion, he rejoined: “Nay, Agonostes; do not thank me, I am but the servant of our master Diaphernes. Thank *him* for the favour he has shown thee. And thou shalt not call me stranger; for I have attended thee since thy entrance into mortal life. I am Aginarius, thy counsellor, the trusted emissary of our mutual lord, Diaphernes.”

"And whither dost thou lead me now, Aginarius?" I ventured to ask, as he again proceeded along the strange avenue.

"To the presence of Diaphernes," he replied, without looking round. "And now, no more questions. To tell the truth, thou art somewhat inquisitive for one so lately arrived. Let this suffice thee; thou art in form a man, but copper-hued, and taller than the men who walk on earth. Thy flesh too is not like theirs, it resembles rather the fibre of plants; thou hast neither bones, nerves, nor organs; and, as thou knowest, physical pain can no longer touch thee. Thy mental faculties are highly developed, and thy eager soul is alert for destruction, above all for the destroying of that thou hast called virtue. But thou canst still love; for Diaphernes will inspire thee with an affection far exceeding that of man for woman. Now, no more; follow closely."

I obeyed in silence, marvelling; and studying in the light of this new information the spirits who jostled us as we passed on.

Some walked with jaunty air, others hung their heads and beat their breast. There were even more women than men; and not a few engaged in desperate struggles. Two women I noticed in particular, fighting beneath a rugged tree. The combat was severe; and the weaker did not yield till long after she was pinned to the ground, her adversary forcing her fingers into her eye-sockets. No traces of wounds were visible, yet I could see that she endured great agony. I wondered that these could suffer pain while I could not. But I observed that they were of a red colour; and the explanation which I give now I learnt later.

The spirits in Monelpisia are divided into groups distinguished by their colouring. Those for whom a chance of redemption seems still to exist are of copper, mauve, or green, according to the degree of evil in their earthly life; those for whom this chance is rapidly fading are yellow, blue, or pink in colour; those awaiting their summons to the nethermost hell are red—wholly abandoned to vice, fighting, suffering, and loving to torture their fellow-sufferers, even as the women whom I had observed.

The Avenue of Gloom, some say, stretches to the very

orders of the Kingdom of Nature. Others deny this, but none are rash enough to attempt to define minutely its length or breadth. The trees which flank it on either side are totally different from anything found on earth. In fact, they seem half-human—they are immortal. Instead of being rough and fibrous, their bark and boughs are soft and smooth, of a texture resembling the flesh of men. These trees are instinct with active life, and seem to be swayed, like the red souls, by uncontrollable passions.

Incredible though it may seem, they wage deadly strife among themselves, using their branches as men use their arms. One I saw uprooted and hurled to the ground by the superior strength of an adversary. Many paths lead into the avenue; so many, in fact, that a plan of it would resemble a huge centipede, its legs representing the by-tracks. Down one of these Aginarius turned suddenly signing to me to follow; which I did closely, for I never trod a darker or more troublesome road. It twisted so often and so abruptly that I sometimes clutched the girdle of Aginarius in sheer giddiness. The ground was covered with boulders, which my guide carefully avoided; and I soon saw that these rocks also were furnished with arms, to ward off intruders or challenge their right of passage.

At the end of this track we were confronted by a sentinel—a thing half-man and half-wolf in form—who with a glance of ferocity demanded the purport of our errand.

"Before advancing farther, give the password, O grey-skinned soul," he said, or rather snarled, baring his yellow teeth.

"Pleasant in the sight of our master is the death of virtue," was the prompt reply of my guide.

"Who is the copper spirit cringing behind thee—has he, too, the password?" asked the monster.

"He is a soul newly come from earth. I have the right to lead him to the master," said Aginarius; and the creature drew aside to allow us to pass on.

Now that no obstacles hindered our journey we progressed rapidly, and soon reached the entrance to an enormous, cave. On either of this stronghold stood a gigantic spirit whose colour was black—black of the deepest sable. They kept time to a doleful chant with firebrands which they waved backwards and forwards in their hands.

Upon perceiving us they lowered their torches, and, bending down, peered closely at our features. I observed with a start that their faces were skeletons, wholly, fleshless, and covered with a substance resembling verdigris. When they spöke—as they did together—their voices rang hollow, and I heard the rattle of their bones, their breath was cold, and offensive as vapours from a putrid corpse.

“What seek ye, O comrades?” they cried, their torches flashing round our heads.

“Are ye come to visit the Great Hall, to hear the readings of Dragonomel—or would ye behold the passage of the red souls into the Pit?”

“I bring hither my spoils of war sentinels, my companion said, pointing to me. “This melancholy soul has but just quitted the visible earth, and Diaphernes desires his presence.”

“Then thou hast the password?” they asked; “for none may enter without our master’s express sanction. The ceremony of the Pit is about to take place, and all may not behold it.”

“Pleasant in the sight of our master is the death of virtue,” Aginarius responded as before.

The great sentinels allowed us to cross the threshold, whence a steep flight of many steps led downwards. At the foot of this staircase were heavy sombre curtains, which separated at our approach, and closed themselves behind us when we had passed.

We entered a vast hall, lighted by millions of flaring torches that hung, unsupported, in mid-air. Around this cavern, leaning against the walls, were yet more spirits, evidently awaiting some event with expectancy. In the centre was a large circular hole with precipitous sides, flanked at equal intervals with fountains of blood—not freshly spilt, but foul, granulous, and discoloured.

We took our places in the waiting circle; and a spirit of similar colour to myself whispered—

“That is the Bottomless Pit. Presently the red souls, accompanied by hellish elemental spirits, will enter through the doorway opposite.”

“And what spirits are those?” I asked. “Pardon my ignorance. I am but newly come from earth, and unacquainted with anything pertaining to your country.”

My interlocutor smiled. "I too, am a recent immigrant," he said. „Hellish elemental spirits are those created by Diaphernes himself, representing the original germs of every possible vice and disease. They performs his missions, physical and mental, on earth, meeting and combating the heavenly elemental spirits in the tissues of the mortal body or in the cells of the human brain. Here they have contro over the spirits whom they urge onward," and with whom they even plunge into the Bottomless Pit. But hush! they are coming!"

Sarcely had he finished speaking when the door opened, and a man entered, accompanied by an elemental spirit in the form of a fair woman.

They approached the brink of the chasm; and the beauty of the girl-figure dumfounded me with its rich sensuality. As they moved she clasped the red man round the neck, and fondled him; the passion in his eyes grew, and grew till he was blinded by it, and stumbling, he plunged forward into the gaping abyss.

Again the door opened, to admit the figure of a man withered and bent; and there rolled edgewise after him a golden coin of several feet in diameter. It overtook him before he had gone many yards, gliding under his arm and rubbing its polished edge against his hand. He looked upon it with glistening eyes; presently he clasped it to his breast, lavishing upon it every token of affectionate admiration. Thus engrossed, he wandered to the very edge of the Pit, till his outstretched foot found no ground to stand upon. Unable to regain his balance, he pirched over, still fondly clasping the cherished germ of wealth.

Now another figure entered, that of a woman beautifully apparelled, holding a living mirror in her hand. It reflected her face, beautiful undoubtedly, but cold and haughty; its sole expression that of vanity and love of earthly pleasure. Yet it seemed to please her, for she moved on, lost on self-contemplation, till she stepped right into the yawning; nor did she remove her gaze from it at the very moment of the awful descent.

Once more the door opened. To my amazement a card—the ace of spades—ran into the hall. It possessed olive-skinned hands and the face of a girl from the south of Europe

In her right hand she rattled a dice-box ; with her left (and I noted its exquisite form, the delicate outline of the flexibled fingers) she beckoned to one that followed. He rode a black horse that pulled and strained at the bit ; the restless eye, twitching hands, and unsteady mouth proclaimed an earthly life of dissipation. On he rode, mad to overtake the flitting, beckoning form, till he deliberately set his horse at the precipice ; and it neighed in fiendish glee as it bore him over.

Other souls followed ; and not one endeavoured to escape the open pit-mouth ; some even plunged eagerly into it, in unbridled pursuit of their guiding passions.

When the door was closed for the last time, a mighty cheer went up from those assembled in the hall, till the walls of the cavern trembled and flung back a million echoes. Then a blood-red mist rose from the opening of the pit ; and with it a stench that caused me to recoil. It was so pestilential that a cry of fear rose from the multitude ; and some rolled on the ground in terror.

I had closed my eyes ; and when I reopened them I sought in vain for the pit-mouth. It had vanished, and the space it had occupied was completely filled by a gigantic emerald throne.

Following the example of those around, I prostrated myself before it, and joined in their cry : "Have mercy on thy slaves, O mighty Diaphernes ! O great and glorious prince, incomparable in power and beauty, accept our humble adoration, we beseech thee !"

Then on my astonished ear broke a voice, sweeter and softer than the purest notes of a harp or the murmur of rippling waters. I was entranced with its soothing magic—it healed old sores, wiped away old sorrows, made the blighted soul love again as it had never loved before. It was gentle, strong, inspiring, creating the enthusiasm that can smile at Death, It made me its slave, ardent to obey it at whatever cost.

When it paused, a murmur of joy broke from the attendant spirits, a sound that grew and swelled till the ground heaved beneath us and the torch-lights quivered overhead.

"Arise, O my faithful servants !" spake the wonderful voice ; "look upon the countenance of him who loves you.

I have many things to say unto you—arise and hear!”

So we all arose, and stood with eyes upraised and meekly-folded hands. Never can the sight I then saw be effaced from my memory.

I became unconscious of the place, of the other souls of myself—of every one and every thing save only the majestic being on whom I gazed. Every breath that stirred in the crypt whispered the name “DIAPHERNES.”

His face was like that a mighty Grecian hero, with noble forehead and long eyelashes, firmly moulded chin and perfect teeth. But the eyes! Ah, who may describe them? I only looked into their clear blue depths, and placed my soul at their disposal. Gladly would I have suffered the most excruciating torments to serve his pleasure for a moment, to win one kindly glance from those most wondrous eyes. The love of man for woman, which inspires the most heroic, most self-sacrificing deeds, was as nothing to the vast love overwhelming those who stood in his presence and gazed upon his beauty.

Now, at the bidding of Diaphernes, his herald Dragonomel a spirit of great stature and stately bearing, stood forth before the throne, and commenced to read from a number of scrolls the histories of the souls newly arrived.

He recounted their earthly careers, calling them by name and commanding them to approach. This they did, in company with the emissary who had brought them hither the latter receiving a few words of praise for his faithful service from the Prince himself. With intense trepidation I awaited my summons.

“Approach, O Agonostes, soul of Paul Penruddock.”

Aginarius led me forward, and we halted close under the emerald throne.

“I have a few words to say unto thee, Agonostes,” Diaphernes said, fixing me with his eagle glance. I saw that neither eyelid nor eyeball moved, and I knew that he read me right through my inmost being. “Nay, be not afraid,” he continued gently, for in truth I shrank and swayed in my fear, “thou art no longer of mortal flesh, therefore no harm can befall thee; least of all in the presence of *me*, thy chosen master and protector.”

Reassured by his gracious words, I stood firm, and listened with rapt attention.

"Dost thou understand, Agonostes, the conditions of thy sojourn here?"

"Not wholly, O my master," I found voice to reply.

"Give ear, then, to my words," the Prince went on. "Thou knowest that thy hue is copper. This means that thou mayest yet be snatched from us; and, unless thou followest closely my instructions, in fighting against one Sagatheela, who is the agent of my Enemy in Heaven!"—(his voice thrilled with a strength of hate that attracted rather than repelled me, waking, a responsive echo in myself)—"thou wilt be torn away from this place—and from *me*! I think," he added, with a look that nearly made me weep from sheer love and ecstasy, "this would scarcely cause thee pleasure?"

Striving to restrain my emotion, I replied—

"To leave thee now, O Prince, were crueller than a thousand human deaths."

"Well spoken, Agonostes!" He smiled again so that my heart yearned towards him tenfold. "Thou art a brave spirit, and wilt be a good servant. Learn, then, thy duties. Henceforth thou art one of my emissaries among the men and women of the world thou hast just quitted. Thou shalt be ever contending for their souls against her of whom I have already spoken. For this Sagatheela whom thou knewest once upon earth, has carried her maudlin love for thee beyond the limits of mortal life. She has left Paradise of her own will and desire, and can no more enter therein unless she wins thee from me. But thou wilt scorn her, and her subtle methods employed to rob me of my rights and to poison thy mind against me—*me*, Diaphernes, whom thou lovest. Yield to her inducements once—and thou hast lost me for ever! Be firm, Agonostes, ever bold and loyal. If thou art in danger or distress, if she seem too strong for thee, cry to me for help. Trust me, and me only—else is thy work undone and thy name blotted out of my favour for ever. Thou hast heard—hast thou aught to answer?"

"This, my master!" I said, with new boldness, "my very soul thirsts to do thy will. The harder the task, the more eagerly will I perform it for thee. My love for thee is such that I can fear nothing—my whole trust is in thy strength and favour."

"Again, well spoken, Agonostes," Diaphernes said. "Give him the winged sandals, Dragonomel."

The herald came forward, and bound a pair of gleaming black sandals upon my feet.

"These," said Diaphermes, "will bear thee speedily to the scene of thy labours, and will guide thee wheresoever I would have thee go. But more than this thou must not seek from them. And now, all ye my faithful and tried servants, pay heed to the story of my new-made servant Agonostes."

The eyes of the multitude were on me ; and I realised that I had become an object of interest to all, as Dragonomel opened a new scroll and began to read.

PROLOGUE.—PART II

RELATING TO THE LIFE OF PAUL PENRUDDOCK

"HEARKEN, ye spirits !" thus Dragonomel read, "to the record of the mortal career of Paul Penruddock, henceforth to be known as our brother Agonostes. And note that it has pleased our noble lord and master to place a red mark against the name of Aginarius, for a sign of good service done on the difficult and important mission entrusted to him.

"The virtue of Paul's mother, and his love for her, were the trusty weapons of our white-faced foe from Heaven, sent to contend against skilful Aginarius. The death of this woman with her beguiling affection removed the first and greatest barrier from our path. Yet the watchful angel, with her glib tongue, persuaded the dying mother to give a cross—accursed symbol !—to her son, charging him to keep it always.

"Give ear now, ye listening spirits, and profit well !

"Our crafty emissary, Aginarius, by weaving a cunning plot, did make a mockery of his foe, breaking suddenly in upon her peaceful sway. A woman, full of subtle grace and sinister design, usurped the earthly place of Paul's dead mother.

"This woman had been wedded before. She brought with her a son, one Crawley Langton, young in years, but a tool well tempered to our master's use ; and she schemed and toiled to make this son heir to the estates that have fallen to the mortal Paul.

"Into the willing ears of Crawley Langton she poured her words of deep conspiracy. He hated Paul and liked well enough the prospect of possessing his fair inheritance. The plot grew and matured ; and, circumstances favouring, our subject was accused of theft. His protests brought no pity to his father's heart, already turned in great degree from him by subtle insinuations well introduced. He had no means of proving his innocence ; and his fervent prayers to Heaven—in which he then believed—found no answer. The plotters won by a masterpiece of subtlety ; the envoy of Heaven stood at Paul's side, thwarted and helpless. So the victim was thrust forth from his home, an outcast, at the mercy of the world of the God of Virtues !

"Aginarius was with him. Alone in a mighty city, the living visions of evil inspired by Diaphernes fixed the lustre of their dark eyes upon him. But when their wondrous beauty had made him look, and start, and look again, and the grey shadow by his side seemed surest of victory, then ever did the white watcher whisper her interference—and the end was not yet.

"With a stubbornness born of long and faithful service to our master, Aginarius persevered nobly, and whispered words of venture into his quarry's ear. So the mortal Paul took ship and sailed for other climes. In a far land he found, however, another home.

"Won by those obstinate virtues he still held from Heaven, a woman loved him. It seemed that our brave emissary was after all doomed to defeat—for woman, if not our staunchest ally, is like to prove our most unconquerable antagonist. Yet with the love that one and all of us feel for our great master, Aginarius yielded not ; and once again Chance fought for the soldier of Diaphernes.

"A fire with crackling flames, fierce as from yon pit, burst out in Paul's new refuge and devoured all. And ere he had recovered from the shock of this new misfortune, one brought him word that Death had claimed the woman who had shown him kindness. For in his weariness and struggling—all praise to Aginarius—the heart of Paul was blind and deaf to her love, and called it kindness and compassion only.

"Once more an outcast, homeless and friendless, he sought his fortunes anew.

"In a dream, worn out with toil, he fell asleep, and saw in a vision the alluring grace of the ace of spades. He woke, and fell a victim to this new passion for awhile. Yet, in a moment of misfortune, our opponent found her opportunity, When he was about to part with that accursed golden symbol, she awakened, with foolish tenderness, the memory of his dead mother. He flung down the cards, thrust away the embracing arm of Aginarius, and pressing to the side of our enemy, bade us defiance.

"The memory had awakened a yearning for his native land, and Paul returned to London. There, after many days, he met a woman with fair face and eyes, and a heart moulded after the fashion of those who serve our master. All praise to Aginarius again, he loved her ! He had obtained good employment in a mighty merchant's house ; the woman plighted him her troth, the white-faced angel wept. Then through the subtle scheming of Aginarius, Paul's former foe crossed his path again. The woman saw him ; in a fleeting glance evil met evil and invited friendship. The great house in which our subject toiled, changed hands ; and in his second master Paul recognised Crawley Langton. A scornful dismissal followed ; and in the same hour that he received it, tidings were brought him of the falseness of Alice, his beloved. Then followed the torture with which the tender God of Mercy rewards His creatures ! Despised, robbed at once of his love and of his livelihood, a prey to all the feelings of the damned, our subject cried for death—and even that was denied him. All the while the pale, weary angel wept, powerless.

"A grievous illness next came upon Paul, racking his limbs and wearing away his flesh. The slender store of money he had saved was all but gone ; and at last the faithful Aginarius convinced Paul of the perfidy of our Enemy. He yielded, and breaking the cord that held the hated cross about his neck, he hurled the symbol from him. If struck the wall, and, falling, slipped out of sight into a dark crevice of the well-worn mantelpiece. With the chink of its disappearance, sounded on the air the despairing sob of Heaven's angel.

"Out into the night, amid the Babel of men's voices, our subject took his way ; and Anginarius was ever at his side. He returned, hugging to his bosom the poison bought with bribery, procured with his last coin ; and in the darkest hour

which ushers in the dawn, he rested on the kindly supporting arm of Aginarius and raised the phial to his lips. In a hush of profound silence his voice rang out strongly—the words were glorious, and damning—

“Take back life which thou hast given me, O God ! Rather let my soul go to everlasting perdition than linger in this living hell’

“Thus did the soul of Paul Penruddock pass into our keeping.”

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Dragonomel finished ; and a vast silence fell upon the hall. Once again Diaphernes addressed me.

“Art thou not full glad that thou art here. O Agonostes?”

Every one waited in silence for my reply ; but my throat had dried so that no words would come, and I stood speechless, a very fool in my helpless shame.

Then some began to jeer, crying, “Where is thy voice, O handsome stranger?”

Others said—“Are we not good enough for thee, that we may not hear thy speech?”

Some there were, the very incarnations of malice, that clawed at me with grisly fingers, and even laid their hands upon my shoulders to cast me down.

Then Diaphernes thought fit to interfere, and shouted, in such tone that the vast hall shook and trembled with a thousand echoes—

“How dare ye, dogs of slaves, touch my servant, my ambassador spirit, who shall be a winner of men’s souls, even as Aginarius, whose praise ye have heard from Dragonomel. Fie on you all—begone !”

So the crowd slunk shamefacedly away, and left me, rejoicing, in the presence of the Prince.

THE FIRST MISSION

CHAPTER I

THE MASTERPIECE

To us poor shades who, never ceasing, toil along the gloomy groves of Monelpisia, turning past grievances over in our minds, all thoughts of time are meaningless, simply because we have no means of reckoning it.

There are no breaks in the monotonous promenading, no rifts in the impenetrable cloud which Diaphernes has been pleased to term his screen from light—in short nothing which might tend in any way to serve as an indicator of the length of our incarceration.

At first I was well enough content to brood over the injuries received on earth, to invent a hundred ingenious ways of tormenting my foes should they ever fall into my power; and to such a pitch did my overwrought feelings attain that I would frequently attack some tree, and, imagining that it was Crawley Langton, endeavour to rend it into pieces. This madness naturally attracted the attention of those around; so that I had to encounter much ribald jesting as well as the resistance of my victim; for, as I have already stated, every tree was furnished with living arms.

Still, these outbursts of fury at least broke the intolerable monotony of the timeless existence. I do not know if they were restricted to me; probably not, though personally I never observed such actions on the part of my fellows. Their behaviour never altered.

I have seen shades, the very incarnation of devilry, with long, white, ghoulish faces positively glittering with animosity towards all they met—nay, I have not hesitated to shrink behind a tree as they approached. Oh, the horror of those moments! No mere mortal can realise what such fear is. The long dark avenues, the fantastic living trees, the sighing wind, the murmur of ghostly voices appalled all alike—each one feared to look around, to see the faces of the others.

Fear itself hung brooding over us, more awful than the shadow of the grave. Can any one wonder that I exulted to receive a respite from all these hellish wanderings, and to see again the sunshine, the blue sky, the sparkling stars—and earth?

How tiny it appeared as I descended towards it, passing in my downward course thousands of other worlds, of many sizes, full of strange indentations, and grotesque mountains shaped like distorted human limbs; of dark pits of awful size, their sides crusted with a strange crimson vegetation. My descent was too rapid to give more than a passing glimpse; those red creepers may not have been the only form of life on those planets, but I saw no other.

I saw innumerable seas, not of water, but of some milky substance over which hung a thick vapour, just as clouds linger on the hill-tops of the earth. I discovered that certain of the planets were belted with this mist-film. All around me flew meteors, helter-skelter, tearing through space with a shrieking sound, hissing round like globules of fire, narrowly missing each other in the most marvellous manner, or, occasionally, plunging straight into the red-hot bosom of an antagonist with a crash that reverberated like thunder and scattered abroad myriads of sparks. - I had never witnessed such sights before, and would gladly have paused in mid-air to watch these monsters meet and batter one another until they could not part asunder; but I might not delay.

As I passed Mercury I was met by another wonder—I learned for the first time the fate of that which we call the brute creation. They have their paradises and purgatories according to the nature of their earthly lives. Here, amid expanses of undulating pasture, wander the shades of domestic animals, and others that are never known to injure man. Here, free from bondage, secure from the snares of the hunter, from all suffering or cruelty, they enjoy all the privileges of safety, liberty, and abundance. In the trees I observed birds building their nests, and fraternising, one species with another, in a commonwealth of music and brilliant colouring. Happy indeed was this animal paradise, and I was loath to pass it by, and I looked back at it above me, till it assumed the dimension of a child's marble, and was finally lost to sight.

Themonon afforded a striking contrast. It was cold, and brutally inhospitable, and chilled me with horror as I passed.

Earthly telescopes have made out and classified the ranges of mountains with their giant peaks, the empty seas and barren plains. One and all of these clever astronomers agree that the moon is a dead planet, its surface untrodden by man or beast.

If they only knew the truth !

Those stretches of bleak, cheerless ground, extending for hundreds of miles in awful solemnity, are awakened by the roar of the lion, the shrill trumpeting of the mankilling elephant ; over rocky boulders the jaguars leap as if on their unsuspecting prey, to alight on some sharp and projecting stone which wounds and enrages them ; the tiger prowls in phantom jungles, seeking to satisfy the gnawing pains of eternal hunger. The ocean beds are full of shark, gasping for the water that will never return ; crocodiles crunch their sharp teeth on unyielding stones, which in their blind fury they take for the rounded limbs of women. On the mountain-tops famished vampires and starving birds of prey vainly seek shelter and food among the leafless, death-like pines that swish and groan in a continual tempest.

I hurried past, and the sky lost its blackness, till at length I could discern a thin white line to the northward of the earth, and knew that I beheld the polar sea. Dropping on through masses of clouds, I could by degrees distinguish the outlines of land and water ; could make out the white peaks of the Himalayas, then the dazzling silverblue of the Indian ocean ; finally, I could even see feeble wafts of smoke climbing towards me from the busy hives of humanity.

Where was I going? Whither would my sandals guide me?

My devilish sandals halted at last, and set me down in London. It seemed but a few days since I had toiled along its grimy streets, rested on the Thames Embarkment, listened to the sonorous voice of Big Ben, and crept with sinking heart to my bare garret in York Road.

That name awakened anew my memories of Crawley Langton. "O Diaphernes !" I vowed, "grant me Revenge, and I am thine for all eternity !"

The room to which I was led was fitted up with all the accessories of an artist's studio. A large upright easel stood in one corner, and there were many pictures on the walls. A long table was covered with paint tubes and their mahogany

palettes, and a large brass-mounted "reflecting mirror" stood against the wall. Yet the prevailing note was hardly one of toll and endeavour. Here was a lounge rather than a workshop. Above the mantelpiece hung a life-size portrait of a fair-haired girl of great loveliness ; on either side of her the heads of two equally captivating brunettes ; but the rest of the pictures were portraits of considerable pretensions, but falling far short of the first three in drawing and colour alike. I judged the three to be the work of some master-hand, the rest the attempts of an amateur—possibly the owner of the studio, for his furniture inevitably suggested the wealthy dilettante. The floor was softly carpeted with a great rug of brick-red and peacock-blue, the chairs and lounge richly covered and luxurious. Money and ease clearly ruled here, accompanied by their usual friend, negligence.

The studio was very untidy. Books lay about everywhere. On an ottoman of Persian saddlebags lay a Shakespeare, a large-paper edition, open at one of the most erotic of the master's poems ; here, on a writing-table of olive-wood encrusted with nacre, face downwards, and dangerously near a pool of ink, lay Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*. The books the considered comfort the whole air of the place told me two things—the occupier was idle, and he was sensual—a good omen if he were to be my client.

Upon examining these volumes I found certain passages underlined, and the names of women written in the margin—"Mrs So-and-So—" 'Miss——' exactly." And there were other comments which I will not mention here, but which served to confirm my deductions.

The door opened and my client entered. I was satisfied. He was a tall, thin young man, with slightly stooping shoulders long, curly black hair, beautifully chiselled features, and dreamy brown eyes. I realised his type at once—a languid semi-mystic of the loose moral school, very dangerous among women.

The hollow cheeks and dark rings round his eyes told their tale of unhealthy carousals ; of the usual supper with the usual kind of women, and the inevitable results. This air of dissipation in itself sufficed to prove the man's nature ; there can be no confusion between the havoc wrought by overwork and that resulting from too much pleasure.

Entering the room with an expression of weariness, he flung himself on the couch, and passing his fingers—I saw at once they were white, and nervous as a woman's—through his hair, gazed in a listless manner at the ceiling.

I could read his thoughts. They ran on women, always on women. Each morning when he got out of bed he formed the resolution of sticking to his work and leaving the other sex alone. Vain resolve! The passions of his heart combated the weakness of his will, and always won. Breakfast over, he must take a constitutional, or his digestion would suffer. His will tried to argue the point, even went so far as to convince him that he was a fool, but in the end he invariably gave way—and he went out! These rambles always tended in the same direction, along the High Road, and past a certain milliner's establishment, haunted by yellow-haired girls with large eyes, who ogled him from behind the counter, or waved to him under cover of some fashion bust. The walk ended, he would return, and dabble away at some imaginary heads, but with no higher ideal to guide his brush than the memory of the giggling shop-assistants. In earlier days women had held a different position in his regard; he had respected them, but later, as he moved with the "fast" sets, he lost this respect, and sought their company with anything but honourable intentions. So, little by little, he slipped downwards, till he reached the level of cravings which must soon terminate in either madness or death.

Why had I been sent on such a petty mission? My client would need no prompting, his natural tendencies could do their work without me!

I leant against the mantelpiece and thought over this, feeling, perhaps not unreasonably, hurt that Diaphernes should give me such child's work to do, when I felt equal to, and eager for, tasks far more stubborn and intricate.

How long I grumbled thus I cannot say; it may have been an hour, it may have been five minutes. At any rate it lasted as long as my client's reverie, and was finally interrupted by a curious feeling of opposition, as if some hostile agency were at work striving to deaden my faculties. I could see no one—yet I was aware of a hand placed gently but firmly on my brow, of a sweet breath on my face—and

my first inclination was to yield to the pressure., and sleep. Those who have had the fingers of some laughing girl laid lightly on their foreheads as they were told to fall into a mesmeric trance, know what I mean.

My client suddenly spoke and invoked Hell for inspiration ! With his words, the touch fell away, and ere it returned I had realised the danger. Immediately I met it with a counter stroke, flinging out my arms and striking fiercely. They came in contact with something. Next moment, with an earnest appeal to Diaphernes, I was engaged in a terrible and persistent struggle with an evidently feminine antagonist.

Round and round that room we fought, over chairs and tables, couch and ottoman. Sometimes she gained an advantage ; and long loose sprays of hair cut into my face as she tried to force me down and away ; sometimes I held the upper hand, and strove in a madness of hatred to rend her in pieces. The mysterious battle raged the whole afternoon, neither gaining a victory, and when at last we ceased the unended contest we had a shrewd knowledge of each other's prowess, and I at least trembled to think of future meetings. I doubt whether I feared or hated my unseen antagonist most. I think the latter.

Judge then of my surprise to hear her voice as we separated, saying, "Poor, poor, Agonostes !"

This incensed me the more, for I thought she was mocking at my inability to see her ; nor did I credit her sighs with sincerity, seeing she had done her best to cast me down. All she received from me in reply to her pity was a mouthful of curses.

I turned to my client at last, and found him fast asleep, rolling uneasily from side to side. As I watched him meditatively, a brilliant idea, which I did not hesitate to put into execution, came to me.

Obeying instructions I had received before leaving Hell, I prayed to Diaphernes for a dream representing a girl of surpassing beauty—and it came.

Seldom have I seen a more seducting phantom. She came, all aglow with winsome smiles, like a flashing star, flying along the path of a moonbeam into the room where I kept watch. There was wild love in her gleaming eyes, and wicked glee in the trembling of her raven hair.

"Will I do?" she whispered, showing her gleaming teeth in a laugh of conscious pride.

I nodded, and would have kept her by my side. Her beauty distracted me, for we were both evil together. But, with a quick motion of her hand, she waved me aside, and stealing to the couch, peered into the sleeper's face; then with her taper fingers touched both his eyelids.

My client turned and opened his eyes wide, to meet the face closely bent above his own. Her beauty dazzled him. At first he gazed as one bereft of reason, or lost in a fog of thought; then a cry from his very heart broke through his lips. And as the magic she employed began to do its work, he lay enchanted on her bosom, drinking in the spectacle of her beauty with unlimited delight.

Such adoration from a human being filled me with wonder—especially from one so long lost to any sense of purity. My adversary—whose name, Sagatheela, had been suddenly communicated to my brain—was at work here; by some crafty trickery she had frustrated my design, and substituted admiration and genuine love for the passion of a lower order I had designed to provoke.

So my client lay peacefully in the caresses of the dream, and loved—and awoke, from the vision with the phantom's picture firmly stamped, upon his mind, but not as I saw her. To him she was clad in virgin innocence, and he loved her all the more for it.

Sagatheela had done this! How should I find my revenge? I reflected, chased some fantastic notion, snatched at it, and lost it—and this not once, but many times.

Methods of vengeance appearing feasible one moment would enrage me with their impracticable folly in the next. At last I cried to Diaphernes in my despair—and gained my object.

Newt morning my client did not go for his customary walk. For once, he was too wholly preoccupied to give it a moment's thought. Hurrying into his studio, he collect his painting materials, placed the easel under the great north light through which the clear light of morning was pouring, and after a slight hesitation, commenced to work on the canvas.

Under his touch grew a dimly-lighted chamber, with a

flood of moonbeams purring on the floor, and lending to the whole a weird, silvery glamour. There was a bed with the clothes half thrown aside, a man half-sitting, half-lying there, gazing, with head thrown back and features alight with love, into the face of a beautiful woman, who was supporting him in her snowy arms. The light in her eyes was such that a man would risk his life to kindle it none could witness the smile on her lips and remain impassive. The idea was one which might produce a master-piece, and the hand of the dilettante seemed inspired as he worked. He rarely left it; from morning till night, day after day, he knew no rest till it was complete, and the fair visitant of his dream smiled down at him from her easel-throne.

Through those days of toil—the first hard work he had ever done—it was I who stood by him, guiding his hand, keeping the image of the vision before his eyes. Success began to draw very near. Once again the artist saw her in his sleep, lovelier than ever, more affectionate, more real. He caught at her as she slipped away, crying that he could not live without her.

All that day he worked with the energy of despair, sick at heart for a love unrealised, a beloved one he could never hope to know except in the brief journeys through the borderland of existence which men call dreams. There was much to be admired in the dogged manner in which this young ne'er-well applied himself to his work, leaving off only for hurried meals and for sleep. He seemed to have lost all his old craving for dissipation in a manner which was incomprehensible to his landlady, a worthy old person with a keen sense of getting full value out of her lodgers, and a knack of forcing obligations down their throats.

The picture had been commenced on a Monday; it was finished on a Monday. The intervening period of twenty days, including Sundays, was a time of solid slavery without interruption.

The yellow-haired shop-girls, with their ogling eyes and carefully curled hair, their trim waists and jingling bangles, no longer exercised any fascination over my client; they, and all other women he had ever known, had faded out of his life. No one remained to fill their place, for the woman for whom he lived was a Nothing, not even a child of the

gutters! A princess, perhaps, of dreamland; beautiful as the stars in heaven—but always non-existent. Yet day by day he drifted into the mazes of this new love, and knew in himself that there was no retreat.

On the evening of the Monday which saw the completion of his picture, he invited two of the least reputable of his friends to supper. He had a sudden desire to learn their opinion of his work.

Both the young men were artists of some note. The elder, Jack Herbert, had his pictures hung, and well hung too, several years. The younger one was a prominent member of the St Ives school, and it was thought that he would obtain his A.R.A. before long. His name was Charles St Aubyn. My client, whom I have hitherto mentioned, only as "my client," I will now introduce as Ralph Webster nephew of the famous actor of that name.

When the meal was over, and the last bottle of champagne emptied. Webster took his friends into the studio. Approaching the easel on tiptoe, he turned to them with an air of mock mystery.

"I'll bet you two champs," he remarked, "you've never clapped eyes on anything so fetching as this."

Swish—the cloth was removed—and before the astonished gaze of the young men the dream-girl stood out in all her supernatural beauty. Neither of them could at first find words to utter, they were simply amazed, and, I think, frightened.

Critics as well as artists, they recognised the touch of a master-hand, not a mere dabbler as they thought their host. There was real genius here, originality of conception perfection of execution.

It was uncanny. Other hands than Webster's must have been at work—or else the devil had barrowed the studio,—for in the woman lurked all the craft of a hidden hell, the love in her eyes was a transparent window for the evil soul; the caressing hands seemed to conceal the stings of serpents; the floating hair hissed out tongues of poisonous flame, and clung to the man's esh filike the tentacles of an octopus.

It was splendid, but horrible—more than horrible—and, mocking sceptics as they were, they hesitated to confess that the spirit-world must have lent its aid to such a picture.

"Well," my client exclaimed, impatient for their verdict, "what do you think of it? To see you both standing like stuffed dummies, one would imagine you didn't like it! Perhaps it infringes your ideas of decency." He laughed—a hollow, unnatural laugh, which made his listeners look strangely at him.

Herbert was the first to speak; it was only with a severe effort that he controlled his voice.

"It is splendid, old chap; but just a trifle weird. Where on earth did you get the idea?"

"Yes, the idea?" the other chimed in, ready enough to speak once the silence was broken.

"Well," my client began moodily, kicking the heel of his left foot with an air of distraction, "you will laugh—" He paused, as if it pained him to continue. "I was inspired by a dream."

"By a *dream*?" the voices came together.

"Yes, a dream. That woman is merely ethereal. I had no tangible model. Oh, you may smile—but upon my honour it is true!"

"But some one sat for you," said St Aubyn.

"No one."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow; the champagne has got into your top-knot. You never painted that thing without a model?" The questioner's laugh was infectious and Herbert echoed it.

My client was not inclined to treat the matter as a joke; love was strong within his breast, and his picture was sacred—for her sake.

"Don't be a sceptical idiot!" he retorted irritably. "I'm not joking! I worked alone—no one was in the room but myself—and her."

"Come, come, old chap!" cried Herbert. "You vowed a minute ago that she was only a dream!"

"So she is!" Webster averred. "She was here—here!" and he pressed his fingers to his forehead, "in here, where she has remained day and night since first I saw her. Are you convinced?"

"Half and half," said St Aubyn. "The whole business is, in my humble opinion, d—queer. I can't make head or tail of it."

"This doesn't tell me your candid opinion of its merits. Well, Jack?"

Herbert coughed.

"I think, Ralph," he said at last with some reserve, "you have struck oil. A picture like that will make the committee sit up—in fact, your name is made."

Ralph was startled. "Don't humbug!" he said.

"I'm in grim earnest. I repeat, you are a made man."

"If you did it," St Aubyn put in, "all I can say is, that genius comes to some of us late in life, and there may yet be hope even for me!"

Webster looked annoyed. There had been occasions on which his word had been challenged and proved a lie. Now, however, he spoke the truth, and was angry in consequence.

"I really can't make you believe it, St Aubyn," he said with a sneer. "Perhaps you will ask my old woman. You will find her ironing in the kitchen. First let me apologise for her lack of beauty, but we don't run to pretty house-maids here."

It was now St Aubyn's turn to lose his temper, and a quarrel seemed imminent, when good-natured Herbert came to the rescue.

"Don't be fools!" he laughed. "Of course Ralph did it. I take your word for it, Ralph; so does Charlie, only he likes to be clever and play the conscientious doubter. You see, the picture is rather above your old standard; in fact, it is rather above us all—perfect, but a bit too devilish to please me. The woman is simply beyond comprehension—she is a marvellous personification of wickedness."

"Wickedness, and devilish!" shouted Webster. "Why what the deuce do you mean? She is purity and innocence itself!"

The men exchanged glances, and St Aubyn walked over to the fireplace. He could not trust himself to control his face.

"All I can say," remonstrated Herbert mildly, "is that you have a rum way of showing innocence. Why, man alive, look at her!"

"Yes," my client said, the old adoration tense and strong on his sensitive face, "I am looking, not for the first time, nor the hundredth—perhaps not the thousandth—I see only innocence."

"Where do you intend exhibiting it?"

"Exhibiting? No, I mean to keep it here."

Both men fairly leaped from the ground; the wonder of this thing was almost beyond belief.

"Keep it!" St Aubyn cried; "why, Ralph, are you stark staring mad? That picture would be the talk of London! It is worth thousands! I guarantee that no committee in the world would dare to refuse it the best hanging they could give. It is a work of genius the real unadulterated thing".

"I can't help it," snapped Ralph, mentally desiring his friends to go to Jericho—or farther. "I shall keep it. Indeed, it would kill me to send it to the Academy to be insulted by the stare of greasy, sweltering crowds."

"You will think better of it to-morrow!" St Aubyn averred. "Too much champagne and that excellent duck have wrought havoc with your digestion to-day."

"I shan't," was the reply; "to-morrow, nor the day after. That picture shall never leave this room, so help me God!"

And at last St Aubyn believed him.

When the two men had bidden Webster good-bye and were parting in the street outside, St Aubyn said: "Well, I shall never forget this night. I have seen Satan disguised as the fairest of women; I have seen the blindest, wildest love ever generated in human nature; and have read the most astonishing story of sudden genius ever developed in this world, in the face of an old friend. How it is to end, God only knows."

He spoke almost reverently; and Herbert's face was very grave in the clear moonlight.

"Ah," he replied, "God only knows. Perhaps He can still save a soul which is lost to-night, for such genius as this must come direct from hell."

CHAPTER II

A GALATEA FROM HELL

The hour of my triumph was nigh. For the hundredth time I assured myself of this as I kept in close attendance on my client. When he slept I crouched, wakeful, by his

bed, thinking over the incidents of the day, planning, for the future—or sometimes holding converse with any stray dreams that floated past the window. I saw the hooded shade of Murder glide like an assassin through the midnight air; the pale face of Envy nodded to me on its rounds; the yellow countenance of Jealousy gleamed in the moon light; the scowling visage of Hate showed its teeth in a snarl by way of greeting. Death and his attendants were not behindhand, but fluttered in all directions across the horizon. Mortals often complain of a chill down the spine, but how many of them guess that it is merely the monarch of the grave or one of his attendants who has breathed upon them in passing by? But I paid little heed to all these—for I felt that victory was at hand, and I was nerving myself for a final blow.

My client, like most lovers had dedicated many poems to his beloved. Some really held flashes of his newly-awakened genius, others were mere ramblings of a weakening intellect. Selecting one which pleased him, he sat one afternoon wrapped in a sentimental mood, repeating it over and over again, as if the object of his adoration would hear him from the canvas.

The room was warm and comfortable, with a bright fire burning in the grate and radiating its heat into all corners, the blinds were down, and the only light in the room came from the leaping flames. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked calmly away in its aggressive monotone—love, murder, and death could never concern it so long as its works were kept in order. Ralph glanced at it and saw that in another hour his landlady would bring in tea—an upsetting episode when one is living in romance at the feet of a dreamland princess.

When he had repeated the poem for the twentieth time, with his eyes fixed upon the picture, he saw, or fancied he saw the eyes glitter; and, half-frightened, he arose, with the intention of lighting the gas.

It wanted but a few minutes to tea time, and the hour had come for the fulfilment of my last great scheme. I stepped forward, when I was interrupted by an outstretched arm, and a gentle voice cautioned me, "Desist from thy evil designs ere it is too late."

I strained my eyes, but could see no one. With the exception of my client there was no one visible in the room. Without doubt I was opposed by Sagatheela. Infuriated, I raised my hand, and dealt a strong blow into the void before me.

It reached its mark. I felt its contact with her soft warm bosom, and the next moment she spoke—

“Wouldst thou hurt me with idle blows? Knowest thou not. O Agonostes, that I, like thyself, am of no earthly mould? Desist; thou addest to thy folly.”

Irritated beyond measure at her continued interference, I hurled at her a torrent of abuse in reply. But with a sigh as one in sorrow she suddenly sprang upon me, and tried with all her power to force me from the side of my client. I knew well what she desired. It was a crisis in his affairs, and one uninterrupted word from her, cleverly timed, might at such a moment shatter my counsels for ever. During the struggle I never lost my footing, and finally pressed her so hard that she yielded—departing with a cry of woe that I could not forget.

And now I breathed freely once more! The hour was mine! I looked at the picture. It was indeed a work of art. Not a lineament, a line, a tiny dimple, remained unnoted—it wanted but one thing to complete its perfection. I was now about to perform an act allowed to each of Diaphernes' envoys but once in his career, and that at a great risk, for if unsuccessfully employed it condemned him who used it to the fiercest torments of the nethermost hell. The dream was to be materialised, and allowed to walk on earth for not more than half a year, subject always to my instructions.

My client was still worshipping the picture as I prompted him with fitting words.

“Could you but live in flesh and blood!” he cried, with uplifted, passionate eyes, “I would gladly surrender my soul.”

The canvas shook from top to bottom, the easel rocked backwards and forwards, the fire burned briantly red, the curtains rustled, the wind passed under the rich carpet and made it surge like billows—and then—

Before Webster's awestruck gaze, the woman in the pic-

ture left her framework, and extending her arms, stepped down to meet him. The result was as I expected—the artist fainted.

Left to ourselves, my ally and I held a short conference—with, I fear, some light badinage, and possibly some evil wooing. Then, at my injunctions, she knelt beside the prostrate man, and rubbing his brows with her soft hand, and breathing on his face, brought him slowly back to consciousness. But on looking up he swooned again. When finally he was restored to the possession of his faculties, and began to appreciate the carresses of the woman by his side, he noticed with a start that his picture was no longer on the easel. Believing himself to be insane, or the victim of some strange delusion, he closed his eyes for a moment. But when he opened them again the picture was still absent, and in its place was the beautiful woman who held him in her arms and gazed into his eyes with love glowing in her own. He felt her hands, soft as velvet, but unmistakably flesh and blood—he listened to her regular breathing and the beating of her heart. Could he believe it? Had some girl—one of his old flames—found out his foolish passion and by means of some clever trickery performed this impersonation, and, gaining admittance to the studio, caught him napping?

No—there was not a girl in Fulham—not in all London, with such a face. It was a living reproduction of his dream, which now returned to him in startling vividness. Then he remembered his last profane utterance before the picture, and shuddered at the thought. The terror which had inspired him at the first movement of the canvas came back; he tried to raise himself and summon his voice to call for help, but his companion checked him, and reassured him with a smile. Her fingers were playing with his hair, and he felt their cool tips on his burning forehead.

"I'm utterly at a loss," he began, "to know who you are—how you came here? Why am I lying like this?"

The girl's mouth twitched with merriment, and he caught a gleam of fun in her eyes. Then she replied, in pretty, unfamiliar accents that puzzled him still further :

"You couldn't guess!" she cried, "because you don't believe in witchcraft."

The man shifted uneasily in her embrace.

"Witchcraft—no," he rejoined. "Why, who does nowadays? Witches belong to the past, and a good thing too—they were supposed to be old and ugly. But," recovering his courage, "if you had said fairies I might have answered very differently."

"And why?" laughed the girl.

"Because I am in the arms of one."

At this she blushed.

"You must not think me very forward," she said shyly "but when I arrived you were asleep, and when I aroused you, you fainted—thinking, I suppose, that I was a witch."

"No—not a witch," he said ; "and I apologise for fainting."

"Well, some horrible monster. And even now you pretend you don't recognise me. Oh, it is too bad of you." There was a suspicion of tears in the deep blue eyes.

"*Recognise* you?" he said, in growing wonder.

"Why, yes—of course, oh, Ralph, how stupid you are to-day."

Webster fairly gasped. The situation was beyond him. He could only stare. She, too, seemed surprised, but it was the surprise of hurt dismay.

"Ralph, don't be trying! Speak as you always do!"

No answer.

"Ralph, why do you look at me like that? Are you ill? Shall I kiss you?"

A faint smile crossed his face at the suggestion ; he tried to reach her lips.

"Not until you behave naturally," she said, "and less like a goose."

It was useless for him to endeavour to solve the mystery. Whenever he questioned her she became petulant, with eyes ready to overflow. So he had to be still and listen to her chatter, wondering whether she mistook him for her husband, brother, or lover, whether she was in earnest, in fun, or mad.

A hundred awkward questions crowded his mind. Where was his picture? What would his landlady say? How was all this to be explained? The girl showed no intention of leaving, but appeared perfectly content where she was, prattling to him in the half-childish fashion of lovers or honeymoon couples.

A rap at the door! Webster felt faint, but in a weak voice said, "Come in." In she came, a short, stout woman, with a ruddy face and the air of a landlady who knows how to manage young men. When she caught sight of the girl she positively gasped for breath.

"The young lady of the picture," she stammered. "Sakes alive—here have I lived for forty years and never knowed the likes of this." Then with a sudden sense of her breach of etiquette—"I beg pardon, miss, but it seems strange to an 'umble body like me to come face to face with the real live lady, and not her painted drawing."

The dream-girl accepted her apology with a gracious smile, and the woman thought her voice more beautiful than her face. She could not restrain her curiosity.

"Mr Webster!" she exclaimed, setting the tray on the table and toying with cup and saucer, "why didn't you tell me? When I sees the picture, 'Annah,' I says to myself, 'that ain't no fancy head, it belongs to a lady of flesh and blood'. And from that I gets to argueing, putting two and two together, till at last I arrives at the 'appy 'ome of Cupid."

Ralph, for the first time in his life, blushed; the girl, on the contrary, broke into a pretty trill of laughter.

"For shame, Ralph," she cried, patting him on the head with her left hand and showing a glittering engagement ring. "Why didn't you tell Mrs Gardiner? You see I know *your* name," she added; "Ralph so often mentions you in his letters."

My client's face was a study. So many strange things had happened that afternoon that he had almost ceased to be surprised. Still, he did marvel at this girl's capacity for ying. What on earth would she say next?

Mrs Gardiner eyed him with an expression intended to convey how pained she was at this want of confidence in her who had been „like a mother to him” for over six years.

Perceiving that he must say something, he muttered, sulkily enough, that "It only came off last week, so I haven't had much time to announce it yet, besides,"—this sincerely enough—"I never expected to see her this afternoon."

"Ah, miss, just like all ladies in love, you like to take your sweetheart by surprise. Bless your dear 'eart, you needn't fear for 'im; he's been hammering at nothing but

your own picture hour after hour till I wonder 'e ain't made himself bad with work. I do. Ain't it like you?" And Mrs Gardiner wheeled round as she spoke, pointing with her thumb to the easel. "Ullo—why, where's it gone?"

"Oh yes," laughed the dream, "Ralph has sold it; the man came half an hour ago. Didn't he, dear?"

Ralph assented with a sickly smile.

"Sold it—a man came 'alf an 'our ago? Why, who let him in; 'ow was it I never 'eard 'im?" The worthy woman was sorely mystified.

"You were busy getting tea, I suppose," the girl replied; "Ralph opened the door to him just as he did to me."

Mrs Gardiner nodded; there was something odd about it all, and she felt some strange influence from the visitor's beauty. Being a devout Roman Catholic, she crossed the palm of her right hand with the fingers of the left before proceeding to lay the table. Then, seeing that neither of them wished to continue the conversation, she fetched an extra cup, brought in the tea and muffins, and withdrew to her own domain downstairs to think it over.

The meal progressed. The girl poured out his tea, drew him, in spite of himself, into conversation, made him laugh or be serious as she herself chose; in fact, bent him entirely to her own inclinations.

"Where are you stopping?" he asked at length.

"At the Metropole, of course. You must call there to-morrow morning; my room is 306. Now, as you seem so stupid to-day, must I remind you that my name is Maggie Westmacoot? I wonder can you remember all this?"

With her eyes upon him Ralph was ready to acquiesce in anything she thought fit to say, her beauty had already made him her slave. In the dark pupils of her eyes he saw a thousand lights—it seemed to him a man could easily lose his soul there. The face was perfect. He looked at the delicate outline of the nose, the straight, pencilled eyebrows, the fine turn of the upper lip, but he always came back to the eyes. Even in his dream they had never seemed one-half so alluring. And there was a strangeness in them quite distinct from formation, or colouring, or expression, which he could not define, a hidden meaning which he tried to read, and failed; a suggestive mystery which

might one day be fathomed. The girl's voice thrilled every nerve in his body, awakening emotions hitherto unknown. She played upon him as upon a finely-strung instrument. Now he was a soldier stirred to martial ardour, now a poet, with wonderful lines, surging in his brain to some far off melody—now an actor—now an inventor. Whatever those eyes desired or that voice suggested found instant answer in his soul. And he loved her with a passion defiant of death.

The fire flickered its light upon her face—its flames paled before the flash of those eyes. I, watching, saw in them the gleam of a triumph! For all their beauty, the eyes of a tiger were less cruel—those of a murderer less malicious.

As time crept on she arose, and yielding to his signal, offered him her lips—at first evading his embrace with a coy movement which made him all the more eager.

"Shall I see you to the hotel?" he asked, as he helped her on with her jacket, a pretty thing of blue velvet, fitting closely to her figure.

"No, no"; then, as if to compensate for her refusal, „but you may have one more. Ah!", with a sigh and cast-down eyes, "I must be going. How long it will seem till tomorrow!"

Ralph trembled as he looked at her. What if he should never see her again; if she vanished out of his life as mysteriously as she had entered into it? What if other men should see her and make love to her? A wave of jealousy rushed through him. He hardly dared to let her go; the risk of losing her seemed so great. They were standing out in the moonlight with the beams falling upon them at their feet. Away in the distance he heard the hum of traffic, the cries of newsboys, the whistling of trains. All the common sounds seemed weighted with some grim foreboding. Her hand was still in his when a hansom pulled up at the gate, and the driver's voice awoke him to the necessity of leave-taking.

"Good-bye, my darling!" he whispered, gazing with a hungry look into her glorious eyes. "Now you have come to me, I cannot live without you. For pity's sake, tell me you are in earnest!"

"Why, of course I am," she replied, with her merry laugh.

"Should I have travelled from my distant home to Fulham, if it hadn't been for love of you? Never fear, be true to me. Once again, *au revoir*."

"Ah, my lovely fairy sweetheart!" he sighed, "your love can be naught to mine. You came like a beautiful will-o'-the-wisp, but you must not go like one. Promise!"

The cabman coughed. He was thinking of his home and his supper and was tired of waiting. The girl looked at Ralph with her great tender eyes.

"I must go, my love," she whispered, gently freeing herself from his grasp. "We meet again to-morrow!"

As the cab vanished down the glimmering road, Ralph returned to his room with a sense of desolation; all life seemed to have left him, and the emptiness was torture to his soul.

CHAPTER III

ASTONISHING INCIDENT AT A THEATRE

The evening of the 18th December 1895 will not soon be forgotten by the people, especially the men, who flocked to the opening performance of "The British Ensign" at the Cosmopolitan Theatre, Strand, W. C. The play was an absurdly sensational one, full of those situations in which nothing short of a miracle saves the hero from a horrible death.

Ever since the assassination of the great tragedian. Ernest Harford, at the door of the theatre, the Cosmopolitan had been closed. No one had been bold enough to take over the management, until an American, with the self-assurance of his nation, came forward and announced his intention of reopening the establishment with a play by the leading sensational, dramatist of the day, and a caste embracing the best talent London could afford. Seats were booked for months advance—newspapers gave vent to all sorts of speculations, some extolled the pluck of the Yankee, others gloomily prognosticated failure. Nothing else was talked of among theatre-going people; the caste was criticised, and many and various opinions were prevalent. Some

said So-and-So would be a miserable failure on a role entirely new to him ; others said the part of the heroine would have been better suited to—any other but the lady selected. How could she shine in tragedy after her career in burlesque? So the clitter-clatter of gossip ran, and one grew sick of the Cosmopolitan long before the production of the play.

On the day of the production, for hours before the opening of the doors the neighbouring streets presented a unique appearance—they were black with hosts of people. A long string of hansoms filed slowly past and deposited a living freight. The orchestra was unusually large, its conductor a man of enormous reputation. His appearance was the signal for a tremendous outburst of applause that only ceased when the overture began. But all through the first act the audience sat like stone, and from gallery to circle, circle to pit, the silence, unbroken save by the voices of the performers, hung over the theatre like an ominous cloud over some doomed city. As minute followed minute the conviction of failure increased, and with its augmentation the nerves of those acting began to fail.

It was at the commencement of the second act, just as the hero was carried off by the press-gang, that a wonderful incident took place. The theatre was almost in darkness, the lights being at their lowest for this scene, when suddenly a pale blue flame illuminated box No. 7. All eyes were instantly turned from the stage to this, and men started to see, leaning her elbow on the velvet fronting, a woman of the most entrancing beauty. Every feature of her face was revealed as if seen through a telescope—and never in their wildest dreams of beauty had any of them looked upon such a face. Every man believed her eyes were turned meaningly on him, every woman felt her beauty shrivel before this dazzling creature. Yet there were many beautiful women, in the audience ; women, too, who knew how to dress well, and did so. There was no comparison between the loveliest of them and this stranger. None of them possesses her power of compelling attention, her strangely striking presence, nor the blending of something uncomprehended with her beauty.

The effect upon the stage was instantaneous and disastrous. Interest in the play had been steadily waning, and

the actors, losing heart at the impassiveness of the audience, became embarrassed. One or two showed symptoms of breaking down, and behaving in anything but the manner expected of them, considering their long experience in the dramatic world. So when with one accord all the occupants of the pit, circles, and boxes, whose position enabled them to get a glimpse of the charming lady, burst into a suppressed murmur of wonder and admiration, the actors paused, and then, following the direction of the eyes of the crowd, were dumfounded—standing motionless and speechless on the boards. Such a phenomenon had never before been witnessed.

A perfect babel arose in the gallery and among those who were ignorant of the cause of the hitch in the performance. Cries of "What is it?" "Fire!" "Police!" were mingled with torrents of hissing and booing. The management were in despair. Everything pointed to a catastrophe of no ordinary nature. Already some of the rowdier element were standing up on their seats, not content with shouting, but jostling, and in one corner collecting in a knot, as if they meant to make an ugly rush to the front. Several women screamed. The proprietor had just made up his mind to face the footlights and implore them to desist, when the origin of the mischief disappeared. The blue light was extinguished, and with a sigh of relief he noticed that Box 7 was no longer occupied.

There was an immediate reaction. The magnetic influence gone, objects within its sphere seemed to return to their normal condition; only some of the men resolved to try and see more of the lovely woman, while their sisters and wives felt as if some baneful influence had been removed, and regarded the performance with kindlier eyes. Somehow the actors themselves seemed benefited by this extraordinary episode. They ceased to be listless and half-hearted, their blood coursed wildly in their veins, their nerves thrilled with enthusiasm; in fact, they simply outshone their own records and made the most dragging parts go with a rush. The hero lived his role, the villain forgot himself and acted with such passionate intensity that real terror was mingled with the shrieks of the heroine. There was no further doubt as to the fate of the piece. Scene after

scene met with tumultuous applause ; men yelled themselves hoarse demanding, reappearances ; women laughed and wept hysterically, and the house shook with the noise. Bedlams seemed to be let loose. No one could practise the least self-control. All acted on the impulse of the moment, that impulse being, to make themselves heard and to applaud the most realistic acting ever staged. The management rubbed their hands and thought of coffers weighted with gold 'the critics hastily tore up their earlier reports and adapted their language to the tune of the public feeling. Undoubtedly the *Cosmopolitan* had scored the hit of the season.

Some time before the house emptied—in fact, at the very moment the blue light vanished—Lord Edward Brompton, a fashionably dressed young man, left Box 6, slipped on his overcoat, and followed the retreating form of the mysterious lady down the corridor. She was not alone. Her arm lay in that of a tall, dark young man, whom his lordship recognised as Ralph Webster, once a shining light of Bohemianism in the west of London.

Lord Edward was doubly puzzled. Like many others dissolute young men about town, he hung on the skirt, of any pretty woman whom chance brought in his way or to whom he could gain access by introductions. Beauty was to him a quarry—virtue an out-of-date punctilio. Yet none of the ladies he had hitherto sought has roused his interest like this stranger, and he was mad to make her acquaintance without further delay.

To hail a hansom and bid the driver follow her was but the work of a moment. The chase was short, easy, and satisfactory. The lady parted from her escort at the doors of the Metropole, and, kissing her hand, entered the hall with a light step and a gay toss of the head.

His lordship seized the chance—his eyes pleaded for closer acquaintance, and in the glance which met his he saw no reason to despair. There was a subtle meaning in the dark depths, such as he had seen many times in the eyes of other girls—only in a less degree.

He followed his opportunity, and paying the driver passed into the splendid hall lighted up by electricity, and, filled with ladies and gentlemen in evening dress. In answer

to his request, he was conducted to a room on the third floor, and without much difficulty he extracted from his guide all the information the latter could give him on the subject uppermost in his thoughts.

"She had been there three weeks. Oh yes, he well remembered her arrival. She came by herself late one evening, and the driver was much puzzled at finding two trunks on the hansom, which he swore had never been placed there by him. This was the more impressed upon him because he was certain the man was sober, and he had never seen any one more horribly frightened in his life. The lady's room was No. 306. No, she never stayed to meals, except her breakfast, which was brought to her own room. Yes, she always went out with the same gentleman, an artist, Mr Ralph Webster. He thought they were engaged, as both wore rings. Oh yes, she was a perfect lady; rich too, and very liberal; wore magnificent jewelry—she might be a titled lady travelling under an assumed name. Miss Westmacott? Lady Westmacott, he would lay long odds, was probably more like it in reality."

The man beamed all over as his lordship slipped some gold into his hand; and he promised to do all he could to put him in the way of getting what he wanted. Miss Westmacott was not above talking to a poor porter—and he could drop her a hint as to his lordship's arrival.

The next day brought Lord Edward no luck. He saw quite a number of men walking up and down in front of the hotel, doubtless bent on the same mission as himself. The papers were full of the incident of the previous night, and clamoured for the name of the "most beautiful woman in London."

All sorts of absurd theories were going about. Several journals professed to hold the secret in their hands, throwing out hints that she was a foreign princess, whose name "for political reasons" could not be divulged at present. Others pretended that they had information from those in the know, and pointed out the coincidence of the arrival of an American belle, a girl quite out of common, who hailed from San Francisco. A few honest editors confessed their inability to answer the demand of the public, and evinced a great eagerness for the question to be settled.

All his feverish excitement manifesting itself throughout London society made my client extremely ill at ease. Since his first encounter with the dream he had been wholly captivated, and indeed, found life insufferable when out of her company. His soul was wrapt in one continual state of adoration, worshipping before the shrine of its beauty-goddes, in which it founds its life, and away from which it could no longer exist.

A love such as his, belonging to a nature of the baser sort, must have as its consort a certain amount of latent jealousy, waiting to be fanned flame, when it will not stop at crime itself. It was not long, in Ralph's case, before this jealousy was excited. One morning, on calling at the Metropole, he was informed that Miss Westmacott was out, but had left a note. With an odd sense of foreboding he opened the envelope, and read the contents written in her cold, clear handwriting:—

"DARLING RALPH,—So sorry to disappoint—but an old friend turned up last night—Lord Edward Brompton. He is such a dear boy! Now, don't be green with jealousy, I'm not going to elope with him, and am I not yours for ever? So cheer up, and look forward to to-morrow instead. With a thousand kisses,—Ever your loving
MAGGIE."

So, after all, his misgivings were correct. The girl was but a fairy princess—she had come with the moonbeams, only to vanish with the dawn.

There was a queer choking feeling in his throat. He never remembered feeling so helpless, as he called a hansom and drove moodily back to Fulham. All sorts of desperate thoughts leaped into his mind. His imagination, always morbidly keen and sensitive, brought vividly before him the picture of his Ideal close in the embrace of an old lover. How different everything had seemed an hour ago! Then the streets, with their crowds of bustling men and women, had made him laugh with pleasure, and his merriment had been a light-hearted outlet for the elasticity of youthful spirits. He had found enjoyment in the warm sunshine, the bright blue sky, and the fresh air against his face. Now all was changed. The streets were gloomy, the men silent and depressed, he even noted in their faces the tell-tale marks of the

struggle for bread. He wondered why the shabby cabman and thinly clad bootblack didn't commit suicide. The sun irritated him—it was a bitter mockery of the faded glitter of this seething Babylon, with its yellow rays. Yellow, the colour of gold—and money at the root of all evil.

"No, not money, but women," I suggested.

"Women, yes ; false, cruel, treacherous women !" Throwing back his head, he laughed a nasty, meaningless laugh.

The driver started. He had once heard a madman laugh, and the resemblance in the sound was too great to be pleasant. He shivered, and whipped his horse to its utmost speed.

When my client reached his rooms he spent the rest of the day indoors, tortured with a thousand fears, and subjected to all the racking of jealousy.

In the evening he was aroused from his lethargy by a visit from St Aubyn and Herbert. Neither had seen him since the evening already described, and they naturally looked at once for the picture. It had occupied their minds a good deal in the interim—it was bound to have a good future, and it was absurd to think that Webster would not part with it.

"Hullo, old man !" St Aubyn greeted him, as he burst into the dark room, his young face aglow with healthy exercise ; "what, all in the dumps ? Come now, never say die, or you are no artist. Is it not the principle of our noble profession to live on hope when you have nothing left to pawn ? Here, let me light your gas."

Webster growled out a not too cordial welcome, but rose from his seat at the fire and turned up the gas notwithstanding.

"Take a seat, you chaps," he said. "To tell you the truth, I am feeling uncommon bad."

"Oh, influenza, is it ? For this epidemic had been raging in the metropolis, and claiming its list of victims every week.

"No, I'm only run down—that's about it."

"Overwork," said Herbert sympathetically, his eyes seeking for the well-remembered canvas. "By the bye, old chap, where's the picture ?"

My client frowned. "What picture ?" he said vaguely and lamely.

"Why, the young lady, of course," Herbert rejoined, and

shot an uneasy glance at St Aubyn. He had seen madmen before ; and if glaring eyes and a nervous hunted demeanour had any value as symptoms, poor Webster seemed to be fairly on the way to join the number.

"It's gone," he said, breathing hard and turning his haggard face towards the easel with the set expression of a man who expects something.

"Gone !" burst from the others simultaneously. "What, sold already?"

"No, I didn't say it was sold, merely *gone*. Please drop the subject, my dear fellows ; it's a painful one."

The men took him at his word, and wondering more than ever, adroitly turned the conversation.

"Heard the latest, Ralph?" Herbert asked as he helped himself to his host's fine Havannah cigars.

"No," was the listless answer, "what is it?"

"Why, all the world is expatiating upon the personality of the loveliest woman in Christendom. It seems she appeared like some fairy princess at Box No. 7 of the Cosmopolitan on the reopening night. By Jove, old chap—you are ill. Here, out, out, St Aubyn, and get some brandy—hot stuff, mind ! He's going to faint or something."

Herbert, downright frightened, lifted the inanimate form of his friend from the easy-chair where it was crouched, lad it upon the sofa, and unbuttoned his collar. It was not for some moments after the return of St Aubyn with the restorative that my client regained consciousness and his face looked so worn and wild that Herbert thought of sending for a doctor.

"For God's sake don't !" Webster pleaded, walking with the help of the others to his chair by the fire. "I've a horror of doctors, and attacks like this are not uncommon. I inherit a weak heart from my mother—she died of it—perhaps I shall, some day. As I told you, I have been seedy for the past day or two, and excitement tends to make me feel faint."

Nothing more could be done, so the visitors resumed their seats, and steering clear of all recent topics of conversation, spoke of their own affairs. When they left him a, ten o'clock, Ralph was much better, his temperature was almost normal ; and his hearty good-bye showed that he appreciated their kindly efforts.

"I will look you up in the morning, Ralph," Herbert shouted as the gate swung on its hinges.

My client replied that he would be glad to see him, and then as the others walked away, he returned slowly to his room, staying a few more minutes by the fire, and then going to bed, though not to sleep. All night long he tossed to and fro, uselessly trying to obtain relief from the Inferno in his brain. The moon, round, bright, and mocking, poured in its ghostly rays upon his pillow. The furniture creaked, the sheets irritated his skin. He heard footsteps outside, and then could have sworn that somebody stealthily crossed the room. Then, to his horror, he felt rather than saw a hideous and bestial face peering at him through the window-pane. Again, a clammy perspiration broke out all over him, as something—it felt like a dead hand—crept up the bedclothes, chilling his limbs and drawing ever nearer to his throat. Just as he believed it was about to seize him, it vanished. Then there floated through his worried brain visions of his Ideal. He saw her in a hundred dear familiar attitudes, and feasted on the love-light in her eyes. Just as his bliss seemed secure, a violent change would take place; her liking turned to scorn, and she would laugh at him from the arms of another lover. So with all this series of troubled wanderings, sleep never came, but jeered at him from a distance, and the welcome morning sun found unrefreshed, and ripe for any deed of madness.

With assiduous attention I had waited by his couch all night long. I had striven to depict to him many of the scenes I had witnessed in Monelpisia; and, be it said to my credit, I succeeded in my object, so that he crept out of bed, at eight o'clock, a mere wreck of his own manhood.

Catching him by the arm as soon as he had eaten a hasty breakfast, I hurried him down the narrow path out into the Fulham Road. I had more power over him now than ever before. My hand was on his wrist as he hailed a Charing Cross 'bus, and covering the ground at a run, jumped in while it was in motion. I laughed. I remembered how he had promised to be at home to Herbert. It was a good omen. I hoped that my anticipations of the scene at the hotel would be reached to the full.

The porter eyed him anxiously. He was an old soldier

himself, and like all smart men of his profession, he resented unshaven chins. This toilet function my client had forgotten to perform, and he entered the Metropole in anything but a presentable state.

"Miss Westmacott was engaged—Mr Webster wouldnt mind waiting?"

"Was any one with her?" My client's fierceness made the man stare; he, too, noted the restless symptoms.

"A gentleman." His reply sounded more evasive than he meant it to be.

"A *gentleman*?" The wildness in Webster's eyes appalled him, and he shrunk from the tightening grasp of his hand.

"I cannot show you up, sir," he said stolidly, pocketing nevertheless the half-sovereign Webster slipped into his hand. "I had strict orders from the lady to say she was engaged."

"Who is the gentleman?"

Webster's breath was full in his face; for once the soldier's instinct failed, and he replied, "Lord Brompton."

"Lord *Edward* Brompton? Impossible—the biggest black-guard in London! My good man do you know what you've done?"

The porter shifted from one foot to the other somewhat sheepishly—he had the greatest dislike to a „scene."

"Hush, sir," he pleaded, "some of the gents will hear you, and, begging your pardon, is isn't right for me to listen to you calling his lordship names."

Just at this moment a trim young lady entered the hall and whispered something to the porter.

"If you will wait here for a while, sir," he said, turning to my client, "I will deliver your message to Miss Westmacott." And before he heard Webster's reply he was whisked off by the girl.

With a madman's cunning, my client, left for the instant alone, and yielding to the pressure of my hand, leaped up the main staircase two steps at a time, and steered his course for room No. 306—his Ideal's room.

At the threshold he paused, and distinctly heard the conversation within. A man's voice spoke.

"Upon my word,"—he was using the loud drawling tone which certain "Society" men at that time thought fit to

adopt—"you are awfully good fun! I wonder you don't kill the young man to whom you are engaged."

"He's a prig and can't stand a joke!" she replied in a saucy tone. "Oh, *he's* not like my Lord Brompton!" There was a jingle of bangles after this as if the wearer was trying to repel some bold advance of her companion, and it conveyed a sinister meaning to my client. His pulse throbbed fiercely as his fingers closed round the handle of the door. He only waited to hear the man's bantering accents, "It's really unkind of you, my pretty one!"—then, with a savage whirl, he sent the door flying back on its hinges, and staggered into the room.

The inmates arose from their seats. Lord Edward, disentangling his arm from the girl's waist, faced his angry opponent with a white face in which the cowardice of his nature was clearly displayed. The girl maintained an attitude of irritating calmness, and her eyes met those of Ralph with an air of cool inquiry.

"Will you be so kind, Mr Webster," she said in chilling tones, "as to explain this unwarrantable intrusion into my private room? I thought you were a gentleman, but I see I have made a mistake."

My client shook with passion, his voice came in thick gasps—

"And I was mistaken too. I thought you loved me—and now I know you were only playing with me, playing——" He broke down in agitation—there was pathos enough in his voice to have melted the heart of most earthly women. But this Thing was not of earth, and she laughed.

"Yes," she said calmly, allowing him the full benefit of her glorious eyes. "Oh yes, I quite admit it. I had nothing better to do, and a fool in love is always most amusing—or is it your 'Bohemian' disregard of etiquette? The man who forces himself thus into a lady's private room is not usually tolerated in good society, is he? At any rate, I have no desire to retain your friendship or your ring." She took a glittering circle from her left hand and tossed it carelessly to the wretched man.

"Well," he continued mercilessly, "at least have the goodness to leave my room. Or must I call upon Lord Edward to assist you? I have no doubt he will be pleased to do so."

His lordship acknowledged this compliment with a rather

sickly smile, for he was no athlete, while the artist's spare lithe figure seemed to promise some power of resistance.

At the mention of Lord Edward's name my client's attitude changed. He had been a spurned, miserable lover ; he was now an infuriated avenger. With a spring like a wild beast he hurled himself upon the terrified nobleman, who, in trying to keep him off with a chair, was hurled against the wall, and in a moment lay at the mercy of his antagonist.

The eyes that glowed over him showed no signs of quarter. In his deadly peril he looked despairingly towards the beautiful origin of the quarrel, as if appealing for her help, or at least her sympathy.

And now came his surprise. The face which had leaned against his cheek a few minutes before had undergone a curious change. It had been full of a piquant grace, shy mirth, bashfulness ; it was now cold and hard, and the eyes filled him with dismay—they were cruel, steely points of malice.

He had, however, short time for observing her. The madman's fingers closed on his throat with a grip of iron, choking his cries and sending the blood surging to his brain. He was aware of a bursting sensation in his head, he felt himself raised from the ground, he saw through a mist the triumphant face of his enemy, and then—crash ! crash !—he saw and felt no more. His skull was smashed to splinters, and a sickly mass of blood and brain and hair clung to the sharp edge of the bright fender.

Webster leaped to his feet. He "saw red"—he was filled with the mania for killing, he wanted more of the sticky, precious red fluid which trickled over his hands. He groped for the poker, and with it sprang at the woman. Snarling like an angry tiger, he brought the heavy implement down on her head with a terrific crash. But—marvel of marvels—she offered no resistance, did not wince at his attack, but received the blow with a tantalising smile of mockery, while in his horrid rage he battered again and again at the changeless smiling face. On —and on ! No, he would never stop ! Smash, smash ; but still she smiled, and showed no sign of pain or fear. With the perspiration streaming down his face he worked convulsively, his chest heaving, his arms rising and falling without cessation, he kept doggedly on at his horrid task—and still she smiled !

It was a grisly sight that met the eyes of the two policemen summoned at last by the porter—a man's corpse with its head battered to a pulp lying beside the fender, and the maniac scattering bits of marble hither and thither with the meaningless blows he rained upon one corner of the mantelpiece. But of the lady of the room neither they, nor others after, saw anything.

She was gone; only a superb portrait of her remained, supported on an artist's easel, near the window.

There were many strange and gruesome stories current in connection with the Metropole murder, and much ingenious theorising. But to this day no one has ever learned what became of the beautiful lady in Room 306; only the wonderful picture by the mad artist, Webster, is still to be seen in the Guildhall.

My sandals bore me away, and I knew that my first campaign was ended. A right royal welcome had I indeed, when fresh from my triumph, I bowed low at the emerald steps of the throne of Diaphernes.

THE SECOND MISSION

CHAPTER IV

THE HAUNTED SIGNAL-BOX OF HELVERTON

THE 4th of November 19—was as wild a night as one could well wish to see. The rain fell in icy sheets, while the wind rushed with swoops over hill and dale, carrying away sign-boards and chimney-pots in its mad career, and making the pedestrians cling to the nearest object within reach. Overhead, the sky was covered with black clouds, which occasionally parted to show a glimpse of moonlight, and closed together again, shrouding the universe with a deep pall.

On such nights Nature calls to the sea, and waves arise, grow and wax mighty, till they assume the dimension of mountains with crests of foam, roaring and seething to their work of destruction. Many a good ship laden with its living freight falls beneath those charging walls of green, and is dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks.

But to-night Death walks not only on the sea, nor is the wail of the dying confined to broken barques; the wind shows its hand within the coast lines, and rooting up trees, hurls them in all directions as if they were slender sticks. Some fall by the roadside, others are swept in the flood of rivers until they are piled in gigantic stacks from bank to bank. Death is waiting by the sign-post which totters in the blast: by the gap in the hedge made by the crashing elms, by the lone church where the weathercock clatters on the steeple. He is everywhere, riding on the storm, plying his sickle when and where he will.

Very near does he seem to the engine-driver as the line leads him across an open tract of country, with nothing to protect him from the elements or save the lives of those behind should the train leave the metals. Sometimes, as he rushes on, he fancies the great engine is being forced aside, that the wheels no longer grip; he almost shuts his eyes not to see the sickening fall. Then he awakes to find that the train is still running safely, that the passengers are yet unhurt; that Death was only telling him what he could do if he chose. "Providence is with me," he thinks, and then strains make out that peculiar-looking object that seems to loom ahead just where he must pass.

"What do you make of it, Bill?" he asks his companion.

"My God!" cries Bill. "Pull up, we are in it."

Crash! a chorus of cries and the train stands still, but not all of it. A few carriages, toughly shaken by the collision, have become detached, and slide, not along the metals, but over the embankment, down into the sullen waters of the river. The engine-driver has short time to say his prayers, his iron horse is twisted and tortured out of shape, and he himself mangled beyond recognition.

This is but one of the horrors of the night in question; there are many others in all parts of the country visited by the tempest.

Folks in Helverton, a village on the Great Western Railway within a score of miles of Bristol, say it is just such a night as the fourth of November five years ago, when the Cornish express met with its appalling disaster.

The accident, due to the carelessness of a signalman had taken place about a hundred and fifty yards from the Helver-

ton Tunnel, within a stone's throw of the White Hart Inn, the inmates of which had been awakened by the cries of the sufferers. Strange to say, the author of the catastrophe had vanished, and, despite a most vigilant search by the police, was never found. Public opinion therefore credited him with the murder of some fifty passengers.

This was five years ago.

The Helverton signal-box commands on one side a stretch of flat country only relieved from absolute ugliness by the silvery windings of the river Askon ; on the other side it is confronted by the yawning mouth of Helverton Tunnel. The wind rages about it, dashing sheets of rain against the window with threatening violence ; and John Adams, the man on night duty, shivers uneasily as he turns to a much-soiled novel, in order to forget the storm. There is something uncanny in the beating on the glass the creaking of the timber, the whistling of the wind. It enforces upon him the sense of his isolation, with no prospect of relief for ten long hours. He is a strong-minded man, well able to do his work ; but it is his first experience of the Helverton box, and he does not like it.

"It's absurd," he mutters, "yet I could swear some one is here with me. I can feel him at hand though I can't see anything.

Every time the wind howled, the feeling of a "presence" became more definite. Once or twice he heard a gentle breathing ; once his heart turned cold at the sound of a snore. There was no longer any doubt—some weird presence haunted the cabin.

Human nature suggested flight, the man's stern sense of duty bade him stay—and he stayed. Glancing at his watch he perceived that it was close on midnight—no train was due for three hours. He determined to brew himself some coffee and have a meal. Thanks to a thoughtful wife, he could sit down to a spread of bread and meat, with cheese as a second course, while the flame of his spirit lamp made his kettle sing.

In spite of his endeavours to feel comfortable, he could not get rid of the idea of some ghostly visitant.

"If nothing more happens," he assured himself, "I can stick it all right."

But something did happen. It wanted two minutes to

twelve—of this he was strangely certain, when to his horror he saw the shadowy outline of a man's face pressed against the window-pane, looking into the room with lurid eyes. It was a cruel face, long and thin, with a high retreating forehead and heavy eyebrows. In the intensity of his fear he noticed every detail of the horrid countenance, even those of colour and shape.

The ghostly visitant was not looking at the signalman, but at something else; and, following the direction of the eyes, Adams saw, with another start, a man clad like himself in the company's uniform, sitting opposite him in a sound sleep. The door swung silently open, admitting a cold blast of wind, and a sprinkling of water. The sinister man from outside approached the table with a cat-like tread.

Adams waited, too fascinated to move or cry out. All resistance had died away out of him, and the bright wicked eyes of the intruder held him glued to his chair. Nearer and nearer the shadowy figure came, until it was within a few feet of the table. Then it paused, placed one hand inside the breast of its coat, fumbled about for a second or two, and drew out something which glittered. Still the man at the table slept on, and the other crept closer—closer—so close that he could have touched any part of his body. It was only when he prepared to strike that the other awoke, glanced over his shoulder, and uttered a cry that froze the blood in Adam's veins.

The struggle that ensued was brief and conclusive, and the murderer, still dripping with the rain from outside, coolly cleaned his knife on the dead man's coat, and after mopping up, with a red handkerchief, the blood that had been spilt, sat down, evidently to think out his next movements.

It was then that Adams noticed how curiously his left hand was tattooed, bearing the device of a stag's head with the skull and cross-bones underneath. He had barely time to observe this when the shrill whistle of a train broke upon his ear.

Mechanically he glanced at his watch and trembled. Horror was being heaped upon horror, for this could be no earthly train!

Nearer and nearer it came; the whistle sounded louder

and louder—he could even hear the rumbling of the wheels as they hurried over the metals. He calculated that it was within a hundred yards, when with a loud shriek it rattled past the box, and the vibration made the floor quiver. Another moment and it would be in the tunnel. But hark ! there is a sound of crashing, the falling of a heavy body—a significant bump, bump, terrible shouts for help, and then the final horror—the loud splash as the carriages are precipitated into the river below. It is so ghastly that Adam's fortitude at last gives way, and he loses consciousness !

How long he remained helpless he could not accurately say—but when recovered it was 12.30 by his watch. The murderer had vanished, and with him all signs of the crime—and Adams, shaken yet relieved, anxiously awaited the morning, intending to see the last of Helverton once his duty was over. The storm raged till dawn, and the first light broke over a scene of fearful destruction—the fields by the river resembled a great lake dotted over with the débris of timber, one could not say where the shallow water ended and where the deep began.

Adams gazed upon the desolation with a prayer for his wife and children upon his lips—for their cottage was dangerously near those meadows and below the level of the river. How slowly his watch ticked on ! It was the longest night he ever knew. Each minute seemed an hour, and each hour seemed a day, and his time not up yet !

One o'clock, two, three, four, FIVE ! The last hour seemed longer than all the rest put together, and he could have cried with joy to see Bill Black's lantern flashing through the gloom, and to hear his heavy, lumbering step on the gravel path. There was no disguising anxiety of his greeting nor the feverishness of his handshake. Sturdy Bill Black wondered if Adams had gone mad.

Adams did not speak of the night incident, but breathlessly asked after his family, and uttered a fervent "Thank God !" to hear of the safety of the cottage. "Though it was a precious close shave ; your missis," said Bill with solemn emphasis, "could heave a bucket into the water, it lies so nigh her door."

"Thank God she didn't get heaved in herself," and Adams broke into a weak, helpless sort of laugh that frightened

his companion. The strain on his nerves had told a last, and with much-needed relief, the reaction had set in with hysteria. Black, not being an emotional man himself and also ignorant of what his friend had gone through, thought it odd, and only muttered a few awkward words of consolation. Adams, however, seemed to resent even this, and walked out of the ill-omened box, shaking his feet as if to free them from the murder-tainted dust, as he walked down the railway track.

As he crossed the bridge which spans the river at its widest part, he met his wife with the two children, and there was love in her eyes, such as he had never seen so clearly since their courting days.

"You look mighty cold, honey," she cried, and she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"It has been cold all night," he replied, so solemnly that she stared at him wonderingly.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"Nay, sweetheart, but much to be thankful for; you and the kids are safe, what more can I want;"

But the woman was not convinced. While he warmed himself before their cottage fire, his meal standing steaming on the table, she plied him with the same questions.

"Come now, honey, what's up? You look that woebe-gone, you might have seen a ghost!"

Adams started and shivered so visibly that she laughed. "Well, Jack," she cried, "tell me whose ghost it was, and what it did, for upon my word I believe you have been scared!"

Adams crouched closer to the fire.

"If women minded their own business," he muttered, ungraciously enough, "the world would turn round faster." There was another peal of laughter, then with feminine mutability Mrs Adams flung herself upon the bed and commenced to cry. Jack could not stand this.

"Cheer up, lassie!" he said, with something like a sob in his own throat; "If I was rough, I'm sorry, but I'm a bit out of sorts. You see I was worrying all night about you and the kids, thinking of that flood rushing through the valley, knocking down houses and drowning every one. What was more natural on such a night? You should just

have heard the wind playing Old Harry round that box." He paused and turned round to the food with a show of appetite that would have contradicted his words, had it been genuine ; but she saw at once that it was assumed to please her, and she smiled.

"But that ain't all, Jack," she broke in, "and I'm dying to hear the truth. Come, tell me !"

The man ceased eating, and spoke with the slowness of his class :

"Well, suppose I do, what good will it do you? and you won't believe a word I say !"

This she gainsaid, but still her husband hesitated. He had a horror of being thought a fool, and there was something decidedly incongruous in a ghost story this sunshiny morning. It was only when he saw his wife was getting angry—and she had a temper—that he at last complied. With an effort to be fluent he told her what had taken place. At the end of his rambling speech she cross-examined him like any lawyer. Poor Adams succumbed to the test and bungled badly ; nevertheless, she was satisfied of the truth of his story, and, to his relief, did not ridicule him. On the contrary she remarked, as he lay in bed in a corner of the room with the blinds down, that she had "a good mind to sift the matter, there's something in it."

These were the last words he heard before he fell into a sound sleep, which lasted unbroken until she awoke him late in the afternoon with the welcome tale of tea.

By her advice he told his story to no one but the station-master, a shrewd, silent man, who heard him out and shut him up with the ironical observation, "Don't be such a fool again," but he coupled it with the hint to "Keep his mouth shut, and not be afraid, for he wouldn't see it again till the same night next year,"—which made Adams marvel all the more.

One thing, however, he resolved, with all the stubbornness of his nature—to keep a sharp lookout for the pale man with the tattoo marks.

CHAPTER V

MR JONES, SHIPOWNER AND FRIEND

The Hotwell Road, Bristol, still contains many houses interesting to those who are fond of the relics of eighteenth century architecture.

Not far from Cumberland Basin stands an old-fashioned public-house, once the resort of George the Third's Jack Tars, and the scene of many an awkward brawl—now the respectable headquarters of merchant skippers and their cronies.

The proprietor, Jabez Wheeler, has withdrawn from his parlour, yielding it with the best possible grace to David Jones, one of his oldest patrons, and a man whom he desired to please at any price. Jones is the owner of a fleet of small vessels trading between London, Bristol, and Cork with mixed cargoes. It is with the *Maria Jane*, a barquentine still called « stout » by sailors who like the word and do not mind applying it to iron plates thick with rust, that this story deals. Twice the Board of Trade has pounced on her and threatened to condemn her unless she is more carefully loaded and kept in better order. Yet the boat has always managed to sail on the appointed day with her preposterous crew of seven, her heavy cargo, and her honest skipper—a man a trifle old, perhaps, for the wearying life afloat, but with a character unspotted as sails of the smartest yacht. Some knowing ones have been heard to throw out hints to the effect that the *Maria Jane* was well insured, and that a few pounds would please old Jones more than the safety of his employés. Others—but of course there are spiteful fellows everywhere—growl out anathemas over their grog, and prophesy a fate for the *Maria Jane* like that of the *Susan Grey*, which sank with all hands off the Manacle Rocks, one moonlight night when the sea was still as a millpond. She too had belonged to David Jones, and he had moved into a larger and finer house after the disaster.

The private sitting-room ceded for the evening to David Jones is similar to the parlour of most houses of the style. There are the same cheap prints in tawdry frames—Nelson

dying in Hardy's arms over the mantelpiece, Kitchener of Omdurman between the windows, and a few coloured heads of burlesque actresses ; a round table with a red and blue check cloth, a horsehair sofa with a white antimacassar—and a general frowsiness of atmosphere.

The only occupant of the room at this time was Mr Jones himself, sitting before the fire, his chair tilted back till it seemed on the verge of collapse, and a much discoloured pipe in the corner of his mouth.

Few people would be favourably prepossessed on an introduction to him. There was a selfish glitter in the prominent blue eyes, and a coarseness amounting to brutality in the full lips and thick nostrils. By his dress he would pass muster as a well-to-do tradesman upon whom one had better not venture to play tricks. Drawing an envelope from his pocket he slowly pulled out of it a piece of note-paper and perused the scrawling caligraphy:—

“4 TENNISON STREET, LONDON, S. E.

“*Friday, March 20th, 19—*

“DEAR MR JONES,—Your letter to hand and contents carefully considered. I will meet you at the place you mention at the time named. Cannot, however, agree to proposal on terms stated, as the risk so great.—Yours faithfully.

“THOMAS B. HUMBER.”

“What a stomach folks have for money !” Mr Jones soliloquised between puffs. “I consider £100 ample for one in his impecunious state, besides, he’ll get a few pickings from the ship. Why should I give in to his grumblings when there are lots of poor devils would jump at the offer of £50? Why——”

He regarded the lamp on the left with an angry stare, and apparently annoyed at its inability to answer him, went on with increasing irritation :

“He strikes for more because he thinks he has the pull over me and could send me to the dock with a word. Bahs! the pitiful fool forgets his own calendar. A pretty night’s work that was! I and I said that’s the man for me, and I was right ; I always am in speculations. The devli is a better friend than God, at any rate”—and the man chuckled

hoarsely—"he hears when I use his name, and t'other don't."

The humour of this remark was too much for Mr Jones, and he laughed long and loudly. The idea of the devil's help suited his mood—he loved to boast of the good under between himself and Diaphernes.

His merriment however, was interrupted. A knock came to the door, and in response to his invitation a stranger entered

The newcomer was a tall man with fair hair and a cadaverous face—a face noticeable for its cunning and the cruel glint of the eyes. His mouth and chin were hidden by a moustache and beard of the same undecided dust-colour as his hair. He had nothing of the slight "swagger" so usual in seamen, though his clothes indicated the ocean as his profession. On the contrary, a certain ceinging air which would have repelled all honourable men, pointed rather to the tradesman. He entered the room in the doubtful way of one who expects an important but distasteful interview, and glanced at Mr Jones with furtive restlessness.

"Sit down, my friend," said the latter. "I suppose you have just arrived from London. Upon my word, I envy you being in town, it's so dull and sleepy in this old city."

The sailor drew a long breath, as one anxious to get through an unpleasant task, and replied, "Yes, I have only been in Bristol an hour. You got my note?"

Jones eyed him steadily. Then puffing out a cloud of smoke and moving so as to allow the new-comer a share of the warmth, he signaleed to him to be seated, and made answer :

"To be sure, it came by the morning post. Let me see "—and after a slight pause during which his eyes never left the other's face—"you didn't seem satisfied with the sum offered—eh?"

The sailor shifted uneasily, more at the stare than at the words.

"There's my wife and children, Mr Jones," he muttered. "Who's going to provide for them? And you must allow, sir, the game is risky."

"I'm glad you're so provident,"—his host spoke with unconcealed irony—"your wife and children must be compensated. But £300 is a lot of money. Many men would do the job for half."

He watched the effect of the words—it was not what he expected. The sailor had recovered his presence of mind, and, now that the ice was broken, called up all his native craftiness.

"You are right, sir," he replied with an extra amount of sulkiness, "many would do it for half, yes, a quarter. But," he lowered his voice impressively, "there are very few who know you as well as I. We are such old friends."

Mr Jones coloured—the rogue knew how to play his cards. There had been too many shady transactions between them to make it safe to throw him over now, and the fellow was sharp enough to appreciate the situation.

"You would blackmail me if I refused, then?" Mr Jones went on. "Do you add that to your other accomplishments?"

The sailor, feeling victory was within his grasp, was not to be balked.

"Blackmail's not a nice word," he observed, "but if you force me, I don't say to it. You daren't clap me in prison, and I'm not afraid of being murdered."

"Or of murdering either—eh?" asked Jones.

The man muttered an imprecation, his skin turning three shades paler.

"Oh, come," he exclaimed, with a pitiable attempt at jocularly, "don't harp on that old subject. It's worn threadbare; besides, you've no proof!"

Mr Jones smiled indulgently. He liked to touch upon people's sore points—it flattered his vanity.

"Well," he said, refilling the other's glass with whisky "I don't want to quarrel; let's sat £130."

The sailor frowned. "Won't do," he muttered. "It ain't worth the risk, and you'll score too much—you, who have only to sit still and wait."

"I shan't give a cent more,"—Mr Jones spoke with decision—"and if you won't do it, I'll go elsewhere."

"Say £200, and I'm your man."

"No, £130, and any swag you can take from the wreck. The captain may be of use in that way, he carries a few valuables."

For several minutes there was a solemn silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock. Both men thought they were by themselves in that tiny parlour where the flaring

firelight casts grotesque shadows on the walls—shadows resembling bodiless heads, and headless bodies—yet, standing in the uncertain light by the chair of the sailor Humber, one hand resting on his shoulder and the other pressed against his forehead, was a tall, gaunt, copper-coloured form, very weird and sinister. Every now and then it bent over the man's head and breathed evil words which sank into the ready blackness of his soul. And that form was mine—Agonostes, humble servant of Diaphernes.

And at my instigation Humber faced his tempter with the reply :

"I'll take it, then, on condition the money is paid in advance."

"No no, my worthy friend," replied his host, "what guarantee have I that the work would be done after?"

Humber rose to the occasion. "And what guarantee have I that you'll keep your part of the bargain after I've done the work? Come now, Mr Jones!"

The man he addressed smoked and meditated awhile. "I've hit it!" he said at last. "I give you £50 in advance and the rest whenever you come back with the news."

After some further parleying—for my client was loathe to fall in with this proposal—the agreement stood as follows :—

At ten o'clock next day Humber was to accompany Jones to the County Bank, and there receive from him £50, and on the ensuing Monday he would embark as mate on board the *Maria Jane*. He would have plenty of opportunity before Wednesday to form a friendship with the man who would have charge of the wheel that night. The captain, an officer with a reputation for seamanship, and a man of strict integrity, was fond of a glass or two of grog, so he could make all safe in that quarter. The fate of the ship then would be in his hands—his own must depend on the weather, the nature of the vessel's injuries, and his own powers of swimming. When Mr Jones pocketed the insurance he would receive the remaining £80.

Humber clinched the bargain with a couple more glasses of whisky, and then, somewhat hazier in the mind than he had been two hours previously, he bade his host goodbye, and steppel out into Hotwell Road. The sky was bright with stars, and the clear moon augured fine weather. The air also was crisp and dry.

The man halted for a moment beneath the electric light, and stooped to fasten his bootlace. A passer-by glanced casually at him, and uttered a sudden exclamation. Humber looked up in surprise to meet the horror-stricken gaze of an absolute stranger. Yet, filled with a vague foreboding of peril, he hurried off.

"D—n !" was his comment. "What a fool I was to let that Jap tottoo me ! I wonder if my hand's given me away. Yet, who the devil could the fellow have been—and why did he stare?"

CHAPTER VI

THE BEGINNING OF THE VOYAGE

There is nothing picturesque about this ship, with her dingy black hull, her yellow masts with their rain-sodden rigging, and the ropes lying strewn about her deck. On her stern you see in white letters the name, "*Maria Jane*, Bristol."

If you go a bit farther and descend into her narrow sweltering hold, you will find that the cargo—half as much again as she is registered to carry—is packed so close that it would be well-nigh impossible to wedge in another case.

Her crew should number ten at least, and she carries only seven—not including a stewardess, the cook's wife, and a stowaway. Her list ran—captain, Joseph Thomas ; mate, Thomas B. Humber ; boatswain, Luke Radnor ; cook-steward. Carl Herineman ; able-bodied seamen. Fiel-ding and Gunter ; ship's boy, Wilkes. There were also the stewardess, Elizabeth Heineman, and William Hardup, stowaway, of whom more anon.

The nine persons on board are quite enough for her scanty accommodation in case of disaster—for she possesses one crazy boat and three or four life-belts the boat is sticking in the chocks, for the ropes are new, cheap, and nasty to handle, and she could scarcely be launched at less than half an hour's notice.

Bearing in mind the owner's instructions, Humber first set to work to curry favour with the captain. It was not easy. The skipper, a bluff, honest seaman, with sterling qualities of his own and keen appreciation of the like in

others, took an instant aversion to the lanky mate, and showed it. But there are people in this world who will not take offence. Humber was one of them. He took the skipper's snubs with saintly forbearance, varying the game by bullying the crew on the sly.

He discovered that the boatswain would be at the wheel just at the time when the vessel should be off the Lizard, and he laid his plans accordingly.

The weather on Monday was ideal. The *Maria Jane* passed slowly down the Channel, leaving the Holmes and the dangerous North Devon coast behind. Everything seemed to augur a prosperous voyage.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday passed uneventfully, the *Maria Jane* running merrily with stretched canvas before a gentle nor'west wind, her bows scarcely rising and falling in the soft green swell. About noon on Wednesday, the wind began to increase, and a few clouds crept up black round the horizon. Sails were reefed, hatches battened down, and the ship made as ready as possible to meet the coming storm, while the skipper, with the grim look of the warrior upon his face—the look that only those who have fought and conquered the elements can wear—paced the little slippery deck prepared for anything.

One only needed to glance at his strong face, the set mouth and square resolute chin, to recognise a man bound by that strongest of human bonds, the tie of Duty. Nothing—sea, nor wind, nor danger had ever daunted him. Yet, strong man as he was, he had one weakness—he loved his drink. He was no drunkard, but an epicure. In a locker, in his cabin, well concealed from the inquisitive eye, there it lay shining in its glass casing—port—real genuine port, A1 brand—but no one had ever seen him drink it. It was only when his door was bolted, and some hours of sleep before him, that he opened the locker with delicious expectancy, and drew thence that precious bottle. There was always much love-making on his part,—a gentle pressure of the fingers, a softening of the eyes, an affectionate smile, and then—oh, heavenly!—a long deep pull at the soothing liquid.

On Thursday night, after the first watch was over (it extends from 8 P. M. till midnight), he retired to his cabin. Just as he was on the first rung of the ladder a figure darted

down the passage from the direction of his cabin and vanished. Feeling puzzled, he followed it, as he thought to the galley, but in spite of a vigorous search discovered no one. Next to the galley was the mate's cabin, and thinking some one might be hidden there, he opened the door and peered in. A flood of moonlight poured through the port-hole direct on the zillow of the bunk, and he saw the head of the sleeper.

"Hullo, Humber!" he cried in a high-pitched voice, "are you ill or anything?"

The only answer was the heavy breathing of the slumberer: so, half-convinced that he had been the victim of an optical illusion, the skipper closed the door and went quietly to his own cabin.

All night the ship held on her course with the wind roaring and the white spray swelling the decks, while on the boatswain rested the responsibility for the safety of those asleep within the black hull. On—on—a changing sky, now black as a sable mantle, now bright with the rays of the moon, a heaving, angry sea, crying for human victims. The lone watcher would not have been a man had he not felt a certain awe at the surrounding scene, and had he not shuddered a little at the foaming expanse, the flapping of the loose tackle, the thud of waves on the shaking deck, the sougning of the bitter wind. "The devil is loose to-night," he muttered; yet he did not see the copper-coloured fiends astride on the surging billows. And as the vessel sailed at the mercy of the elements, God and the devil alike seemed to leave her alone to take her chance with Nature.

Friday morning broke clear and cold, with a blue sky and a hint of snow-clouds down Channel under a falling wind. The effects of the previous night were plainly visible on board the *Maria Jane*. Her sails were torn, her gear unroven, a sweeping wave had smashed her bulwarks, and the deck was strewn with débris. She presented a sorry spectacle to the men who crossed the deck to their respective duties, and some exchanged forebodings as to their fate should they meet another storm. To add to their anxiety, their boat, such as it was, was gone, and they had only the little dinghy to look to in emergencies. The two A. B.'s who were trying to repair some of the damage took matters at their worst. Sailors are often wont to outrival landsmen as pessimists.

"I'll give yer the straight tip, Bill," said one, "that if the skipper don't put in at Penzance and have this blamed old craft made taut, I'll d—d well desert when we get ashore."

"Ay, that's my way of thinking," said his companion; "it's tantalisin' Providence, so it is. 'Ere's the *Maria Jane* loaded with twice as much cargo as is good for 'er, the plates on 'er bottom rotting, 'er sails 'anging like blooming rags, and 'er only boat gone. No, I don't call it fair, and if he don't lay low for repairs, I'm with you."

The men would have said more had not the skipper come up and cursed them, as only a skipper can, for a pair of skulkers.

"Stir yourselves, you lazy lubbers!" he shouted with a clenching of his fists; "what the H——do you think you're here for—to gas about your sweethearts? Rouse yourselves or I'll have to come and wake you!"

Bill swore under his breath, and sullenly obeyed. There was no getting in a word edgeways, with such a captain, whose fist was no mere ornament, and whose temper stopped short only of manslaughter. So the men ceased grumbling and worked on, while the sun rose higher; and by and by they sighted the bare rocks of Land's End gleaming in the sunshine, while the wind blew over its cliffs to give them a foretaste of Cornish hospitality. In spite of the whitebreakers the sea was much calmer now. Away on their right they saw a three-funneled steamer ploughing her way oceanwards, and knew her for the latest addition to the American line. Nearer in they passed a tramp in woeful plight, her decks swept clean, and her bows heading for Penzance, though, judging from her present speed, it would be long before her presence graced the harbour.

The skipper of the *Maria Jane* would have done what he could for her, but as she showed no distress signals, he concluded that she meant to struggle on independently, and left her, holding on his own course with dogged tenacity. About sunset there was a freshening of the breeze from the south-west, and some formidable white-headed tollers gathered in the Channel. With the past night's danger fresh in their minds, the crew were in no way disposed to meet the advent of darkness without apprehension. Yet none of them cared to tackle the skipper in his present mood; so they kept their feeling-

to themselves, or only vented them in invectives in the seclusion of the fo'c'sle.

It was a comfortless fore-castle enough—a relic of the old school when seamen were considered a little beneath the level of cattle, and stowed away anywhere, anyhow. Filthy beams covered with cockroaches stretched over their hammocks, and there was little or no place wherein to stow their chests. The *Maria Jane* had long been recognised as the worst-equipped ship in all Bristol Docks, and none knew it better than her unfortunate crew.

Now, as they sat there prior to turning in to their hammocks, they were tortured with the presentiment of a hurrying doom, eager to snatch from them even such a life as they had. Neglected, depressed, overworked dregs of the shipping world as they were, they could fear—they had feelings—and their souls rose in revolt against the iron ears of Providence and skippers. It was not that they disliked their captain. Indeed, they preferred him to many men they knew in port; but they hated his fine sense of duty and carelessness of danger—they wanted to save their own skins, and cared for little besides. My client played his subtle game well in their company, friend of all parties, espouser of none. He had always been ready to follow his evil tendencies. True, there were moments when conscience gained an audience, even a triumph—but they were very rare. Up to the present I had found no difficulty in defeating the machinations of my antagonist. Now, however, an unexpected obstacle was thrown in my path in the person of the stewardess. This woman was no stranger to Humber. She had been an old flame of his, and even now preferred him to her ugly German husband. She had married the latter for two reasons—he had a snug berth, and she loved the sea—a Bristol lass, she had been born and bred to the fascination of it. Humber saw in her a useful ally. She was avaricious; he remembered she was unscrupulous; he recollected strange rumours about her step-daughter's death; and with these characteristics he felt sure of her.

After a shrewd observation of her treatment of the steward, and comparing it with her attitude towards himself, he made a bold movement. There was no difficulty in finding her alone, and a few moments put her in possession of all his designs. The conversation took place in the officer's cabin.

The waves beat angrily against the port-holes, and the floor never remained a minute at the same level ; sometimes bows, up, sometimes down, or again a heavy list to port or starboard. Had the furniture not been securely fastened, there would have been a tremendous breakage ; as it was, merely a few odds and ends were thrown about. Humber signed to the woman to be seated, and then examined the door to guard against eavesdropping.

The stewardess was wary, she misunderstood his precautions, and half rose to remonstrate.

"Don't be uneasy, my dear," the fellow said familiarly setting himself opposite to her and gazing into red brown eyes. They were hard and dry—thoroughly suited to his purpose. He began cautiously, "Do you know why I have brought you here?"

"*Brought*, indeed !" the woman tossed her head. "Hoity toi ty—what next?"

"Beg pardon, I meant no offence. You came of your own accord, my darling, of course," he said soothingly.

"That's better, Tom," she leaned back and smiled, but the eyes never lost their glitter. "But what do you want? Remember, I'm married now." She made a show of edging away from him.

"You ain't so well off but what you could do with a little more money, are you?" He asked it with such an extra amount of cunning that she became alarmed.

Just at this moment I was aware of an opposing force, as if my will, after running freely, had been brought to a standstill by a contrary current of energy.

I stood at the left hand of my client, my elbow on his shoulder as I whispered in his ear :

"Be explicit," I said, "she is weak and will be won."

But her answer disappointed us.

"What do you mean?" she said, coolly, smoothing her black apron with coarse hands.

"That's soon told, but you must swear secrecy. Say 'I'll never tell a soul what you are going to tell me—so—help me, God.' "

She gazed with fear into his eyes and held her tongue.

"Pish," I muttered, directing my attention to her, "don't be a fool ! The man means something to your advantage. Swear, and break the oath after if you will."

But then I heard the hated voice of Sagatheela, low and clear and full of pathos—that somehow against my will made me think of perfect beauty, for nothing unlovely could possess such a voice.

"Nay, do not heed the ill-adviser—he means no good. How darest thou break an oath before God—and of surety what he tells thee will be a secret of no easy keeping."

Her breath came like lily-scent to my nostrils, and made me hate her but the more.

"Art thou here, meddling chatterer—and why?" I said, approaching the spot where, I judged she stood.

"To be of service to mankind," she replied. I marvelled at the calmness of her voice.

"Service," I sneered, "a plague on thy service! Wilt thou thwart the work of my Prince Diaphernes?"

"Ay, I would, and I will," she replied. "Yet I bear thee no ill-will, Agonostes; if thou but knewest, thou wouldest leave alone evil and let mischief take care of itself."

"A pretty counsel indeed," I broke in, "the cry of all thy sex—leave alone evil! Yet they seek not good themselves, but break men's hearts and ruin souls. Ay, I know them—deny it not."

I heard her sigh, but she spoke to me no more. My client grew impatient.

"Are you afraid to answer, my dear," he said, leaning forward and laying his hand on hers. There was not much difference between the two coarse, toilworn, insensitive hands.

"I don't know what you are going to say. I might want to let out on you."

She was candid for perhaps the first time in her life—and I cursed Sagatheela.

"I'll risk it then, and tell you," said Humber. "I have it in my mind to be rich yet. You laugh, but maybe it's nearer than you think. I've been promised £130 for one job."

The woman looked at him curiously, but he was evidently serious, so she let him continue.

"Yes," he said, stroking her hand. "£130, how do you like that? Enough to start a tidy public and leave a bit over in the bank. And then I could marry the woman I've an eye for." He paused and watched her colour fade. ("All

these dark women are jealous," I whispered, "follow it up." "The woman I marry would be well off—she might do worse. The Hotwell Road's the right place for business, eh?"

"Yes," she replied with a certain nervous slowness. "But," with a sudden quickening, "what is the job, and who is the woman?"

"Your oath first," he said resolutely.

A terrible struggle took place now for the soul of the woman. I sprang at Sagatheela and tried to thrust her from her place, but she met me with strong arms, and for a while kept me at bay. At last, with a fervent cry to Diaphernes, I hurled her off for a moment, and the willing natures of the man and woman did the rest. The stewardess hesitated no longer, and the oath was taken. I no longer felt the presence of Sagatheela.

My client took the citadel by storm and explained all without reserve.

"There will be no danger," he said in an explanatory tone; "when the vessel sinks, you will leap with me into the sea—we shall wear lifebelts, and, with the tide in our favour, shall easily reach Coverack Cove."

The woman shivered, the risk seemed to her awful; still, the money loomed on the horizon, and she was very tired of her fat German husband.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked cautiously.

"Doctor the lad's grog," said my client hurriedly after peering round at the door. "Slip some of this powder into it. Make sure of your husband; I'll see to the skipper and the man at the wheel. We'll collect any valuables we can carry easily, wait till the ship is about to strike, and drop off her stern. I suppose there is *some* risk, but think what succeeding means. Now, will you help?"

She was silent, weighing *pro and con*. Life was not too full of promise with her German spouse. He might lose his billet, and she was tired of the sea. All the romance of it had faded. With a fine recklessness that told of gipsy blood in her veins, she closed with the terrible offer, and sealed the compact with a kiss that seemed to burn into Humber's lips.

The conspirators had little time for dallying for the Lizard lights were already left behind, and the vessel still kept well on her true course.

It was only on very rare occasions that the seamen received an addition to their supper of coffee or tea, with fried fish, onions and bread—only when the weather was extra cold, or their spare hours were taken from them for heavy work in high-running seas. There was no lowering of the temperature now, nor any sign of imminent danger, but she brought them grog—and with sailor-like simplicity, they put it down to sheer good nature.

She was kinder, cheerier, prettier than they ever remembered to have seen her before, and took their rough compliments with a coquettishness and mirth that made them, drink a toast in her honour.

"Carl Heineman's a lucky devil to have got such a girl," said the boatswain; "wish I were in his shoes!"

"Ay," said another, "she's a wench worth having, and mighty good to us chaps too, at times."

"At times," muttered a third, who was no believer in women, and even on this occasion, could not smother his distrust. "This rum tastes bitter," he growled on; but they all knew his way, and paid no heed.

The woman had not spared the laudanum. A happy sleepiness soon made itself manifest among the men, and one by one they yielded to it. They lay there on the boards, some with their heads on their chests, one on the table, all silent and asleep. The skipper gave no trouble. Alone with his beloved port, he never noticed that the bottle had been tampered with, but sipped and sipped in the comfort of his warm cabin, till he lost count of the articles in the place. The pictures in their cheap frames, the books, the chairs, the table—all receded farther and farther, and lost themselves in haziness. He no longer heard the sea without, nor felt the rolling, of the ship; he forgot all the troubles of the day and the previous night's anxieties, everything, in the delicious drowsiness which warped his senses and carried him to the very gates of paradise. By-and-by even that was blank; he remembered no more, and slept on in a dreamless and unawaking slumber.

There was now only one man to make sure of—the A.B. who had relieved the boatswain at the wheel, and he was standing grimly at his post wrapped up in his oilskin and sou'-wester and cursing his luck.

Providence allowed this man, blaspheming as he was, a chance of life : Fate held aloof for a moment and watched the game. As Humber was making his way aft, the stewardess threw herself in his path, and with tears in her eyes averred her sorrow at what she had done, and begged him to desist.

So—Sagatheela had conquered !

The woman threw her arms round Humber's neck and kept him from ascending the companion way.

"Don't," she cried, "don't let the men be murdered. We have done enough ; let us drop overboard now, and get off with their valuables."

"Nonsense," said Humber gruffly, "there's the £130."

"Never mind it," she pleaded, "let us be satisfied with what we've got. I can't bear to think we are murderers—it's dreadful. Tom, darling, don't !"

The man's nerves were failing and he began to fall in with her views. I sprang to his side, only to meet with a repulse which hurled me back, and which was the beginning of one of the most terrible struggles in which I had ever been engaged. I was forced on my knees, out through wood and iron away from my client and his interlocutor—away until the dark water lapped about my feet and I fell without, a splash into the depths.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF THE VOYAGE

As speedily as the battered tiger renews his attack upon the furious boar, I sprang up again and hurled myself through wood and iron to the spot I had just left. Then I laughed in triumph. My gaze encountered the form of the woman lying prone upon the floor, her feet resting upon the lowest step of the stair. Had the rolling of the ship caused this accident—or? A glance at the body told me all I wished to learn. Humber had killed her ; I saw the crimson pouring from a great wound over her heart, a great gaping wound that no fall could have caused! My client's weakness had vanished. Everything made for success now, and, as I

reasoned with him, what were a few lives more or less to *him*? The men could never rise again to trouble him, they would be hidden away fathoms deep, and bound down by the heavy water. Not one must escape. He was well rid of this woman, to begin with. She had rebelled against her share of the work—broken one part of her oath—might she not equally well break the other and denounce him? But he must act promptly. I caught him by the arm and urged him vehemently. Yet he hesitated.

Sagatheela spoke too—and he listened.

A wave of anger enveloped me and filled me with fresh vigour. My words became suaver, more plausible, and I was gaining ground. Suddenly a huge wave broke above us, and the spray poured down the companion like a shower over my client. It was a timely occurrence. The man's face hardened, his eyes glittered angrily, and he ascended the companion ladder and walked quickly towards the wheel.

The moonlight showed the gaunt Cornish coastline in the distance, but only at intervals, for every now and then clouds of darkness covered the sky—and then only the twinkling of the Lizard gleamed over the heaving sea.

Humber splashed over the deck, keeping his equilibrium with difficulty.

"Hullo, Bill!" he shouted.

No answer.

"Hullo, Bill!"

The man looked round.

"Who the devil's calling me?" he snarled.

"It's me! The mate! How are you getting on?"

"Neither better nor worse one expects on a Hell's night like this. What do you want?"

"The skipper told me to look after you—thought you might be having a tough time. Have a pull of whisky?" and a flask glinted in the moonlight.

"You're a nice officer," laughed the A.B., "offering a drink to a man on duty, but as you *are* an officer, I reckon I may as well."

He took the flask, and placing it to his lips, swallowed the liquid in great gulps. „My client watched him eagerly. The stuff was so strongly doctored that it ought to act almost at once.

"That's right, lad," he said, when he thought the man had had enough, "that will keep the cold out. It's genuine stuff and won't hurt your head ; besides, we're on a clear course now with the Manacles well to leeward."

The seaman was smacking his lips.

"Yes," he said diffidently, "we poor fellows are out in all weathers, freezing, hailing, snowing, or raining, it's all one to us. What odds? To-day we live, to-morrow we die, Who would be a blamed sailor if he hadn't been born with a restless spirit, I wonder?"

"Well, well," said Humber sententiously. "I suppose ours is a hard life ; but it's better than starving in dock or the humdrum of the labourer. Now, I must be off ; good luck !"

Humber went below, and found all silent as the grave. The skipper was snoring, the crew lay heavy and unconscious, and the only vigilant creature on board was the stowaway lad, whose existence Humber had forgotten.

William Hardup was a slum boy, reared in a vicious home, with only evil companions and a craving taste for unhealthy literature. He had the usual thirst for adventure, and, under its influence, had sneaked on board the *Maria Jane*, as she lay coaling in the Cumberland Basin.

But his search for romance was a vain one. There was nothing of the bold buccaneer about this vessel, no cutthroat sailors, nor armour-plated sides, nor punishment at the mast-head, and not even by the rope's end. No, but worse, he was made to *work*—swab decks, peel potatoes, ladle in coal, and be generally useful—it was cruelly disappointing. He did more work in twenty-four hours after he had made his presence known than he had done in all his previous life.

Between toil and sea-sickness, he thought he would be better off in gaol, but the green waves between him and land showed him that he could not even desert.

He had been skulking in the galley when the fall of the stewardess made him wonder what could be the matter. Cautiously opening the door he peered out into the passage, when a sudden lurch of the boat sent him out head foremost. The walls of the passage now towered above him, now lay low at his feet in a giddy chasm. Everything was like a nightmare to the wretched boy, who felt his flesh creep at the sound of

the wind and waves. When he saw the woman's body lying in a pool of blood a few yards off, his hair rose and he fairly yelled. Just then an extra lurch pitched him over again, this time full on top of the corpse.

Gathering himself with terrified rapidity, he scrambled up the ladder to the deck, where he promptly landed on his head—for the boards were as slippery as glass. It was here that Humber found him prone.

"Get up, you lumbering scullion!" the mate shouted, accompanying his words with a lusty kick. "What do you want up here, prying around when you ought to be in your bunk, you good-for-nothing stowaway? Get below or I'll—well, I don't know what I won't do."

There was a look in his eyes that froze the blood in his listener's veins, and the satins on the mate's hands and clothes added to the lad's horror. He pulled the boy to his feet and sent him whizzing down the hatchway, with a cuff on the side of his head. All was going well, the steersman lay sleeping soundly on the planks beside the wheel. Humber caught hold of the spokes and sharply turned the ship's head landward. He could not see the coast, but he knew that his calculations were sound, and that about an hour should bring the *Maria Jane* to the Manacles. There are moments in every man's life when he passes through an acute crisis, and stops as it were on the brink of a chasm which his next action must render impassable.

Some call this the awakening of responsibility—the dying flicker of conscience—others, the master effort of a guardian angel. Call it what you will, it still remains a fact—sure to come sooner or later in the course of existence.

Such a moment came to Thomas Humber as he touched the wheel. He had lived a restless, criminal life, sensual, revengeful, consistently avaricious. From his cradle his passion had swayed him wholly. Yet his guardian angel kept to his side, sorrowful, repulsed, discouraged, yet not wholly driven away, ever ready to stretch out her white arms and shield him—his angel, my enemy. Sagatheela. She was pleading with him now.

"It is a crime against God and man," she urged. "Thou shalt do no murder, it is written. Thou shalt answer before Him who judges. And for the fate of thy shipmates, the

wreck of the ship, thou shalt also answer to Man. Oh, think, well before it is too late. By the great and infinite love of the Christ whom thou hast mocked, by the tie of common nature which binds thee even to these men—pause, I adjure thee. Think of the women and children helpless destitute. Darest thou cause this? Hast thou the wicked hardihood to create such trouble as would make even thy world shun thee as a thing too foul to live? Darest thou, with such a calendar of crime written in blood upon thy brow, tempt the sea, weighed down as thou art with stolen goods? Ah! be advised—pause—repent! God is merciful, even to thee, even now.”

With such words she assailed my client, until to my dismay I saw he was inclined to yield, fumbling at the wheel to correct the vessel's course and turn her away from the nearing Manacles.

The waves were increasing again, chasing each other across the moonlight stretch. It was a wonderful scene, at once silent and noisy, such as one can only meet at sea, with a fickle moon and an angry sea and wind and a line of dark cliffs beyond. I set myself to my difficult task.

“Ay, consider well,” I spoke into his ear, as I laid my hand on the arm directing the wheel. “Consider well and carefully. Too much has been done to leave the rest undone. It is thy life or theirs. Go on! The captain and crew lie helpless; thou hast their money and jewels. Wilt thou restore these? After thy labour art thou not entitled to some reward? And when they wake and find the dead stewardess, find the man at the helm drugged also, will they have mercy in their hearts for thee? It is too late—think of the vengeance of those whom thou wouldst spare. Away with maudlin sentiment, and be a man!”

“Nay, be a hero!” Sagatheela broke in.

“Don't heed such foolishness!” I cried angrily.

“Hear the voice of God!” she urged.

“There is *no* God,” I muttered—and her hand was shaken off. So much I had gained.

“There must be a God, or there would be no virtue.”

“Virtue is the worst vanity, an outward show to cloak and dissemble Vice.”

“Nay, nay, Honesty exists, and Mercy and Love. Are these not virtues?”

"If there be a God then," I said, seeing him turn to her again, "thou hast never yearned for Him before, but rather abused His name, and vilified His gifts. Obscenity, theft, murder—a strange record to bring to Him, indeed."

As I finished Sagatheela spoke again :

"To no man in whom repentance is not dead is the grace of God denied. He is ready, willing, longing for the soul to turn to Him in its hour of need. No sins are too foul for His pardon if repentance be there."

"False, false," I cried, trying to wrest my client from her arms, "thy sins are past forgiveness, thou hast been an incarnation of sin. Canst thou deny it?"

The man wiped the perspiration from his brow—the struggle was becoming an exhausting torture. He saw that there was no room for indecision, of two courses he must follow one, and that speedily. Both were full of peril. The retrospect of his misdeeds startled him, and the idea of braving the dangers of the sea with his sins upon his head filled him with horror. On the other hand the reward was enticing, and was there even now room to retract? He paused between us, and the wind howled, and the white breakers washed against the crazy hull. Nearer and nearer the Manacles hove in view, and now the bell-buoy was audible above the wind.

"Keep off! keep off! beware!" it rang. "Stand clear, stand clear!"

The oil lamp at the *Maria Jane's* masthead cast its smoky glare ahead, it swayed to and fro as the bow plunged in the green water—and the ship flew on.

"Hurrah!" I cried "the dice is thrown!"

My client had by his dallying settled the matter and left no doubts. The heads of the rocks were within a hundred yards, and the vessel was going at full speed. If he himself were to be saved, there was no time to lose. He descended hastily to the lower deck, wrapped a lifebelt about him, and making sure that the bag of valuables was securely attached to his belt, prepared to leap overboard; when a hand touched his arm. Frightened, he turned round, to encounter the scared gaze of the stowaway.

"What have you done, mister?" said the lad in a half-choked voice. "Why are you going over-board?"

Humber raised his fist threateningly. Then, to my surprise,

his demeanour changed, and he performed, perhaps, the one kindly action of his whole life.

"Here, take this, lad!" he said, removing the lifebelt from his own body and fitting it round the boy. "I can fend for myself."

Another belt was close by; he seized it, but had barely time to slip it over his shoulder before the ship ran with a sickening crunch upon the rocks. Without another word or look round, he caught hold of his companion, dropped him overboard, and leaped after him, the two splashes following in quick succession. He heard the rush of the wind in his ears, felt it in his nostrils, and then came a fearful plunge straight down, down into the cold. Oh! it was icy! It petrified his body, choked his lungs. Years seemed to pass before he came to the surface and found himself struggling in the hollow of a wave. Crash, and another, volume of water forced him under. Once more the fight for breath, the freezing descent into a pit of horror. Again he rose to a glimpse of the sky and the jeering moon, and drank in the air with a new sense of life and vigour. With all his might he struck out, rising and falling on the backs of the billows, buoyed up by the hastily donned lifebelt. The first strokes seemed to require a tremendous output of exertion which he almost despaired of being able to maintain, but after a few moments it became easier, and at a distance of a hundred yards from the vessel he was swimming with scarcely an effort. From old experience Humber knew his own powers of endurance. The fierce waves were old and well-known opponents, he had faced them in the turbulent Bay of Barnstaple, had ridden them from Lamorna to Nawlyn, had conquered them always. He could almost afford to chuckle when he had gone two hundred yards. But he did not, for the water was cold and a new fear met him. What if he should fall a victim to the chilliness and lose the use of his-limbs?

The idea spurred him to effort, and he swam faster. On—on! he dared not allow his thoughts to wander over his own sins, nor ponder over his last fight conscience—for the words of Sagatheela were awe-inspiring to his guilty soul. Swish—swish—the waves bore him on. Once he fancied he heard cries of distress, and he pictured the vessel sinking, the drugged crew perhaps awakened by the shock only to

realise their doom. He could not shut his ears to those cries, they followed him.

On and on the sea carried him, and he never tired. It was a brave fight, and any onlookers, had they been there, would have acclaimed the daring of the dauntless sailor.

On—on! A wild sea of white and black catching here and there the glimmer of the moon—a sea doubtless dragging down many a good ship's crew, giving them over to the care of the seaweed and crabs. There among the caves lurk creatures—things with bony feelers and hideous nippers and eager eyes—things that rejoice over a sunken ship with orgies unspeakable.

Humber thought of this now—and of those who had lately been his comrades. On an on he swam, Sagatheela on his right and I on his left. And I was rejoicing, for I had conquered in all but the one unimportant detail of the stowaway. I rejoiced the more in knowing the sadness of Sagatheela—for my hatred of her was overwhelming.

At last to my client's watchful eyes appeared the outline of Coverack Cove; and in a few minutes more, all bruised and bleeding, with a singing in his head and a numbness in his limbs, he was lying high and dry on the shingles.

He had been a long time in the water and travelled a little over two and a half miles, a wonderful performance indeed, taking into consideration the roughness of the sea, the intense cold, and the intermittent darkness of that strange night.

CHAPTER VIII

MR ADAMS COMES TO THE FRONT

JOHN ADAMS had not forgotten the tragedy he had been compelled to witness in the signal-box at Helverton; nor his subsequent meeting in Bristol with the man with the tattooed hand. The whole scene was a clear to his mind several months afterwards as it had been on the night of the occurrence; nor had he any doubt about the marks on the hand of the weird assassin. He was not a man one would call adventurous or hyper-sensitive, he had never wearied of the routine of station-duty which he calmly accepted as his lot in life.

He was unimaginative, methodical, and practical as those of his calling generally are, hard to turn from his accustomed way and adverse to companions other than reputable. In short he was a sober-minded, industrious employer, well fitted to perform the duties entrusted to him. Yet, since that memorable night, Adams had grown restless and superstitious. It was in vain he tried to keep his mind off the subject, to persuade himself it was fancy, or a nightmare. His thoughts would run in one direction, and he was powerless to check them.

His wife would chide and even rave at him for his changed conduct. His comrades began to make fun of various nervous mannerisms he had adopted, but all to no purpose. He was a different man. The murder in the signal-box haunted him by day and darkened his dreams by night. He tried every means in his power to rid himself of the ever present horror, became more careful than ever, about his attendance at chapel, said the Lord's Prayer with an extra amount of vehemence, never allowed the faintest approach to swearing to pass his lips, only read religious books—but still the dream came. He saw the tattoo mark everywhere, on the hand of his own wife, of the minister, of every tramp that passed. It stared at him, magnified to a grotesque size, in every direction. It was the bugbear of his life, and seemed likely to drive him mad.

Finally, it got him into trouble. He electrified the village constable by seizing his hand and crying, "You are he—you are he! There's the mark, I've got you!" Another time he suddenly gripped the doctor by the wrist, and, much to the worthy gentleman's amazement, whispered in a voice of exaggerated tragedy, "I caught you. Don't deny it, you are the ghost who has tormented me!"

The doctor naturally concluded that the man was drunk and, being good-natured, decided to take no notice of the incident. It was otherwise with the squire, a retired match merchant, too much in love with his own newly acquired dignity to excuse any familiarity on the part of "common people." When Adams—who had shadowed his steps cunningly from the church to the station—caught his hand and addressed him as "You murderer!"—he gave the signalman into custody.

Poor Adams was fined five shillings and costs, and warned

not to do it again. Had it not been for the good-will of the stationmaster, he would also have lost his place. After this, he managed to refrain from open acclamations, contenting himself with observing carefully, perfectly conscious of his delusion—but equally convinced that, one day, it would prove no delusion.

One morning when Bristol was ringing with the news of the loss of the *Maria Jane*, barquentine—owner, David Jones of that city—which had mysteriously gone ashore on the *Manacles* with the loss of all on board save one, and he a stowaway, Adams sat down on a trolley for a few leisure moments to glance at a paper.

Being a Bristol man, the news interested him. It was a repetition of many disasters at or about the same spot.

Probably the loss the *Maria Jane* would have excited little interest outside Bristol, had it not been that she had gone down off the infamous *Manacles*. But some attention was attracted by the decidedly sensational narrative of the escaped stowaway. He, poor boy, had been picked up by the Porthoustock lifeboat, a few hundred yards from the scene of the disaster, wholly exhausted, and insensible from cold.

Upon being placed in bed and treated by a medical man he slowly recovered. Afterwards, when seven bodies were recovered and an inquest opened at St Kevernes Church, he was able to make some thrilling statements.

It appeared that on the evening of the wreck he had been surprised to find the sailors in the fo'c'sle, the cook, and the captain alike sound asleep. Being alarmed, he went from one cabin to another, hoping to find some one awake. Upon quitting the main saloon he came upon the stewardess, lying dead in a pool of blood at the foot of the companion ladder. Terrified, and for some inexplicable reason associating this tragedy with the condition of the men, he scrambled up the ladder. On deck he met the mate, who seemed much agitated, and threatened to "do for him" unless he made himself scarce. He observed the body of a man lying beside the wheel—and also saw the mate throw a knife overboard. Questioned as to whether he observed any wound on the woman's body, he said that the second time he saw it he noticed a knife wound over the heart. He would swear to this. Questioned as to the personal appearance and character of the mate

Humber, he said he had rarely seen him, and he was never talked of much by the crew. He was a tall, thin man—perhaps thirty-five years old—fair hair, long face, with a craggy, washed-out kind of beard. One thing had always struck him as odd—a queer tattoo mark the mate had on his hand, a stag's head with a skull and crossbones underneath.

Adams sat for a few moments after reading the account, too dumfounded to move or speak. Was it true—or was he dreaming again? He covered his eyes for a moment with his hand to shut out the light, then looked at the newspaper again, half expecting to find that the mention of the tattoo mark had vanished. No—he had not been deceived this time—there were the words in legible black print.

He repeated the experiment, and the words were still there. Then he asked a passing comrade to read it to him. The latter certainly said—"the tattoo mark, a stag's head with skull and crossbones underneath." There was no doubting it after that : and, filled with a queer wild joy, Adamrose and paced the platform, in imagination a famous detective already. He had not forgotten the place in the Hotwell Road where he had a glimpse of that mark, nor the public-house out of which the man had gone. He could easily find that spot, and he resolved to frequent it in all his spare hours—to walk up and down and linger about, till fate should bring him once again in contact with this archvillain.

"So, Sagatffeela, white angel who pretendest to love me." I mused, 'thou hast failed again, and art after all a poor antagonist for one of Diaphernes' emissaries. Yet why I hate thee so I cannot tell—save that thou art good—and hast the soul of a woman. Strange anomaly !"

I then wondered why my sandals did not bear me back to my Prince—for surely the fight was over.

I was in familiar surroundings—the inn-parlour in the Hotwell Road. Nothing had been changed, not even the pictures on the wall ; and the same man arose to greet my client. The expression of his countenance was an interesting study.

"Be seated," he said, pointing to a high-back chair. "I am as pleased as I am amazed to see you." He ran his eye over Humber, not the same in appearance^{as} a week ago, but a stouter, cleaner-shaven personage, 'd'ed to suggest a

low comedian, " 'Pon my word, your masquerading's very neat."

The sailor eyed him curiously.

"You don't look pleased, but I daresay you are amazed," he said. "You didn't believe I could hold out, did you?"

"There are not many men who could keep afloat so long in such a sea," said Jones evasively. "It was a great feat."

"And worthy of——"

"A reward?" said David Jones. "Yes, it was, and you shall have one. I shall not forget. But—are you not in some danger?"

Humber lifted his head and clenched his fists.

"Of what?" he asked angrily.

"Don't fly into a temper, for Heaven's sake!" said the other coolly. "Have a cigar? No? Have a glass of whisky? Yes; that's right, fill it up to your liking."

"Cut it short, mister," Humber muttered.

"What? the whisky?"

"No, the gas. I haven't the time to lose."

He was slow of speech, and Jones always gained an advantage in this respect.

"I suppose you're afraid of being nabbed," he said gently. "Poor fellow—how ill you are being used, hunted from place to place."

Humber interrupted with an oath. "Stop your infernal prattle!" he cried, lifting his hand menacingly, but only to let it drop again as he saw Jones, casually fingering a revolver. "I didn't come here to talk about—things like that—I want to talk business. I've done my share of the transaction according to agreement—now you may do yours. And bustle, for my time presses."

A crafty smile lighted up Jones' face—there was a world of cunning in his protruding grey eyes, and a fierceness that would have alarmed some men.

"One moment," the shipowner began, "before I hand you the cheque I want you to do something for me—only to promise me something. Will you?"

Humber gave a grudging assent.

"I know an oath isn't particularly binding with men of your sweet disposition," Jones went on; "but, just as a matter of form, you must swear never to visit Bristol again after you

leave it, which must be to-morrow. You'll do this?"

"Oh, certainly!" replied Humber.

"That's all right. Besides, you must write something on this paper."

He drew a piece of vellum from his breast-pocket, and, rising, spread it on the round table in the centre of the room. He then moved the table towards the fire, placing it in front of Humber. The latter helped himself to another glass of whisky before he asked—

"What's all this about?"

"You may say," began Jones, clearing his throat and breathing deep with an oratorical air. "As follows: 'I, Thomas Humber, late first mate of the *Maria Jane*, of Bristol—owners, David Jones & Son, testify that I, and I alone, was the cause of the loss of that vessel on the Manacle, Rocks December 11th, 19—. No one else was a party to the alleged accident, and I hereby exonerate the owner, David Jones, the captain, officers, and seamen of the *Maria Jane*, from all share in it.' Then sign your name to it."

Jones watched my client narrowly, noting how his colour came and went, and he cast furtive glances towards door and window. There was a long silence before Humber spoke, breathing hard—

"I won't write it. I'll be d—d if I do!"

"You'll be that anyway," was the cool reply. "Gentlemen of your sort aren't exactly received in heaven. Come, think of the £80 and do it."

"No."

"You won't?"

"I won't, and what's more, I'll have £200."

He rose from his chair, but, encountering the inscrutable and smiling gaze of his employer, subsided again.

"You see," said Jones soothingly, "you can't bully me, and I didn't come unprepared for emergencies." He allowed the bright muzzle of his revolver to show for a moment. "Be wise; you had better do it for your children's sake."

Humber was passing through another struggle. Leaning over his left shoulder, I urged his compliance.

"There may be a chance of getting the paper afterwards and destroying his hold over you," I pointed out. "If you refuse, he will circumvent you yet."

The man listened, and yielded with an ill grace ; he took the pen and sullenly wrote at the other's dictation. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked on. It was half-past four, and the evening was very dark. From outside came the sounds of traffic, the soft movement of electric trams, the clatter of horses' hoofs, the bells of motor cars and cycles. Paperboys yelled out, "Inquest on the *Maria Jane*. Startling rumours ! Evening special !" A barrel-organ ground on, and errand boys whistled. No moon was visible—not a star. The electric light was left to look after the needs of mankind.

People hurried to and fro, eager to get home ; it was not an inviting evening, only one man seemed inclined to spend his leisure out of doors—and he stood with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the street wall of the inn. And still Humber wrote on ; he was a bad penman, and the task presented some difficulty.

At last it was finished, and he dropped the scratchy pen. "There you are, mister," he said, refilling his glass. "My job's done. Now for the money."

Jones carefully placed the document in his pocket, the walked towards the window, drew out a greasy pocket-book, and returning to Humber, presented him with a bundle of bank-notes. He was fingering his revolver all the time.

"Only £50 here," said Humber. "What does this mean?"

"It means," said Jones, "that that's all you get."

"A thousand devils ! Give me the rest, or, by Heaven, I'll do for you."

He was white with rage, and his eyes and teeth gleamed with fury. There was murder in the air. The lust for blood was in me and I laughed.

Between the men were a table and a chair. With a quick movement Humber seized the latter and caught Jones full in the face with one of the legs. Then a fearful struggle commenced. Humber was like a madman, furious at the other's perfidy. He cared for nothing but revenge, and, heedless of the disturbance he was creating, simply fought to kill.

It was the only way left to him, the only means of alike punishing and preventing the treachery of his instigator. To and fro they swayed, struggling and cursing. The revolver was still in Jones's hand, but he was powerless to use it, for

Humber had gripped his wrist like a vice. Such a hubbub as they caused could not but attract the attention of the household ; and when finally the pistol went off, and its report was followed by the cracking and falling of broken glass, the room was full of people in an instant, and the combatants were separated by force. Then a man, flushed with excitement, stepped from the midst of the curious crowd and caught hold of Humber's left hand.

"Hold him fast, mates !" he cried. "You've got the man who murdered a signalman in Helverton Tunnel Box, as well as the villain who wrecked the *Maria Jane*."

Had a bomb gone off in their midst, the listeners could not have been more astonished. A short silence followed the sensational statement, and then a babel of voices.

Humber's was heard above the rest.

"It's a lie," he said stolidly. "I know nothin' about either Helverton or the *Maria Jane*."

One of the bystanders asked Adams for an explanation.

"The man who murdered the signalman in Helverton Box on the fourth of November, five years ago, and wrecked the Cornish express the same night, had a tattoo mark on his left hand—a stag's head over a skull and cross-bones, and so had the first mate of the *Maria Jane*—him as the coppers want."

"And here's the mark on this bloke," commented one of the men who was holding Humber.

A low murmur of surprise burst from those present ; it was as good as any theatre tragedy.

"Send for a cop," some one cried.

But a policeman was there already, nay, two, a sergeant and a constable, who had entered while Adams was speaking, and had taken their cue accordingly.

The sergeant took in Humber's description at a glance—tall, fair and thin ; no beard certainly, but that was easily changed, and the mark.

"Thomas Humber," he said in the solemn voice of his profession on important occasions, "I have a warrant for your arrest."

"On what charge?" asked the sailor, trying to appear righteously indignant and failing miserably.

"On the charge of wilful murder, of course."

My client's bravado was fast leaving him ; the contemp-

tuous faces around terrified him. One or two showed their opinion of him by coarse abuse, and the fight with Jones had physically exhausted him. He sank, weak and powerless, into the constable's arms, permitted himself to be handcuffed without protest, and was led like one in a dream through the crowd of expectant faces, out of the room and into the street.

CHAPTER IX

ACONOSTES VERSUS THE CHAPLAIN

DURING his incarceration previous to the trial, my client seemed in a state of drowsy indifference to his fate. Only one thing worried him.

Adams had visited him, and, in reply to a surly inquiry as to what he meant by a murder at Helverton, had told him about the apparitions in the signal-box. Not that Adams was eager to give away his secret—he had hesitated long ; and had only done so in the hope that his listener might be startled into confession.

The result was disappointing Humber, instead of being frightened, evinced the utmost incredulity.

"How the deuce," he said, "how in the name of all that's wonderful, do you think a live man could have a ghost?"

This was a puzzler, but Adams replied slowly :

"Oh, I reckon a live man may have a ghost as well as a dead man—,tain't a thing to be monopolised."

"You lick me," retorted my client, "come now, why not be straight, and tell me how you got at it?"

Adams' wits came back.

"Then you acknowledge you did it?" he said quickly, and noticed how the other shrank at his words. Humber covered his confusion with a curse.

"I don't acknowledge anything," he sneered. "I only want to know how in thunder you got up such a cock and bull story."

But Adams was touchy regarding his apparition, and resented the slighting words.

"If you don't believe it, do the other thing," he said. "But I'll give you a bit of advice. Ease your conscience, for you've a lump on it that will weigh heavy if you don't."

After Adams had gone, the prisoner sat wondering. All the details of the story were so exact. He remembered so well how he had watched his victim through the window, and cautiously entered when he fell into a doze. The manner in which he killed him had been so exactly described. Not a link in the awful chain had been omitted—the swift blow, the brief struggle, the attempt to remove the blood stains from the boards. Oh, there was no doubt that some third person had been there and seen it all. He looked at his left hand, and for the hundredth time cursed the Japanese tattooist.

None of his soliloquies ever turned in the direction of repentance. Of all his many crimes, in one sense the thought of the murder at Helverton troubled him least; the man he had murdered had once been his companion in a burglary at Blackheath, when, quite by accident, the lady of the house had been strangled. They had quitted the premises safely and left no clue—but the act had lain heavy on the railway-man's conscience. At last it worried him so much that he determined to give himself up, and, with quite admirable candour had told his comrade of his resolve. Humber, however, failed to see the advisability of this course, and quietly resolved to put his friend out of the way before it could be carried out.

Fate favoured him. He exchanged clothes with his victim, and, after dropping the corpse into the river returned to the box, when, to start a plausible explanation of the deceased's disappearance, he deliberately wrecked the down express at the entrance of the tunnel.

It was cleverly worked out. Diaphernes could find use for such brains as my client's when the time came.

So the trial came round.

According to a late Act of Victoria, the prisoner could be put under examination as a witness. This proved his ruin. Cute and phlegmatic as he had been when others were questioned, he broke down when his own time came. Perhaps he owed some of his bad luck to me. I was in close attendance throughout, my left arm in his, and our heads close together.

Sagatheela pleaded with him to confess. I counselled him to resist. He could not altogether refrain from listening to

her words, even while his will followed mine. Between us he fell into confusion, and all was lost.

An attempt to incriminate David Jones was frustrated by the production of the signed statement, though it was evident that the court put little faith in the shipowner's own words—he was so evidently trying to inculcate the prisoner. The stowaway's tale contained by far the most damning evidence, incoherent and badly told as it was. Adams's examination was even more interesting; he asked leave to tell his story in his own way, and, leave being promptly given, he launched out into a transparently genuine account of the Helverton tragedy. The account being irrelevant, he was not allowed to tell it all. But while he spoke, unknown to him, unseen by any but my client and myself, the ghost of the murdered man stood at the witness's side.

It overpowered Humber so, that when his turn came, contradiction followed contradiction, lie succeeded lie. The prosecuting counsel turned him inside out. In a state of bewilderment he lost sight of the court, of the fine stern old face of the judge, of the red-faced policeman, the listening jury, the gaping crowds. Everything retreated—and he stood answering at random those terrible merciless questions that he barely understood. Would the day never end?

When led back, still in a dream, to his place in the dock, his soul broke loose from me and yielded to the seductions of Sagatheela.

He stood up and confessed.

He began at the beginning and told the story of all his crimes, sparing himself nothing. The pitiful, shrinking coward of a few moments before now faced the eyes of hundreds, erect and manly, speaking with the slow, dignified confidence of a man accustomed to be heard.

Such a category of horrors no one had been prepared to learn—no one had conceived there could be such attributed to a single individual. Yet so marked was the transformation of the man from the despicable to the strong, that many a heart leaned towards clemency when he finished speaking.

This was a stroke in favour of my enemy. I was only anxious for a change to counteract her.

The jury returned from their short consultation, and in answer to the customary question the foreman said „guilty.”

The judge then sentenced the prisoner to execution ; the sentence to take effect at Horfield on the eighteenth of February. In passing sentence he said that after the evidence and the confession, no reasonable doubt could remain in the minds of any one.

The prisoner received the sentence unmoved, looking almost as if he had not heard it. He left the dock with a firm tread, and a careless nod to his wife, whose tearstained face turned pathetically towards him from the crowd.

In prison he maintained a demeanour of callousness that augured well for me. Nothing seemed to weigh on his mind or to renew the awakening of conscience. Only on the morning of the execution did any change become manifest. It was a damp, raw morning ; a heavy fog hung over the Bristol Channel and bathed the coast with wet mist.

The neighbourhood of Horfield was silent and deserted. Few pedestrians were about at such an early hour and in such uninviting weather. No vehicle of any sort, not even a cycle, passed along the deserted streets—nothing moved the echoes save the heavy tramp of the policeman on duty. The lights shone brightly from the lamp-post. It was to all appearance still night. The majority of citizens were sleeping and would sleep for hours. Who in the sleepy old city thought of the condemned murderer and his impending fate?

Inside the prison it was different. Officials hurried to and fro, along passages and over the stone-flagged yards where several reporters stood in a disconsolate group.

The chaplain came out of his quarters at a run ; he had overslept himself, and there would be little time to spend in the doomed man's cell. The clock in the quadrangle showed him there was not half an hour ; and being very conscientious, he hurried across the stone flags to make a final effort. It was a stubborn soul he fain would serve.

My client stirred uneasily in bed. What was the time? It was so long since it had struck three, it must be nearly four now. Strange to say, he hated the delay, and wished for the fatal moment to arrive. There was a savage joy in his heart at the thought of leaving the world he had grown to hate. Excitement had kept him awake. He compared his unsettled state with that of a man about to change his

quarters and anxious not to miss the early train. He thought not of repentance, of the future, nor of God. Why should he? All his life had sneered at the first and questioned the existence of the two latter. Like all who call themselves atheists, he found it convenient in his misdeeds to deny the existence of an Almighty Being who might call him to account. Men like Humber worship the liberty which allows them the indulgence of vice ; a Power which forbids licentiousness is tyranny to them.

As I said, he did not sleep. He lay wondering how he should deport himself on the scaffold. Once or twice his thoughts were interrupted by something so uncanny that his blood ran cold. He seemed to see the shadowy outline of a man's body with a gaping wound in the head and a blotch of blood on one cheek. There was a look of agony in the eyes that made Humber hide his head under the clothes.

These appearances were, however, rare, and of brief duration, lasting a few seconds only. Still, when the chaplain entered, my client could not persuade himself that he was not glad—very glad ; for the company of a mortal was preferable to that of a phantom, belonging to Heaven only knew where !

The clergyman was thoroughly sincere and wellmeaning, but, like most university men ordained before they have gained a knowledge of the world, or the sympathy with humanity which only toil and sorrow can produce, he set to work in the very way to harden a heart like Humber's. He pointed out the greatness of God and how terrible a thing it was to incur His wrath—went on to speak in harrowing language of the prisoner's own crimes, finally urging him to seek forgiveness, for without it he must be eternally damned. Never once did his voice lose the aristocratic tone eminently suited to a respectable congregation, and scarcely did he touch on the gentle side of the Divine nature, nor on the manhood of Christ, with His readiness to forgive and love the vilest of sinners.

If the prisoner's rigidity showed signs of breaking down it was not owing to his efforts, though perhaps he believed it was. To be just, I must give the credit to Sagatheela. She was ever at Humber's side. I could hear the words she muttered, and the following is the speech that passed between us all :

Sagatheela. Heed not the promptings of thy hard heart

Let love 'conquer. Think of Christ, who died that no sin should bar the gates of Paradise to repentant sinners.

Agonistes. Wilt thou be led now to humbleness by this man's unsympathetic words? Art thou so weak as to yield thy lifelong convictions at his bidding?

Humber (to the chaplain). You talk of a God. Who is He, or what is He?

Chaplain. He is God, the Creator, the Master of us all, omnipotent, a Ruler to be feared and loved.

Agonistes. He does not answer thy question. He only repeats the word *God*. And how can one love a Being whom one fears?

Sagatheela. Nay, God is love. Does not one fear to grieve or injure what one loves?

Chaplain. God is a Ruler.

Humber. So is the King of Denmark. Is he a God? I can understand him, for he is like one of us. But your God—where is He? Where was He before He, as you say, created the world?

Chaplain. Come, this is foolish. You try to pry into knowledge that is forbidden to us. Be satisfied that God is, and unburden your heart to Him.

Agonistes. See how this priest of a so-called God evades thy questions! There can be no God! Before the world was created, He must have dwelt in space, alone, with none to converse with, nothing to remember, nothing to see, needing no reason and no senses. Yet men say He is a wise and rational Being. Then the earth is full of misery, diseases, poverty, hunger, thirst, starvation. Men kill one another—men go mad through toil, and all but the rich are slaves, groaning under the burden of their bondage. And yet his God is merciful! The rich are tyrants, the thieves prosper, the virtuous suffer—and he says God is just.

Chaplain. Times presses. If I can be of no use to you—though I do so in sorrow, I must leave you.

Humber. I've confessed all I did. Isn't that enough?

Chaplain. For man's sense of justice—perhaps. For God's, no.

Humber. What more should I do?

Chaplain. Fall on your knees and pray for God's mercy. Come, I will join with you in prayer.

Humber. But I can't pray to what I don't know exists. How can I?

Chaplain (despairingly). Oh ! unhappy man, your heart is harder than the stone walls of the prison.

Sagatheela. Repent, repent ! Ask for the pardon of Christ who loves all men. Thou wilt not deny Him !

Agonistes. Beware, this priest is but mocking thee, he knows no God himself.

Chaplain. Can I do nothing for you ?

Sagatheela. Oh, repent, pray !

Agonistes. Tell him to go !

Then we stood and waited the final decision of my client. I could feel Sagatheela's warm breath on my cheek and the magnetism of her touch as it passed through Humber's body to mine. I even depicted her as she stood there, and imagined her wondrous fair. Yet how I hated her !

My client opened his lips, his soul looked out of his eyes—and his voice came clear and firm :

"Go ! I don't want any of your prayers."

So I had conquered. There was a madness in me as I sprang into the air and waved my arms. What capers I went through—how I laughed and rejoiced ! Sagatheela is vanquished, is vanquished ! Vain boast of thine, thou woman spirit ! Hateful sex, most hateful of thy sex, thou art defeated. All praise be to Diaphernes ! Hurrah !

On sped the moments. The mournful procession left the condemned cell—the chaplain in front, pale and solemn ; the warders, one on either side of the prisoner ; the governor of the gaol, swelling importance, though somewhat sensitive to the chill of the morning—and the executioner.

They passed down the passage, a hundred phantoms following them. Death clanked in the rear of all, his hollow orbs alive with green fire and one bony arm uplifted—while all the ghostly tribe kept time in a mocking chant.

Death—death—death ! Parades along slowly, parades along proudly, knowing his power over all.

See, all the monarchs—see, all the nobles—see, all the peasants bow to his call.

Death alone wonderful, over all glorious, death transforms every one—none can ye save.

Where there was splendour, where there was envy, now rest there only the bones in the grave.

Such little details as the creases in the chaplain's trousers, the seams in the warders' tunics, the division between the flags of the floor, impressed themselves upon Humber during that walk—the last he was ever to take upon earth.

Ding—dong—ding, dong—ding—dong, the chapel bell rang sonorously. There was no sympathy in its metallic voice—only doom—doom—doom. Yet it was truly the cold damp that made Humber shiver and not fear. The air cut into the marrow of his bones, and the warders felt him tremble.

"Curse that bell ! he muttered once.

They had reached the fatal spot now, and saw the newspaper reporters muffled up in ulsters awaiting them.

A terrible silence prevailed as the bell ceased ringing—and the executioner fastened a handkerchief round my client's forehead, covering his eyes. The warders led him gently to the spot indicated, and he shrank slightly as the noose was adjusted round his neck. And Sagatheela made a last pleading effort—

"For Christ's sake !"

A wave of indecision swept through him—but the chaplain spoke, and that decided the question.

"Again—can I do *nothing*," he asked. The prisoner sullenly shook his head.

Then the signal was given, the bolt drawn, and the body launched into space ; and I, receiving the liberated soul in my triumph arms, bore it away to the hall of Diaphernes.

Yet, in the joy of my victory there remained something of sadness—and for all my skill and knowledge I could not understand why.

THE THIRD MISSION

CHAPTER X

AN OREGON CRIME

SAVE for the yelping and baying of dogs in the settlement, and the wailing of distant coyotes, the great brown desert to the north of Vulture Point was silent. The last threshing

crew had retired from their work beneath the semi-tropical sun, and the twinkling lights in the ranch windows denoted that they were enjoying a well-earned repast.

With the full blaze of the summer moon upon them, all the objects in the desert stood out with greater prominence than daylight itself could give. Barns half full of wheat, worrals crowded with sleeping hogs, orchards full of heavily laden fruit-trees, stood out clear to the eye. One could count the black forms of the animals, or the rich clusters of yellow peaches.

Far away to the south, Snowy Bute rose against the sky, its proud crest lifted high above the other mountains that hemmed in the valley of the Rogue River. Like huge sentinels crouching in grotesque attitudes, they sheltered the desert from the northeast wind, casting their shadows on the cooling plain.

No rain has fallen for several months, and the creeks gape with dry, parching throats, as if seeking pity from the beautiful, unrelenting moon. All is still—so still that it might be midnight instead of eight o'clock. The summer evenings in Oregon are very short; the sun sinks to its western bed almost before the afternoon is fully spent, leaving the skies as it found them, blue with the blue that wearies.

To the north of the desert, facing a winding track that branches off from the chief highway a short distance from the settlement, stands a little wooden house and a few hundred acres of fenced-in ground. At the back of it is a gently sloping hill, covered with a dense forest of pinetrees, some of which adjoin the orchard. This latter consists of about a hundred and twenty trees laden with peaches, plums, and apples, some of which now litter the hard-caked soil. Leaving the orchard and going toward the back entrance of the house, one passes in succession plots of wheat and of Indian corn. To the right lie the barns and corral; to the left, a well for the use of the ranchmen. Beside the well is a pile of loose logs ready for the stove. The space around is bare, affording no shelter for creeping animals.

Something, however, is moving, silently wriggling, with head stretched forward and eyes on the alert, over the soil that, upon close examination, is seen to be swarming with black beetles. This creature, short, thick, and hideously

striped with broad yellow bands, is the much dreaded rattlesnake—an eerie, evil thing to be abroad on a beautiful summer night. When close to the brink of the well, it halts, cringes in an attitude of rapt attention, listening to a faint scratching sound—the noise of some animal trying to force its way out of a prison. The snake curls its back in doubt whether to advance or retreat, but its trepidation is only momentary. Rendered reckless, perhaps, by the memory of some domestic grievance—for who knows if snakes, like men, love and suffer—it suddenly moves forward, heedless of consequences.

Crash ! one of the logs on the summit of the piles moves, totters, and falls ; from the place where it has lain, a grey head with snarling teeth peeps out, cautiously scanning the horizon. Following the head is a long thin body, that lies for a few seconds in its new position. Then, seeing nothing of an antagonistic nature—for, in spite of its cautious circumspection, it has not perceived the poisonous reptile—it drops to the ground and approaches the well. Then, but not till then, does the creature become aware of the ringed form approaching it.

For a moment the two creatures glare at each other in curious expectation. To the stoat there is an expression in the snake's eye which seems unnatural ; hitherto it has regarded the serpent tribe as distinctly peaceable ; why, then, should this one glare with such intense malignity ? Why does it spit out its forked tongue and hiss ? Because—and a shiver passes through the poor stoat—it is mad—mad with the summer heat.—By degrees it becomes animated, its eyes more and more baneful—its tail rings out a rapid warning—and it makes a rush for the now petrified stoat.

The latter stands as if fascinated, and remains so until its foe—for there can no longer be any doubt as to the snake's intentions—has approached within a few inches. The spell is then broken, and, regaining the use of its limbs, it retreats towards the wall. The snake makes ready for the fatal attack, draws back its head, and with a muscular movement of its striped neck, suddenly lunges forward. With a spasmodic motion the stoat springs aside, avoiding the vicious thrust ; but in so doing it stumbles over the brink of the well and falls with a loud splash into the water. The walls being

high and slippery, afford no means of escape ; and, after a brave struggle for life, the animal sinks beneath the dark surface, whilst its foe, scared by its unaccountable disappearance, seeks shelter beneath the wood pile.

I, Agonostes, waited to witness the end of the fight, and then turned toward the house with noiseless feet, and stepping on to the low platform, I entered the kitchen.

There were but four rooms in the dwelling, two on the ground floor, and two immediately above. The kitchen, in which I found myself, was a small apartment, with a stove in the middle, and a few plain pieces of furniture set around the walls. Under the window was a deal table upon which the evening meal was laid. It was not a sumptuous repast—home-made bread, syrup instead of butter, bacon and fried eggs. On the other side of the room was a large chest which served a double purpose ; the top was used as a rolling board, while the drawers contained groceries. Beside this stood a wooden bench, bearing a bucket of water and two or three dippers. This constituted the furniture of the kitchen.

The room next to it, styled the guest's chamber, was in reality a kind of lumber closet, all sorts of odds and ends littering the floor. Overhead were the bedrooms, separated from each other by a small partition destitute of a door, and so thin as to afford no privacy. To attempt to sleep in such rooms, amid such filth as there prevailed, would have been waste of time. One glance at the hordes of "yellow jackets," and other more obnoxious insects, was enough to impress this upon the mind of any reasonable man.

Outside, in the veranda, wrapped up in a blanket, is the place to sleep—there, though not wholly free from insect visitors, dreams will come at last, to cheat the sleeper with visions of his life in the old country.

Voices from the direction of the well attracted my attention.

I looked ; the occupants of the house were crossing the yard. The tall man in the centre, with the slouch hat carelessly thrust on the back of his head, was, I knew, my client—Edward Holt. He on the right, with a weaker, less marked physiognomy, was Ernest Rickman, his ranch "chum," and the long, lanky-bearded giant on the left was Bill Brookee, a Californian outlaw. From a moral point of view none of the

trio was prepossessing ; a minister might have passed several times before making up his mind to address them. This, of course, was to my satisfaction ; and I had little doubt of the success of my present campaign.

"Come on, boys, let's get our grub !" Holt exclaimed, throwing a sack of corn, which he had been carrying on his shoulders, down upon the platform.

"I guess you ain't far wrong, Ed," the Californian replied gruffly, from the tin basin in which his shock head had just been cooling. "I put in a spell of tough work this afternoon, and feel that I could do with a bite."

Rickman spoke next. "The eggs will be cold ; get a move on you, Bill," he said impatiently, drawing in his chair.

With a good many splutterings and oaths, the Californian completed his ablutions, and, after emptying the basin into the yard, sat down to the meal. His ferrety eyes soon perceived that Holt had not been so fastidious. There is one thing ranchmen usually avoid--sitting down to food with dirty hands. Their bodies may be unacquainted with water, their language and habits equally foul, but their hands, rough and misshapen as they are, must be washed before eating. Offenders against this social rule have a rough time of it in Oregon.

Bill grew serious. "Do you know what the boys at the Point say, Ed?" he remarked.

"No, and darn me if I care."

It was a contemptuous reply, shot out between mouthfuls of egg.

"Wall, I reckon it won't harm you to hear. Anyway you've got to do so. They sez, Holt, sez they, is the muckiest man we've ever struck. He makes bread with dirty hands."

"I've something to say to you two," was the only reply vouchsafed by Holt.

"Spit it out, boss."

Bill was apprehensive, and chewed his quid of tobacco uneasily. Holt's "somethings" were often of a dangerous nature.

Rickman, the quicker of the two, had jumped to conclusions.

"It's about young Goodman, ain't it?"

Bill's eyebrows were in elevation—he smelt poison.

Holt, in the quiet manner of one accustomed to take the lead in risky enterprises, with that steady self-possession to be met with in born gamblers, thrust his hands into his hip pockets and faced the others.

"You're on the track, Ern," he said. "It's that precious young tenderfoot who by the bye, ought to be here by now."

"The '*Frisco Examiner* has been blowing mighty hard over those railway strikes," Bill put in. "Do you reckon the kid's got skeered and trotted home?"

I had been standing by the door during their meal, but at the beginning of this colloquy, I left that position and posted myself behind the chair of my client, with one hand on his shoulder and the other on his moist forehead, pressing it almost caressingly. This formed a link between us, so that the evil persuasions of my soul might without hindrance enter his contaminated mind.

"I hope not, boys," he was saying, "for you see, a lot depends on his coming. If the sum his mother named is landed at the bank, there's not much fear about our share of it—even supposing—and he is such a d—d tenderfoot that the notion's ridiculous—he takes it into his head to doubt us and ask questions at the Point, what will he hear? Nothing against *us*!"

Rickman, who was lost in thought, asked suddenly—

"Is Josh Brown square?"

"Josh?" said Holt. "Safe as the old mare in the corral. I've sounded him on that score. He isn't such a son of a gun as to give us away to any greenhorn."

The speaker's lips curled at the bare idea of such innocence in the local storekeeper. Ole Man Brown, as folks called him, was a notability—a hard-headed business man who had managed to pile up money in a district where others lost it, and at a time when others felt its absence.

If any stranger wanted to buy land round the Point, he went to old Brown; if he wished to enquire into the antecedents of any member of the community, he went to old Brown. Not always to elicit truth perhaps, but to get his fill of facts—quite possible facts and plenty of them!

From this it may be gathered that Brown was a wellknown character; and Brown's daughters were certainly the elite of the place.

Every ambitious young farmer in the district had a hankering after them, and at one time or another had been seen, in his Sunday best, fixing his horse to the post on the stone platform; and every one had taken his refusal with an air of submission, for all knew Ole Man Brown and his love for his daughters.

So Josh was the first, perhaps the only man who needed "squaring"—the opinions of the rest counted for little.

"Well, if you've settled with Josh, that's everything."

Rickman was but half satisfied, however, and his voice showed it.

"You can sleep on that," said Holt complacently. "I've fixed him, and Jack Withely too."

"The Bedford Banker?" said Bill, who was beginning to show some excitement.

"That's the boy—Jack is slick enough for all the Bedford hoodlums" (*Anglicé*, scapegoats).

"You're right. With him on our side, we shall do well." Still Rickman was not at ease.

"Mrs Goodwin wrote to him on my recommendation," went on Holt, "asking a few pages of questions about our ranch, and our prospects. Also stating, that in the event of her son emigrating, she intended to lodge £500 with him. You bet, Jack gave her all the information she wanted!"

My client laughed, and the others followed suit; his mirth and his cynicism were alike infectious.

In the West, it is customary after supper to sit on the platform and enjoy the cool night air. I crouched among the men as they did so, observing them silently, and at my leisure.

Holt was the first to speak, drowning the faint barking of some distant dogs, and the click of hammers in some forge away across the desert.

"You are anxious to get back to the old country, Ern—and you, Bill, to the East?"

"Anxious is hardly the correct word," Rickman replied from his recumbent position against the wall. "If you had said infernally keen, you would have been nearer it."

"That's about it," chimed the Californian, "d—d keen. I'm thirsty for York city and the yellow-haired girls."

Holt laughed mechanically—this was no time for bantering woman-talk.

"Like me," he said, taking no notice of the last allusion, "you both want money ; like me, you aren't particular how you get it. But, unlike me, you haven't tried and tried, and thought and thought over, every way that seemed possible."

"Yes," they muttered wearily—they were tired of talking about this money which came no nearer for all their talking—"so long as we can leave this God-forsaken hole behind, we don't care how we raise the dollars. Put us in the way of getting them, and we'll soon show you."

"Well, boys," and Holt eyed them from his position in the shadow as they sat silhouetted in the moonlight, "you shall. There is nothing to prevent your moving from here" he sunk his voice to a whisper, "if *if*"—the repetition made his hearers shudder—"if you make up your minds."

Rickman stirred awkwardly—maybe he had had some dim notions himself.

"You speak in riddles," he said.

"Do I? I'll make myself clearer. None of us are over-scrupulous, eh, Bill?"

The Californian felt his veins creep. In the daytime, when the clear sun burned and blazed, he was as daring as the best of them ; but at night, when the shadows fell grim and weird, and the moon shone cold, Bill was another creature. He peered at the boss, and the boss, with the advantage of position, stared back at him. Both his tone and look were full of deadly significance.

"N—no," Bill replied, shivering. "I ain't particular—darn me if I'm skeered o' anything. Why, when I was down in Californy, once——"

"We've heard that gag before," cut in the boss. „You may say you ain't particular?"

"I sez so."

"So do I," chimed in Rickman.

It was ludicrous to observe how completely Holt's stronger will dominated theirs. When he spoke, they listened, swearing with him, laughing with him, grumbling with him, entirely swayed by his words, to do as he bid them.

For several days they had noticed he had been gloomy and absent-minded—as they conjectured, turning over in his brain some plan for their emancipation. His voice went on:

"Once establish the fact of your willingness to get off by hook or crook—the rest must be satisfactory. We will get it—we *will*——" he hissed out with snakish energy. The whole ranch vibrated with it, the huge outlined mountains took it up and flung it back again.

"We will get it!"

The coyotes baying among the pine-trees seemed to have caught the sound, and echoed it in sympathetic malignity. He paused to note with satisfaction the effect of his words; they had been playing on his tongue for weeks, waiting for the moment of liberty which had come at last.

The black, swarthy head of my client was intensified in the white light, the lean cadaverous face of Rickman, the huge ungainly form of the Californian, were weird enough company for any one to meet, and their thoughts were stranger still. No one spoke. Holt beat time on the woodwork with his feet. He had given himself away. With what result?

His usually emotionless nature was evidently agitated, the cool air passing over the plain from Snowy Bute fanned his face. The air, like the man, was impure. It brought with it the faintest tinge of something nauseous, something dead.

In hot countries the carcass of an animal becomes unbearable even in the short time that elapses before the birds of prey discover it. Rickman, glad of some excuse to turn "Why didn't you turn the hogs loose, Ed? That cow stinks."

My client frowned—he disliked digressions.

"Because," he said shortly, "the brute died of poison—I thought I told you about the rattler we found close to it. It must have lain down on the snake. Rattlers are just a bit tricky this hot weather. But what has that got to do with what we were talking about?"

The Californian grunted; he was in no mood to bind himself over to a plot incurring lynch law. He had seen something of that down South. His brain was slow and cautious for a Westerner; moreover, he was tired with his day's work, and wanted rest for his limbs as well as time for his thoughts.

He drew in his legs as if they pained him.

"I reckon, boys," he said, "I'll turn in. We can talk about the kid when he comes, time enough then and plenty. So long!"

Holt neither spoke nor moved; he was too incensed to

trust himself, so he contented himself with looking at Bill as he languidly rose and slouched off. There was little to glean from his expression—it was sullen and tired, with the heaviness that comes from long hours in the hot sun.

As he passed Rickman, the latter rose, and, bidding Holt good-night, followed Bill into the kitchen, closing the door after him. Holt strained his ears to the utmost, but could not hear their voices; and in a very few moments, their movements in the veranda overhead told him that they had retired for the night. The wind still blew over the plain with the same faint, pestilential taint. The embers in the kitchen stove burned up brightly, and then died out.

Still, in the distance the dogs barked, the coyotes howled, the moon mocked them with its changeless light—and still my client sat on on the edge of the platform, beating with his foot against the boarding.

The spirit of aggression—my spirit—was upon him; he cursed his comrades, he cursed the beasts on the hills, he cursed the luck that had brought him thither. Nothing would have pleased him better than an outlet for his combative propensities—some object on which to vent his spleen.

As I looked at him, he became almost the incarnation of evil—the evil that belongs to master criminals. His head, as I have said, was massive, and the bumps of mischief on either side were remarkably developed. And, as is so often the case with criminal heads of the higher intellectual order, the perceptive and reasoning faculties were strongly marked, thereby strengthening the natural propensities.

When I came to look at the back of the skull there was a singular deficiency—it fell away suddenly just where the moral group is often found, and would have attracted any novice in phrenology. Speaking of the head leads me to criticise the features. His eyes, surmounted by black eyebrows, were brown, or rather dark yellow, cool, steady, and half closed, with something in their quiet depths to arouse suspicion, and put a prudent man upon his guard. They were the eyes of a murderer.

The usual immobility of his face had given way to a flush and a slight twitch of annoyance. He was not accustomed to having his plans frustrated; he had wished for the company

of his companions to discuss an important matter, and they had refused it.

It had been through the agency of Rickman, who had sent an ingenious letter to a housemaster at his old school, that Goodwin had undertaken the journey. Without any other choice but the drudgery of an office, the boy, on leaving school, had communicated with the same master, hoping to hear of an opening abroad. Strange to relate that very morning the latter had received Rickman's glowing letter, from which he quoted some portions :—

"For a small sum a share in our syndicate can be bought. This would give an additional interest to the purchaser, who would naturally be drawn closer to the life than if he were a hired hand. Still, I should be glad to have boys from you here in any capacity, if only out of affection for the old school."—

Goodwin was destined to remember the house-master's concluding remark—

"Rickman is a man to be trusted, warm-hearted and sincere. Go to him by all means, and you will be sure of a royal welcome."

This closed the correspondence as far as the master was concerned. Goodwin had yet to write to Rickman. Several anxious weeks of waiting ensued, then came the reply.

It was principally composed of a description of the ranch, its products and prospects, and of the capital necessary for a share in the syndicate. Rickman played his role well. Careful not to make the financial portion too important, he wrote as one cheery, genial public schoolboy would write to another. And he succeeded.

Mrs Goodwin remarked to her dearest friend :

"Our boy will not be going to strangers. but to an old schoolfellow, a dear, kind young man, who will be like an elder brother to him. It is such a comfort to know of some one so thoroughly to be trusted."

So, on recommendation of the syndicate, Mrs Goodwin entered into correspondence with a banker in Bedford city, the nearest town to Vulture Point, and arranged to transmit to him £500, as soon as her son had settled down to ranch life.

All preliminaries being thus concluded to the satisfaction of both parties, Goodwin, furnished with an elaborate outfit,

left England when the summer was still young, and the trees covered with fresh leaves. Full of eager anticipations, his boyish hopes shrouding the future in a halo of romance, he travelled westward, thrilling with glad young wonder at the new sights he saw.

Holt had not moved much except to shift his hands to his knees.

"I want the money more than the others do," his thoughts ran, "and I generally get what I want out here. As far as I can see, there are two courses open to me— either to abscond with the money if he is unwilling to part with it, and leave the others to shift for themselves ; or to let others do away with the youngster and go shares in the £500. The former is more dangerous—but bah, why should I care—there is only one life after all."

Here I intervened : "And of course, no hereafter."

"True," he went on, "there is no evidence of a God of of punishment—none. All that is an idle superstition of the ancients. Life ends with death, and death can only last a moment. I'll risk it. I have nothing to lose, much to gain. Nature gave me plenty of wits, and, by Jove I'll use them."

The rafters overhead creaked.

"Hullo !" cried Holt suspiciously, "aren't you fellows asleep? You've been there long enough."

Californian Bill replied with a prolonged snore, indicating his inability to converse.

It was now late, and mindful of a heavy day's work to come, Holt rose and slowly moved away. Weary with toil and scheming he was soon asleep, and I alone in the ranch was still watching.

Preferring to keep my vigil on the platform, I gazed, reflectively at the long row of mountains, pencilled darkly in the moonlit background. Somehow Snowy Bute riveted my attention, and I found myself expecting something strange to appear on its summit.

"How like that grey rock is to a human figure," I thought. "It moves! It is a figure! It is leaping through space and coming towards me".

I stood amazed. What form, or spirit, wats this? Then

it drew nearer, and the halo of light accompanying it showed me that it was an angel of heaven. I recognised that the dimly—seen saintly features and mournful eyes must be those of Sagatheela. In another moment she was by my side, regarding me with her accustomed melancholy. She spoke, but tears almost choked her voice—

“Once more we meet, O Agonistes—and alas that I find thee thus occupied. Lovest thou Diaphernes still as ever?”

These words only added fuel to the ingling flame; I faced her impatiently, fascinated by the countenance I so bitterly hated.

“Ay,” I cried in my Lerceness, “I love him more than ever. And should I not? Has he not done more for me than thy God will ever do?”

She paused for a moment, then laid her hand upon my shoulder. A sensation like that which I had experienced on a previous occasion pervaded my limbs. I looked upon her with diminishing abhorrence, that might almost have changed to liking. Had she continued silently looking at me with those holy eyes, and touching me with that gentle hand, she might have gained a victory. But she spoke. The light of love in her eyes impressed me differently from the tone of her voice. The latter was too womanish! With an impatient shrug of my shoulder that loosened her hold, I confronted her in sullen stubbornness. Never was a woman more fully convinced of her failure to force love from the unwilling—she stood silent, and her silence spoke of the intensity of her shame.

She threw one imploring look at me that lingered long in my mind. Then, almost unintentionally. I cried to Diaphernes for strength to keep loyal to him. And there was sent upon me a fit of savage, irresistible fury.

Forgetting her immortality, I leaped at her with murderous intent, and a barbarous yell upon my lips. Then as I plunged forward and clutched the air, a cry which, might have been that of a soul with its love refused broke upon my ears, and rang around me. A light, white and blinding, flashed in a succession of quick flashes from the summit of Snowy Bute, and ere it ceased Sagatheela had vanished. But on the eastern horizon I read, written in crimson letters across the fathomless blue: “**THINK NOT TO TERRIFY GOD’S OWN ELECT WITH EMPTY BLOWS.**”

Then a mighty wind swept across the barren plain, and in it, riding on a coal-black horse, I saw the figure of an angel in shining armour, whose open vizor revealed the face of her whom I had striven to repulse. Through fence and barrier the swift steed bore her on, and, as she dashed past me, I heard her say :

"Next time thou seest me, thou shalt implore my forgiveness."

Then an earthquake seemed to heave up the bosom of the earth ; the mountains reared their heads, the solemn pines waved to and fro, the desert spat forth flames, and I hid my face in fear.

CHAPTER XI

THE TENDERFOOT

LIFE on a ranch out West seldom varies from the same, dull routine. Thompson's County, Oregon, was no exception. In summer work begins at five, before the hot sun has risen, and the air is still cold. Breakfast at six, then off to the orchard, corral, or cornfield—work, work, work, with the scorching sun overhead, the hard baked soil underfoot, swearing, blaspheming, boasting of drunken and immoral revelties, tales of women and of Chinese Frisco—stories of a hundred and one fictitious escapades. Back to a hasty dinner at eleven, and off again. Such is the life that men lead out West with land to sell—but it is shrouded with glamour when they speak to their younger brethren in the old country. "Plenty of work, plenty of honestly earned rest."

To Neville Goodwin the change, after a life of English comfort, was very cruel—and although he was at first too much attracted by the novelty of his surroundings to give way to grief, he soon learned to bemoan the difference, and suffered all the miseries of home-sickness.

Of the treatment he received from his companions he had no complaint to make. They had been kind and considerate, had allowed him a day or two's rest, and given him the lightest tasks. Seeing that he had not the physique to stand the strain of work in cornfield and orchard, he had

been appointed cook, which, with their limited menu, involved no great labour. Tea, bacon, or mush for breakfast ; tea, bacon, potatoes, sometimes hard beef, more rarely beans and damper, for dinner ; tea, bacon and eggs for supper. Milk was a luxury, to be seen but seldom, and whisky never appeared at meals.

Limited as the menu was, there was one dish which caused Goodwin some anxiety to prepare. That dish was mush. The art making porridge sinks into insignificance compared with the Oregon recipe for mush.

A handful of smooth oatmeal is poured into a frying pan already swimming in liquid bacon fat ; this compound is stirred till it becomes an uninviting yellow paste painfully suggestive of train oil ; with it is mixed a cupful, sometimes of milk, oftener of water, and the whole must be kept on the move till its hissing and bubbling announces boiling pitch, when it is ready.

Goodwin's difficulty lay in judging exactly the right moment for adding the water—he was often too soon or too late, with disastrous results. But the men were either too polite or not fastidious enough to grumble at the spoilt flavour—and ate the food placed before them with stoicism worthy of a better cause. Perhaps, hunger was often responsible for this.

Besides undertaking the culinary department, Goodwin had other duties to perform. Every morning the hogs had to be supplied with drinking water, and this involved considerable manual labour at the corral pump. It took rather more than two hours to fill the troughs, and by the end of the times his arms ached horribly. It was cruel, wearisome labour for one of delicate physique. But what Goodwin hated far more than the muscular strain was the mental inactivity. The monotony of the task was terrible. As his arms moved, and the rusty iron creaked and the water splashed, his eyes wandered vainly over the unlovely plain to find one spot whereon they could rest with pleasure.

So, on the whole, his new sphere of life was most unprepossessing, and differed totally from that to which he had looked forward. The "Romance of the Wild West" was dissipated ; the bold, large-hearted ranchmen and cowboys were far removed from their material representatives—

mean, cunning, petty farmers and dishonest hired hands

To Goodwin the gradual revelation of the sordid side of human nature, the craft and subtilty of men, with their lust, their immorality, their cruelty, their treachery, was like a blow that staggered the foundations of his being. He sat in silent shame, with a strange thrill of indignation pulsing through him, as he listened to the vile badinage that always went on after meals. It was so new, so terribly new to him—and he felt his heart die within him as he heard it. A sudden transportation from heaven to hell could not have dismayed him more.

But this was only the beginning. His eyes were merely being opened to the foulness which does exist in one section of humanity. He had yet to find that the beloved ones, from whom he had lately parted, were to shatter his faith still more. And he had begun to count on them for sympathy and a ready audience when he returned. A scheme for leaving the ranch, getting to New York, and thence to England, and throwing himself trustfully upon their affections was already forming in his brain. Unfortunately for him, he had not yet learned to mask his feelings.

The three men read him like an open book. They never ceased to watch him, trying to gather from his expression how long this fit of home-sickness was likely to last. Would it pass away and leave him resigned to his fate, submitting to sign away his freedom and transfer to them all the capital he possessed—or would it develop into a ruling passion?

There are some people, who, true to first impressions, never change their aversions, but hold to them through all vicissitudes. Goodwin was one of these. As a child he had had fixed ideas of what life should be, given certain conditions ; also he had been imbued with strong likes and dislikes that were never modified.

In his letters home he gave way to them, expatiating on the disappointment he was experiencing, on the uselessness of investing in so distasteful an enterprise. He seemed to be always poring over these letters—at least so it appeared to the Californian, who had under taken the duties of spy. Such a task presented little difficulty—everything facilitated it. Bill had merely to return at an unexpected hour from his work, approach the house unobserved, and ensconce

himself, against the wall on the windowless side. There, by peering through some large cracks in the wall could observe much and deduce more.

More than once he had been surprised to see Boodwin kneeling on the floor in prayer ; at other times he buried his face in his hands and relieved his feelings by violent, almost hysterical weeping. This behaviour was very novel to the hardened Californian, and, although he could not help feeling amused at the boy's prayers to a God in whom he himself disbelieved so thoroughly, it was not without pity that he beheld his grief.

Bill was not a thorough villain. Few weak—as the world calls “weak”—men are. He still had a heart, crusted as it was with a covering of sin, that was capable of a kind of sympathy. A volley of oaths would doubtless have appealed to him more than tears, but he was beginning to understand that all Englishmen were not cast in the mould of Holt and Rickman ; that, on the contrary some were gently nurtured and compelled respect through their simple purity. Still, Bill could not afford to be scrupulous. He feared Holt too much to forsake him and side with the tenderfoot ; so he applied himself to his work, and reported the things he had witnessed to the boss.

The argument that ensued between them produced a definite result. One evening on the plea of posting a letter, Goodwin excused himself from supper and set off slowly towards the settlement. The ground in front of him was flat and bare for several hundred yards, without trees or bushes or anything behind which a man might lie. Then, however, at perhaps a quarter of a mile from the ranch came a slight rising, so slight that it was barely perceptible. It continued however, till at the end of a mile a marked elevation had been reached, the soil being still brown and barren. Walking onwards and upwards one came at last to a few trees and a patch of alfalfa, and here, in the heat of the day, it was not uncommon for drivers to recline for an hour's sleep.

Toward this oasis Goodwin directed his steps. The mission on which he was bent preoccupied him too much to allow his faculties any chance of asserting themselves. Consequently, he was unaware of the fact that a man had followed, in his wake warily, and at a distance, halting when he halted

advancing when he did, seeking the cover of the earth whenever he showed any sign of looking backward.

At the clump of trees, the tracker threw himself down and enjoyed a rest till Goodwin's figure had diminished to a vanishing point in the distance, just where the plain dipped down into the settlement. Further delay might be dangerous, so Bill—for it was he—picked himself up and covered the intervening ground at an easy run. His quarry had by this time entered the main streets, for, like, all Americans, the inhabitants of Vulture Point liked to call their little hamlet a "city," and its tiny thoroughfares "streets." The one in which Goodwin found himself was Republican Street, and there dwelt Joshua Brown.

Brown's store was open. It always was until late at night, when all chance of securing customers was past, for Josh did not like missing a chance, and worked hard to increase the pile of dollars lying secure in a far-off bank. He was not the man to trust a Bedford banker.

When Goodwin passed, he was greeted with a cheery "good-evening" by the keen-eyed American, who watched him, as if taking stock of some grocery sample, from the platform of his store. A few seconds after, the Californian passed, and the reason for his presence was well divined by the store-keeper.

"I guess they're smart enough after the Britisher um at that ranch," he observed meditatively to a man who was sitting by him.

"You bet!" was the reply, in that dry tone which imparts humour to everything a Yankee says. "The kid can't smile without Holt wantin' to know why. I saw it when I was round t'other day."

The Californian slouched along, passed the smithy, the post-office, the drug store, still keeping Goodwin in sight, and not giving up the pursuit till he saw him take a sudden turn to the left and ascend by a beaten track the rugged side of a hill.

There was only one solution to this move, and that fitted in with Bill's theory—the Englishmann was going to the farm of John Carlton, a fellow-countryman, and the inveterate enemy of Holt.

Satisfied with this discovery, the Californian wheeled

and sauntered back, calling in on his way at the largest hotel in the place. It was not palatial, having only four sleeping and two dining-rooms—good enough accommodation for Western folk.

Left to himself, with no further responsibility, Bill enjoyed the luxury of a drink, a smoke, a chew, and a quiet meditation on event's past, present, and to come.

The man to whom Goodwin went had at one time away in the seventies been employed as a miner in the North-umberland coal-fields. Inveigled into a brawl with some drunken companions, he had so far forgotten the requirements of his country's laws as to strike a killing blow. Fortunately for him, the scuffle took place in the brawk, on an open space, and in a spot little frequented by the police. Aided by these circumstances, and unobserved by his intoxicated companions, he slipped away and ran home as fast as his legs could carry him. Without waiting a moment, he collected all his savings, and with a few articles of clothing stuffed hastily into a handkerchief, rushed off to the nearest station. Luck again favoured him—he was in time to catch the midnight train for London.

Thus in the morning, when the body was found, and a hue and cry raised, Carlton was many miles distant, meditating a trip to the United States. The golden prospects of the West had caught his fancy when a youth and at a later period had led him to think seriously of emigrating. So, in his emergency, he naturally turned thither, and secured his ticket for New York on an outward bound liner.

Many years of ups and downs succeeded that memorable flight. Sometimes his pile grew until it was nearly large enough to buy a business and settle down to a quiet life; then, by some reckless act, it was diminished to—nothing. And this not once or twice, but often.

Chance guided him to marry a Chicago woman, presented him with a half-witted son, and sent him to Oregon to seek a better fortune. Once, reduced to a state of absolute pauperism, he struck Vulture Point, and, hearing, that hands were wanted at Holt's ranch, he offered his services.

He and his family remained there for several months. faring neither better nor worse than other hired labourers. Had it not been for one thing, the enmity between him and

Holt would never have arisen. Holt was a bully by nature. He was never so happy as when killing or wounding some animal. In the absence of such "sport" he led his companions a hard life with cursing and fault-finding. To such a man, Carlton's son offered an excellent butt ; being a semi-idiot, he had neither strength nor spirit to resent the treatment he received.

Never was a youth subjected to more vindictive tyranny. Whenever his parents were absent, he was either made the laughing-stock of all the hired hoodlums, till they were tired of it, or else beaten and even brutally branded by Holt himself.

This latter torture was resorted to one day when Holt returned to the house and discovered that no meal had been prepared by young Carlton, who was fast asleep in a corner.

My client's demoniacal temper rose, and, quietly approaching the fire, he thrust a rod of steel between the bars. In a few moments it was heated red hot and applied to the bared chest of the helpless boy. It was useless to cry out ; no one was near, and there was no pity in the eyes of the man who knelt upon him ; he could only writhe under the torture, emitting the incoherent babblings of a weakened brain. Silence was enforced upon him by terrible threats, accompanied by repeated blows ; and on the return of his parents, he dared not reveal to them the torments he had undergone.

One day, however, when Holt was engaged in his favourite recreation, Carlton came upon the scene—and a furious fracas took place. It looked like killing. Both men had closed and were fighting for their lives, both were wiry and hard as cart steel, and it is difficult to surmise which would have come out the victor, had not a party of travellers arrived and effected a separation. After this, Carlton sought shelter elsewhere, and finally fixed his quarters at the ranch on the hill-side. Smarting under a burning sense of wrong, he had shunned as much as possible the society of his fellow-men, and brooded alone over schemes of vengeance. This seclusion did not increase his popularity, and at the time of Goodwin's advent, no man in the district was more thoroughly detested than John Carlton, and no woman more consistently slandered than his wife. To be seen in their company was enough to secure the scathing condemnation of Vulture Point. After *that* has been said of a man, his last social hope is exter-

minated, the career of an outlaw lies inevitably before him.

When the news of Goodwin's arrival was noised in the settlement, a fact which Holt in his annoyance credited to the gossiping tongue of the Californian, Carlton resolved to get hold of the tenderfoot. Desperate as he was—the lease of the ranch was nearly up, and he had not a cent to his name—he saw in the newcomer a means to his end.

One morning, therefore, after careful reconnoitring, he approached Holt's ranch and knocked at the door. As he expected, no one but the Britisher was there. The boy was as usual a picture of misery, sitting by the table alone, thinking of home.

"Hullo!" Carlton exclaimed, as if surprised at the sight. "Why, what's up? In the blues, my boy! Come, cheer up, never say die! I reckon you and I are fellow-countrymen. Your hand, mister, I'm glad to make yout acquaintance."

There was something so cheering in the visitor's unlooked-for appearance, to say nothing of the genial smile that hovered over his weather-beaten face, that Goodwin felt his heart yearn towards him. It was an act of Providence. God had heard his prayers, and had sent some one to comfort him! He was not backward in responding to the advance of the other. Their hands closed, and the hearty grip of the elder was as a strong tonic to the younger. He was too unsophisticated to know that Diaphernes' emissaries find a blanc smile and a greeting of blustering fellowship their most excellent mask. To him this kindly grizzled veteran was the very incarnation of open-hearted charity; of that sort of friendliness that invites confidence.

After a brief conversation, Carlton came to the point assuming a confidential air.

"The best thing you can do," he said, "is to get right away from here."

Goodwin felt a chill run through him. In one of these strange revelations men sometimes have, the whole scene seemed to have been enacted before at some far-off date. He knew he had been expecting its recurrence, and was crushed by the sense of impending evil.

Carlton narrowly watched the effect of his words, and proceeded :

"Between you and me, this Holt is an utter rascal, what Yanks call a slick card. He and his chums have been looking for a chance to pull out of here—you may well look scared—because"—he sank his voice to a whisper—"the ranch is a fake, and doesn't pay them a cent. What they wanted was a tenderfoot like you with a lump of brass, to be sucked in. They talked of you before you came as Rickman's greenhorn, Holt's sucker. There. Mister Britisher, that's what's the matter with you! Sez I to the missis, 'Missis, sez I, it that young Goodwin doesn't move out at once, they'll have the very skin off his back.' Now, young man, what sez you?"

Goodwin was flabbergasted. This was even worse than he had imagined. What could he do? Should he trust this man, rely on his relations' clemency and go to them, or wait to see how events shaped themselves. Carlton was waiting for his answer.

"To tell you the truth, Mr Carlton," he began, "I'm very awkwardly placed. You see, my people at home have implicit confidence in this concern of Rickman's, and I doubt if they would believe my yarn. They would think it a ruse to bolster up my return!"

"I reckon I might fix that for you," was the quiet reply. "Just let me know how he gulled you out. Now come, you may rely on me. I'd sooner have my neck stretched than go back on a youngster like you."

Thus pressed, Goodwin told him everything—how glad the folks at home had been to hear of an opening for him, how he had boasted of his determination to pile up a fortune how glowingly Rickman had written of the ranch, and what a disappointment it had all been. He even spoke with winning innocence of his mother's love, of his happy schoolboy life, of his financial prospects. He did not notice the glimmer in his new friend's eyes when he spoke of the £500.

"Well, my boy," observed Carlton, cutting himself a plug of tobacco, "you will live to see the old ones at home yet, maybe, if you follow my advice." "If not—I don't know—they don't stick at much. I know a thing or two against two of them, at all events, which would be swinging matters in a law-abiding country."

The old man arose. Even murderers are sometimes virtuous.

"Well, what *can* I do?"

The boy was at his wits' end, an easy dupe for any unscrupulous man. Carlton smote his palm as if with sudden inspiration.

"I have it!" he cried. "Come along with me. In a few days, I'm going to Crescent City with my two horse team, to scout around for work. For a couple of dollars I'd carry your baggage, and plant you down there. There are plenty of tramps—coaling-ships I mean—that would take you to 'Frisco for next to nothing. Then you could get by train to New York, or direct to London in a sailing ship."

The horror of his position was creeping with effect over Goodwin. In this project he saw some chance of escape, of breathing purer air uncontaminated by the wretches with whom he was daily in contact.

With the impulsiveness worthy of an Irishman, though there was not an ounce of Celtic blood in his veins, he leaped into the net extended before him.

"I will do it," he said. "But you must put a note in my letter home, to back up my statements."

This idea did not seem to please the ex-miner.

"I can't write," he said shortly, but added with a smile, "but the missis can. She would be just the right one. Will you come and see her. Drop in to-night; if you aren't too dainty, maybe we can manage some food to your liking."

Goodwin hesitated to accept the invitation. He must have some plausible excuse, otherwise his departure would arouse suspicion.

"Say you have a letter to post," suggested Carlton, "and you must catch the last mail. Put on a careless voice and stroll off across the desert—but keep your eyes skinned. That Californian is as sly as any coyote."

Nothing further of importance passed between them. With a parting warning, Carlton mounted his horse and left the premises, watched earnestly by his new acquaintance until he passed out of sight across the brown desert.

With a tumult of conflicting emotions raging in his breast,

the Englishman turned from the window to meet the door.

"Hullo, Neville!" cried the latter. "Been having company? Who is your new friend?"

There was only one course open to the desperate youth.

"I don't know," he said. "He never told me. Some one who came to see Holt, got tired of waiting, and went off saying he would call again."

Rickman said no more—but Goodwin wondered uneasily how much he knew.

That evening he made the excuse about the letter, and set off for the ranch on the hill-side. One thing he forgot to do—that was, to look behind! However, he had some excuse, he had seen the Californian go off to the orchard a few minutes before, and imagined, therefore, that no spying on his part need be feared.

The first thing that struck Goodwin's notice in Carlton's ranch was the evidence of extreme poverty everywhere apparent. The furniture was meagre and dilapidated, a broken-down bed serving in lieu of chairs; the table was propped up by a box to avoid imminent collapse; an old trunk smeared with grease doubtless served as a receptacle for kitchen utensils—one or two were resting upon it. For ornament, the room boasted a few soiled prints from illustrated papers, crookedly nailed against the wall.

If Neville Goodwin was unfavourably impressed by the dwelling, he was still less attracted by the lady of the house when she welcomed him. There was a hardness in the cold brown eyes, a thinness in the nostrils and lips that betokened innate and lurking cruelty; there was something repulsive in the broad sallow face and close black hair. Then her handshake lacked heartiness; it was cold and slimy. Noticing that he hesitated, she invited him to sit on the couch, apologised for lack of chairs, and said a good deal about his deigning to enter so humble an abode. The meal was very frugal—there was tea, but neither sugar nor milk eggs and dry break completed the fare. But what they lacked in eatables, they were willing to make up in conversation.

Mrs Carlton was vehement in her abuse of Holt.

"He is a scamp," she declared, "a rogue that would stop at nothing, not even murder. The way he treated Albert is enough to prove it."

"Ay," said her husband, "he treated him right bad. If there was any justice in this God-forsaken country, he might have swung for it. Lynch law has settled many a man for less."

The woman went on :

"It will be a good thing for you, lad, when you are clear of him. I reckon, though, there'll be a trouble before they let you go."

Goodwin drank his tea, feeling anything but comfortable. The thought of his departure being hindered had not occurred to him.

"Will there?" he enquired in a tone of such consternation that the Carltons exchanged meaning glances. But that glance to Goodwin was a full interpretation of the woman's physiognomy, and put an end to any doubts he might have left.

"When do you want to move," was the next remark levelled at him over the narrow table.

"Not until I hear from home."

"*What!*" the man's and woman's voice came together, and the former proceeded : "But, lad, I took it for granted you meant to quit without delay. You were to let me drive you over to Crescent City next week."

Goodwin knew he was in a awkward position, but faced them coolly.

"Yes," he said. "But I have changed my mind."

"Have you seen Holt?"

There was almost a threat in the woman's voice as she fixed her eyes on him.

As a rule, there is more subtlety of expression in dark than in light eyes—blue eyes are more perceptibly deceitful than the bolder brown—but in those of this woman, the meaning was palpable. Goodwin's reply baffled her.

"No," he said. "I have not seen Holt, and have had little conversation with Rickman, nothing bearing on the subject."

There was no gainsaying this statement ; it bore the unmistakable stamp of truth, and the speaker was a gentleman.

Like all her sex, Mrs Carlton hated to be thwarted by a man. She persevered.

"Don't be a fool, young man," she said, with the air of one speaking for his good. "It's just this way with you—either you stay to be stripped of every blessed cent you've got, with perhaps a bullet in your brain as a keepsake—or else you go with my husband to live and strike oil elsewhere. That's about the way of it. Which is it to be?"

But Goodwin did not falter, he inherited the bulldog tenacity of soldier ancestors, men who were always used to face long odds.

"I shall remain until I hear from home," he replied, and to that reply he consistently adhered.

At last it dawned upon the worthy couple that this tender foot meant what he said, that perhaps he was not quite so simple as he looked. And they had perforce to let him abide by his decision, with a growing conviction that that £500 was not destined to come their way.

After promising to pay them another visit, Goodwin arose, and, afraid lest his relief at leaving them should be manifest in his tell-tale face, he bade them a hasty farewell.

The walk home seemed unusually long, perhaps because he was weary and has suffered much from the heat of the day. The desert seemed interminable, and, in spite of the clear moonlight that lit up the mountain and valley, he lost his way. Indeed, the moon was the cause of it. It reminded him of home, of the starlight nights when he and his mother used to sit together and speculate upon the mysteries of the heavens. But, stumbling along, heedless whither his feet carried him, quite by chance, he hit upon the right track, and after that it was not long until he was standing before the ranch.

A light in the kitchen told him that some of the men were still about, and, much to his chagrin, he perceived Holt in his favourite position on the platform, half hidden in the shadow of the wall. There was a strange, uncanny feeling in the air; a ghostly wind blew through the alfalfa and lashed up the smouldering logs. The effect was heightened by the presence of my client, who, all unconsciously,

took from me some traces of the invisible world of evil.

Goodwin shivered. Holt spoke first.

"Hullo!" he said. "Where the deuce have you been? We thought you were lost, and Bill wanted to get up a search party. Dear old Bill, he does love you like a brother."

The arch hypocrisy of the last remark was too evident.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, with sidelong look What was he thinking about?

Neville at bay was cooler than Neville in action.

"I've been down to the settlement," he said, "and lost my way coming back, which makes me so late."

"Oh, lost your way? The moon is bright too how very odd!" the satirical laugh jarred on Goodwin.

"It may seem odd to you," he retorted with more spirit than one would expected, "but I'm new to these night rambles, and I confess I have always to stand still and think before I can hit on the right track."

Holt's love of torture was coming well to the front. He leaned forward, his yellow eyes gleaming, and settled to his task with keen relish.

"I believe you mentioned that you had been to the settlement. May I venture to ask when?"

"Pray don't apologise. I don't in the slightest mind telling you. I was there an hour ago."

"Did you pass Brown's store?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you see Bill?"

"Bill? No, was he there?"

"Yes," rejoined my client, enjoying the other's slight discomfiture. "Bill *was* there, in fact was there for more than two hours, and has only just got back. Curious you didn't meet, isn't it?"

"I suppose I was walking with my eyes shut; it's a habit I've got into."

"A queer habit and a dangerous one. Yes, I reckon you were; still, it's a coincidence. Had supper?"

"No—am I too late?"

"I reckon not. If you ain't particular, you'll find a bite of something and a dipper of cold tea."

To keep up the role of the liar, Goodwin accepted the

offer and made a meal of half-baked "damper." This finished, he crept up to his bed in the room above, and in a very short time his breathing announced to the Californian, who as usual was listening close at hand, that he was asleep.

An hour later, the three ranchmen sat below discussing Goodwin's fate.

"It must be done," my client said, putting away the lamp and resting his elbow on the table.

The room was a fit meeting-place for conspirators, flooded as it was with the white light that streamed through the lattice window, showing up the pale countenances of the inmates. The fire had died out but not long enough since for the ashes to have ceased slipping from their places within the bars and breaking the silence by their fitful movements. An uneasy quiet succeeded the last words. The Californian, unable to stand it any longer, at last broke in:

"How about the money, Ed?"

"That's safe. Whitely has it fast enough, the old lady sent it with a babbling letter a week ago. She didn't wait for her darling to write, but, thinking it would tend to make him settle to his interesting occupation, she forwarded it without delay."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" muttered Rickman.

"How could I? I only knew it myself this morning. I met Whitely."

"Then, I reckon the sooner we get to work the better," quoth Bill, with greedy anticipation.

"Just so! I, for my part, have an idea—but I daresay you have too—eh, Rickman?"

Rickman became suddenly and mysteriously intelligent.

"Ye—es," he drawled, imitating unconsciously the Yankee inflexion. "I've a sort of notion how to work it."

(Both my hands were rubbing the brow of my client.)

"Well," Holt said slowly, with an impressive pause now and then, "let each of us try his plan in turn. *Butt—*" and a death-like silence ensued till he continued,—"*but* we must exercise the utmost caution; we have enemies—Carlton, his wife, and several others. Nothing must be done to arouse suspicion—no clumsy bungling, Sabbey?"

Again a silence followed, even more horribly intense than the former. The moonlight seemed to burst into a stronger flood, the shadows to assume more unearthly shapes, the baying of the coyotes to resemble ghostly voices. A chilly blast of wind blew with a creaking sound through the doorway; the lamp gave one feeble flicker and died out. A terror of darkness seemed to fall on the trio, making them fear to move. Holt recovered first.

"We are a pack of fools," he observed, "to be scared by the moon. Now to business. You shall try first, Rick; but how?"

"Leave that to me," was the reply. "I've thought it out. Are you sure of the money, that's all? I don't care about meddling in the matter otherwise."

"You needn't fear that."

"And our shares?"

"£150 each. £50 to Whitely."

"That's all Chinese to me," growled the Californian, "what does it mean in dollars?"

"Dollars 750 each. Now, are you satisfied?"

"I'm on," observed Rickman, complacently gazing out of the window. He was no longer afraid.

"And if you fail?" quiered my client.

"Then I'll take my turn," Bill answered for him, chewing his tobacco in savage earnestness. To look at him, one would have credited him with the courage of a lion, but I knew better than that.

"Then if you fail I will try."

My client, when roused, could not speak like an ordinary man—he either shouted, or hissed out his words with a stress that would have been ridiculous in a speaker of less threatening aspect.

I gently caressed the ill-shaped head. "And succeed," I whispered to his feverish brain.

Springing from his chair, he moved noiselessly across the floor to a corner of the room, to the astonishment of his companions, who scarcely knew him in this new phase of excitement.

"What the deuce are you up to?" Rickman enquired anxiously. There was no knowing what might happen on a night like this—a night that seemed fit to shelter a hundred lurking assassins.

"Drink to the luck of our enterprise," Holt said, placing a whisky keg on the table.

"Yes, we will," said the others, but they cast apprehensive looks around.

"Then pledge yourselves to be steadfast—no looking back."

My client fixed them in turn with his yellow eyes, strong in my power.

The men were spellbound for a moment ; the seemed to 'the man incarnation of the evil they dared not resist. Then, shaking off their nervousness, they repeated his toast—"No looking back !"

So, on that night, in a lone ranch on the desert of the Vulture Point, did three men, aided, though they knew it not, by a chosen emissary of the Prince of Darkness drink a dipper of raw whisky, and their toast was the murder of an English boy—a pale, weary boy, who lay sleeping above them, his unconscious face turned to the stars he loved.

CHAPTER XII

PROGRESS OF THE TENDERFOOT

FOUR weeks had elapsed since Goodwin's arrival, and, during that time, he had been treated rather as a guest than as a ranch hand. Every consideration had been shown him, every device tried to make him alter his opinion of the ranch life. But, in spite of their care, of the restraint the men placed on their tongues, of the virtuous sentiments they were beginning to express, the tenderfoot clung to his first impressions. He hated the place, the men, their ways ; and nothing would make him change his views.

Of Carlton he had seen nothing since his visit to the ranch on the hill ; and from this he inferred that he must be away working „up country." Goodwin was not sorry ; he instinctively felt that the tender mercies of Carlton and his wife might be worse than those of Holt. At least, in the settlement it was known where he was. Would Holt and his confederates dare to ill-use him, with every probability of being found out? He thought and hoped not.

Early one morning he set out for the post-office, and received with trembling hands the long-desired letter. Without any doubts as to its contents, he waited until no one was in sight to read it.

His mother wrote :

"On no account, my darling boy, must you come home. After all the expense of your journey and outfit, it would be foolish to return before giving the life a fair trial. As to the tales you have heard about Holt and his friends, don't believe them. They are probably invented by his enemies—all prosperous people, you know, have enemies—and of course you will meet with plenty of unscrupulous rogues ready to poison the minds of young men like you against any one they dislike. Why, my dear boy, Mr Rickman is an old Clevetonian—how can you be so foolish? I think you owe him, at least, an apology. Now, please, be sensible. You will soon get over your home-sickness, get into your work, and come back in a few years strong and hardy, for a holiday. The £500 is waiting for you in Whitely's bank. Invest it in the syndicate as soon as you like, but get a lawyer to see that all is straight, and the share properly attested. Cheer up, darling boy, and be brave. You can't expect life to be all roses and no thorns; we have all had and are having our battles, though you might never think it. What poor Christian soldiers we should make if we were to turn tail and run away at the first onset."

The rest was merely affectionate messages from various members of the family.

To Goodwin the disappointment was intense. It was evident that his return would vex them, and lower him in the estimation of all. So there was nothing to be done but remain and force himself to endure the life which seemed at this moment more intolerable than ever.

Thoroughly disheartened, he returned to the ranch, with, however, one firm determination in his mind. He was resolved not to part with the £500 till fully convinced that his instinctive aversion to Holt and his friends was indeed unjustifiable. He was thinking this over when he encountered my client sauntering down the track towards him.

"Hullo, youngster he cried !" (and I slipped my arm into

his as he spoke), "down in the blues on such a lovely morning? Come, buck up! Where have you been?"

Now, there was no one Goodwin less desired to meet than Holt, and fearing that he might betray his sentiments, the boy simulated neuralgia.

"To the drug store," he said, holding his hand to his face. "My teeth bothered me all last night."

"Sorry to hear it Could Joe Edmunds do anything for you?"

"No—at least, he was out."

"Well, have a pull of whisky, you will find some in the keg. I know of nothing better neuralgia. Oh, by the bye, Neville," the words came slowly, as if something important was to follow, "we have been talking about the syndicate. It is proposed to add on a couple of hundred yards to the orchard, and stock it with the best apple and pear-trees. This, of course, means an immediate outlay, and the question of funds crops up. Rickman will invest \$500, Brooke and I \$400 each. I believe you have some idea of joining us, and have a certain capital already banked in Bedford. Oh, don't look surprised! Rickman heard about it from your mother."

The boy walked slowly along, kicking the stones in his way. What could he say?

"Look here, Mr Holt," he began, with a sudden inspiration, "to be candid, I don't like the life here at all. The climate disagrees with me, the people are not to my taste, and the work isn't congenial."

He stopped, because he saw that the other was smiling at him, in the manner which fathers assume when they wish to look forbearing towards the hastiness of youth! It was a galling smile, and Neville writhed inwardly. What could he do if Holt persisted in regarding his case from that standpoint.

"We all thought as you do when we first came out," the elder man said gently, "but after the comparison with the old country became less fresh in our minds, we got over the homesickness; and now, why, we wouldn't change with any business men in England. Where would you get such magnificent, wild, unlimited country—such freedom, such healthy conditions of work? Then suddenly dropping from the oratorical style into his natural tone, „but what do you mean to do if you leave us? Return to England, to the regret of your friends,

and your own, when you come to you senses and say as your excuse that you didn't like the life? It would be rather weak, wouldn't it? And, once back, what will you do? Go into an office, and drudge away in a stuffy room behind a counter with ten hour's work in front of you each morning, and a fortnight's holiday un the year? Would you like *that* after your freedom here? Come my boy, I'm old enough to be your father, and have been through the mill of life enough, at any rate, to see the difference between advantages and disadvantages. Besides, I am no idle speculator or adventurer, but a hard-headed business-man, who can distinguish between a good and bad deal, and calculate profits to a nicety. Come, what do you say? Your share will bring you in a income, not princely at first, but enough to secure you a fair position, in the place, with a pretty little nest-egg in the bank. Come, cheer up; look at it from a manly point of view. Think of those at home and what they expect of you."

Goodwin listened to this harangue unmoved. He was not one to be swayed from his settled course by a man's words—least of all by the words of a man whom he distrusted. So he bit his under-lip and kept silence.

This roused my client. He felt a string of oaths pulling at his tongue, and kept them back only by a great effort. They had by this time reached the gate in the fence, and a troop of hogs that had broken loose from the corral scattered at their approach.

"Aren't you ready with your answer," Holt asked, trying to keep up his pleasantness with a weak attempt at a smile.

But the reply, when it came, did not please him.

"I am still of the opinion that I shall never like the life, and therefore, with many thanks to you all the same, I must finally decline to put my money into the suggested scheme."

The tenderfoot meant what he said. There was no doubt of that, and, leaving Holt to his own company, Goodwin started in pursuit of the refractory swine.

Glances at the retreating figure trampling over the squirrel grass, Holt suddenly returned to the house. There was no one in the room. Throwing himself on a chair, and putting his feet on the table, he let his head sink on his breast and grumbled himself to sleep. The terrific heat and an unusually

large draught of whisky had produced a sense of lassitude.

While he slept, I lost no opportunity of pouring into his muddled brain grotesque schemes of robbery and murder. Murder in the kitchen, murder on the desert, murder on the mountain—but always murder. The yellow-jackets buzzed round him, the flies settled in swarms all over him, the fleas rejoiced at his indifference—he slept on. The rest of the day passed uneventfully.

On the morrow, after the men had-been gone to the orchard for about an hour, Rickman came running back to the house. In his haste, he stumbled over the platform, cursing in consequence with such zeal that Goodwin left off washing his dishes to come out and ask :

“Anything wrong?”

“I’ve had a bit of a spill, that’s all. Have you seen my bandanna?”

The article was produced, but Rickman seemed in no hurry now. Resting on the wooden bench, he regarded his own boots with an air of perplexity. Suddenly he said :

“Neville—old chap.”

“Yes.”

He was not often called „old chap.”

“Will you do me a good turn?” The honest ring in the voice disarmed suspicion for once.

“By all means, if I can.”

“Why, there is some brute of a dead animal in the well. Didn’t you notice how the water stinks? Holt asked me to get it out ; he ought to have come to help, but there’s an extra pressure of orchard work just now. Will you lend a hand?”

“Yes, certainly. What can I do?”

They walked slowly towards the well ; the heat of the day was beginning to make itself felt, and the sun’s rays blazed down on the desert. A few two-horse teams were visible lazily moving along the tracks *en route* for the settlement or Bedford ; trails of smoke crept up from far off ranch chimneys, and an interminglement of sound bore witness that the life of the dry was advancing. Neither of the men going towards the well, however, paid much heed to these things.

“If you are afraid of being lowered, don’t be ashamed to say so,” said Rickman genially. “You wouldn’t be strong

enough to hold and pull me up—but, of course, we can leave it till Holt returns.”

He was looking down at the dark water surface twelve feet beneath, where floated the remains of a small animal, a stoat.

“No, I’m not afraid,” said Goodwin readily.

“You’ve got plenty of grit for a kid.” It was spoken approvingly, as Rickman picked up a rope.

“Wind this round your body—sa——” he commanded, and for better security, proceeded to fasten it himself.

A few seconds, later, the tenderfoot was hanging over the water, clutching the rope with one hand, and, with the other, fishing for the corpse by means of a pail.

There was a half-scared expression in the blue eyes above. I saw it without surprise, it fitted in with my estimate of the man’s character. Goodwin did not see; he was too intent on his unsavoury task, too eager to get it over. The stench sickened him, and the water seemed alive with slimy insects.

Just as he had succeeded, and the dead animal lay at the bottom of the basket there was an ominous thinning of the rope at one particular spot, a terrible wrench, and a sharp cry of warning. Splash The boy was struggling in ten feet of water, without swimming space, without means of support, for the walls of the well were clean cut.

Rickman stood in helpless bewilderment. He was a better actor than one would have supposed. In answer to his victim’s cries for help, he moaned his inability to do anything.

At last, when the hands had ceased to claw at the unfriendly walls, and floundered piteously, beating and splashing, in the water; when the white, despairing face sank deeper and deeper and the voice was almost stifled, then, and not till then, did Rickman stir.

He turned round to look for some pole with which he could make a pretence of rendering aid, when, to his intense alarm, he met the angry stare of a stranger’s eyes.

A traveller had arrived in the nick of time. With the acuteness of the eastern American he had grasped the situation as he reached the fence, and seeing a rope near by, picked it up and hurried upon the scene.

With a significant motion towards his hip pocket, he bade

Rickman descend, and the murderer dared not disobey. As he was lowered, a klik overhead warned him that no fooling, would be tolerated, and so, greatly against his will, he brought up the drowning boy. Hitherto but few words had passed between him and the stranger. The interview that followed the rescue was chiefly composed of reference to the realms of my royal master. Nor was the stranger's parting advice to be despised ; at least, Rickman was prepared to pay it due respect.

"If that there kid ain't alive and kicking when I look in to-morrow night, there'll be hell for more than one of you, or my name ain't Micthell. Saûbey?"

Rickman assented eagerly. His attempt had passed with failure, and now he wished only to do the best for himself. Besides, the name of Mitchell was not unfamiliar, it carried with it the idea of popularity, and a reputation for marksmanship second to none in Thompson Country.

Trying to bring Goodman back to health was not altogether unpleasant to Rickman. To my disgust, the man was weak enough to feel thankful that the guilt of murder was not to lie at his door. He had dreamt of hanging a good deal lately.

Still, he awaited Holt's return with uneasiness. He wondered whether he feared an outburst of fury or a turn of calm cynicism the most. Holt was rather to be dreaded in either mood. The boy did not require much attention. He lay in a corner of the sitting-room, where the stranger had placed him to be out of the sun's rays. There was nothing between him and the boards, except a threadbare cushion under his head. The wet overalls had been taken off, and he had been wrapped in a blanket. This consideration also, he owed to the stranger.

Knowing that I had plenty of leisure time, I wandered over the estate, looking at the growing shrubs, at the older fruit-burdened trees, and at the fallen fruit rotting on the ground below. There were many varieties of apples, and one especially fine—a large purple-tinted fruit, not so juicy as those grown in England, but far more, splendid to look at I estimated that the products of the orchard on the whole would not pay for the gathering ; that it would be more profitable to fatten the hogs on the fruit than to send it to the Bedford market. But, from an artistic point of view, the orchard was the redeeming

feature of the ranch. It was a pretty oasis in a hideous, scorching wilderness.

A few mornings later I again visited the spot, and this time extended my wanderings to the cornfield. There were none of the golden ears, none of the swaying yellow stalks, none of the scarlet poppies, or blue cornflowers of the idealistic summer scenery—only a broad expanse of green or brown, of sharp keen-edged blades, of rough soil, cracked, baked, and uneven. In the middle of the field the three conspirators were engaged in gathering the daily crop for the clorral.

Holt stood in a cart, pitchfork in hand, levelling the sheaves as they came up to him. The other two, one on either side, were clearing the allotted rows. It was a monotonous task, and one which must have wearied men whose spheres of life should have been elsewhere.

To the Californian, it was second nature. Born on the prairies, he had fulfilled this and similar tasks ever since, as a little red-headed urchin, he parted from his mother, and left her saturated with drink in the arms of Death. He had trusted to chance, and chance had led him a reckless, dare; devil dance. Toil, money, drink; drink, more toil, money - in and out of luck, always in sight of Diaphernes, Californian Bill had followed the luck of the West with the same unconcern as he showed at his present occupation.

The sun blazed down upon the men, as if determined to roast them where they stood.

Rickman was the first to falter. Leaning on his pitchfork, he looked up at Holt from under his broad-brimmed hat.

"It's too hot for anything," he said.

With an agile leap that would have scared an earthly athlete, I sprang upon the stack and stood beside my client. As I guessed, he was brooding over the failure of Rickman's plot. His face would not have been a pleasant study for a nervous person.

"If Bill is going to play the fool as you did, Ern," he said, wiping his face with his bandanna, "the sooner I'm out of your company the better. You behaved like a thorough greenhorn."

Rickman scowled.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of offending you," the other went on; "you can't move from here without my help. I'm the hand

that moves the machine, the brain that thinks for you both. Why in thunder you couldn't do for the boy before Micthell arrived passes me ! It would have been simple enough to keep him under with a pole ; and you said there was one handy."

"You see I am not so clever as you," retorted Rickman in a voice of increasing anger.

"It wouldn't have taken a genius to have done *that* ! Upon my word, a nipper fresh from the schoolroom couldn't have managed worse. It will be doubly hard now, since the settlement have got wind of our game. However, it's no use groaning over a broken leg, the best remedy is to lie low and have no further monkeying."

The men sulkily agreed ; and, finding that there was enough corn in the cart to satisfy the capacity of the hogs, they took their way homewards.

A week went by. The youngster progressed so favourably and received such assiduous attention that he was able to resume his household work, much to the edification of his friends from the Point, for quite a number of folk, not all actuated by sympathy, had come out to see him. In answer to their enquiries he unreservedly praised to them the kindness of Holt and his allies ; and this doubtless lulled to sleep suspicions in many minds.

So, for a week there was calm—a refreshing change to the young Englishman, who found himself the object of more kindness than he had ever expected Westerners were capable of showing. Invitations to dinner and supper, to a friendly candy-pulling, to spend a few quiet days, were showered upon him by good-hearted ranchmen. Even Josh Brown did not begrudge an extra meal from his larder ; the Britisher must walk over to the store and stay a few hours, just to cheer him up a bit after his spell of sickness ! He looked right down bad, with one foot in the grave—to be sure he had never been stout, but—well, he must have a chat with Mrs Brown and the girls, and mebbe that would physic him better than being by himself up at the ranch.

Neville was not loath to avail himself of this invitation. The Browns were nice-looking girls, with a superior taste in dress and a better tone in their voices than the usual set

of Vulture Point ladies. It was a pity that Cora spat like a man, and that Belinda had a trick of dropping an occasional oath ; but for all that, Neville found it pleasant to while away his spare moments in their company. There was an unreservedness and sincerity about them very engaging after the conventional coldness of the ordinary English girl.

Weighing these facts in the balance, Goodwin found the scales turn in favour of the Misses Brown, and took to their company with a relish that would have aroused the suspicions of the British matron ; but the old folk didn't go a cent for stand-offishness, and let him run a friendship as he pleased. There was a gun in the corner if he transgressed the laws of the household ; that reminder would serve to keep him within bounds.

But the calm could not last for ever. There came a time when the dark clouds, always gathering in the horizon, gave vent to their passions and belched forth thunder, with the lightning that seems to kill, and often kills.

One afternoon, while the tenderfoot was still busy washing dishes, my client entered the barn to saddle his mare. He intended to ride over to Bedford and see Whitely.

Just as he swung the saddle over the creature's back, a dark figure filled the doorway, and the voice of the Californian proclaimed that „he had got a bully notion !

“What's that?” said Holt indifferently.

“Why, the rattler is still under the log pile !”

“And what of that?” was the sharp retort ; really Bill must be a born idiot.

“What of it? It could do a lot ! Sabbey?”

There was such a triumphant ring in the voice, that the fellow really had to be taken down a peg or two.

“You infernal fool, do you imagine that with any ass's head like yours, the rattler will be of any use to us?”

Bill looked hurt, and fidgeted uncomfortably.

“You're mighty hard on me, I reckon, Ed ; say, when did you ever know me spoil a trick?”

“*When*, you son of a gun? Why, always, from the first day I was fool enough to give you a job.”

The straws were flying from under the boots now.

“Well, Holt, I bet you one hundred to one in dollars that I make no blunder this time.”

"Then I won't take it. Money is too scarce on this ranch for that sort of thing. Keep that door open! I'm off! Do your best, you can't do more. So long!"

My client had mounted, and in a few moments was leaping over the desert in a cloud of dust that trailed behind like the smoke of a ship.

Bill looked after him and sniffed contemptuously.

"Called me a fool, did he? I'll show him right away that I'm smarter than he reckons!"

The youngster was in the kitchen when Bill sauntered carelessly into the house.

"Young man," he said with an air of authority, "I'll trouble you to lend me a hand. The boss sez to me just now, 'Bill, I've lost a white-handled knife.' 'Where to?' sez I. 'Well,' sez he, 'I reckon it's gone beneath that balmed pile of faggots, and as I want it to-morrow, will you look after it.' I did, but the hole showed me is too small for my fist. Mebbe yours would go into it."

Neville came out. It seemed hotter than ever as they crossed the yard; the hogs slaking their thirst plunged not only their snouts but half their bodies into the troughs. It was a fine specimen of Oregon heat.

Goodwin felt sick. The usual smell of something dead came across the desert; there is nothing more loathsome.

"Which is the hole?" he inquired as they arrived at the pile.

The Californian indicated the spot with a jerk of his thumb.

"Down there, kid!"

Neville threw himself on the ground, and, after a little hesitation, began to grope in the dark recess with his hand.

But he barely repressed a cry as his fingers closed on something cold and scarily, something in coils that moved when touched. Ugh!

"What is it, kid?" enquired Bill.

A yell of pain and terror was the answer. The ruse had succeeded. Infusiated at being awakened from a cosy nap the snake had attacked the first thing that came handy which of course, was the palm of Neville Goodwin.

"Something has bitten me," he exclaimed, as he nursed the injured member in his lap.

"Let me have a look," said Bill. "Why, that's nothing, kid, you jammed it on a nail. Where's the knife."

But the boy did not answer. A horrible faintness was creeping over him, and he was chilled as if by the wind from a vault.

Bill chuckled inwardly. There was no mistake this time, no bungling, the rattler had answered the purpose! A thrill of triumph ran all through him, and he was picturing how crestfallen Holt would be, when he received an unpleasant surprise.

Somebody coughed close at hand.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, making a feeble endeavour to keep up appearances.

A woman stood behind him, eyeing him with a stern glance of enquiry that changed to pity as her eyes fell on the boy's face.

The Californian knew her, and cursed his luck.

"Pleased to see you, Mrs Barnes," he muttered as politely as his education permitted.

"That's a darned lie, Bill Brooke! You ain't a bit pleased, but just mighty mad, that's what's the matter with you. Let me see your hand, young man," she continued, addressing Neville. "That's no nail, it's a rattler's bite! Quick, hustle yourself, you long-legged Californian scum! What, you won't? Then, I reckon I'll raise hell before I'm done with you."

Bill saw tragedy in her look, and "hustled."

"What do you want?" he enquired in a whisper.

"Whisky—a keg full—every blessed drop you've got, and just stir those shakety joints of yours."

Bill was off, covering the ground with kangaroo leaps. When he returned, he found the woman on her knees beside the prostrate boy, rubbing him with all her might.

"Anything to keep the circulation afloat," she muttered. "Here, clumsy, give me the keg."

With more haste than gentleness she poured a stream of the fiery liquid down Goodwin's throat, and more, and more, till it seemed as if his whole being must be saturated with it.

"Help me scrub him," she ordered, and Bill obeyed. Between them they kept Life at her post, and Death again stole away into the background.

Of the three it would be hard to say which perspired the most; perhaps the tenderfoot showed the effects of the heat most plainly, for the water rolled off his chest in streams.

"Small thanks to you, Bill Brooke, the boy's life is spared," said Mrs Barnes, as they carried the still fainting sufferer between them to the house. "You are even a bigger devil than I took you for. What will the boys at the Point say?"

That was a question Bill would rather have left unanswered. He saw in fancy the followers of Judge Lynch, a grim band of men not all strangers to him, with ugly expressions on their faces, and shiny six-shooters in their hands. He saw a rope and a noose, and watched it swinging from a high branch. He might have seen more, had not his imagination been checked by their arrival at the house.

"It seems to me, Mr Brooke," Mrs Barnes remarked as they placed the boy on a heap of old sacks in the coolest corner of the sitting-room, "that you have lost the use of your tongue."

She always said „Mr" when she desired to be sarcastic, and it generally took effect. Besides, Bill knew what the Vulture Point crowd thought of him.

"I reckon you can talk enough for us both," he retorted, without looking at her.

"It would pay you to be polite, *Mr Brooke*."

Bill winced, as the stress on the "*Mr*" was more marked.

"What's the good of my telling you I reckoned the kid had hit his hand on a nail?"

"It ain't no good, 'cause I ain't so green as to swallow it. Weren't *you* bitten by a rattler last year? That's once I know of, and maybe you've had more bites in the course of your ramblings. You're ugly enough to have been bitten all over—yes! It's a year come next week that my ole man sez to me, 'Celia, Bill Brooke up at Holt's has been bitten by a rattler,' and my ole man never fooled me yet. He knows better."

She said this between her teeth with such conviction that the Californian was impressed. He mopped his forehead as if to gain time before answering.

"You're hard on me," he said at length.

"Hard on you?" Bill shuddered at the scorn in her tones. "Hoity-toiry! Listen to Mr Booke complaining! He says I'm hard on him. Are you so delicate, may I ask, that you want some quinine? I reckon I can cure you. You meant to kill that lad now, ain't it so?"

Bill fell back. There was no misreading the guilt in his coward eyes, blanched face, and cringing body. All the bravado had gone out of him. He would have liked to fall on his knees and beg for mercy, but he only whispered—

"It's a lie."

"Are you sure, now, you didn't mean to kill him?" the woman went on, like one delighting in torture, for what woman is not cruel at times? "Are you sure you don't know the difference between a nail scratch and a rattler's bite? It's you are the liar, Bill,—you—you—you!"

She was the incarnation of an avenging spirit now. There is strong dramatic talent latent in the West—and this slatternly dressed woman had the fire of it in her veins.

Bill stared at her wrathful figure as she pointed a hard finger at him, denouncing him. Her words seemed to fill the room, to drift out and away over the desert to the sleeping settlement. Already in his mind's eye, he saw the people roused, heard their cries for vengeance, and perceived their dust trails in the distance creeping nearer and nearer.

"Are you satisfied, Mr Brooke?" she went on, "for I am. Nurse that boy well and see that he is fit when I come new,—or— There are queer stories in the settlement already you see—and it is possible folk may feel like lynching all your blessed gang if this comes out."

With a warning nod to Bill, she stooped, kissed the boy affectionately, and went out.

The Californian felt stifled till she was fairly across the threshold, and on her way to the fence. Then the reaction set in. He threw himself down and cursed long and loudly.

So Neville Goodwin survived. But there still remained the attempt of the third conspirator.

CHAPTER XIII

EXIT OF THE TENDERFOOT

OF all the sights in America for vastness, for weirdness, for singularity, nothing, not Niagara itself, can beat Crater Lake, Away in the Cascades, in the region of great forests where the giant pine towers over a primitive world, where the tourist has never trespassed, where, until lately, the Indian has wandered at large, where the glories of Nature rest undisturbed, lies Crater Lake. There the eagle builds in peace, the panther and the grizzly bear find secure retreats for their offspring—here the weak are dragged to slaughter and devoured by the strong of the forest; here the rattlesnake attains enormous dimensions, and gay-coloured reptile sport in the pools.

There are a few tracks through the forest, but very few and seldom frequented except in the beginning of the fall, when parties of settlers fly from the pains for a change to the cool air of the quiet mountains.

Following the largest of these tracks past the Hole in the Ground, one comes to a steep ascent covered with bushes and jagged rocks. Up—up, till the limbs ache and the heart grows weary; up, till the feet blister; up, up, past tree after tree, boulder after boulder, till the forest ends and the horizon expands with an immense view on all sides, and one stands on a soft grassy plateau. If it be evening, the dying light crimsons the western sky, and gilds the mountain tops till the pines stand out as shadows, kisses the glades of the forest, and plays iridescent on the waters of the lake.

These perpendicular rocks are no playthings, but gaunt, terrible cliffs, studded here and there with pines that look tiny in spite of their two hundred feet, springing out from cliffs where one would hardly believe they could find noursihment. From this giddy height, one looks down sheer into the cold, clear water, leading, as some suppose, into the very bowels of the earth.

Woe to the reckless man who ventures too near the edge and falls! Woe to the climber who dares the descent; woe to the unwary traveller lost in the grey mist, or to the

suicide who leaps headlong over. This is a decoy of Nature, one of her chosen sanctuaries.

It was on this plateau that a party of men halted one evening at the commencement of the fall. They were weary with a week's travelling, the roads had been heavy, the weather bad, and the horses fretful. A heavy grey mist hid the lake from view, and limited the landscape to a radius of a few feet. Three of the wayfarers knew well how far they might wander, but the fourth was a boy—a tenderfoot; and what does a tenderfoot know of hidden pitfalls?

In spite of inward premonitions, in spite of friendly warnings from well-meaning folk at Vulture Point, Neville Goodwin had consented to be one of the party now preparing the lakeside camp.

When my client turned to his inventive faculties for an idea to solve the problem of the \$500, it was I who came to his assistance.

One evening, as he slept in the veranda, I prayed to Diaphernes for a dream. One came straight from the West where the sun had long since set. It was an uncanny dream, white and expressionless as it hastened to me, bloody and devilish as I sent it into his brain. That night in his sleep he seemed to stand on the shore of the Silent Lake, and in the moonlight he perceived, to his right, the form of an Indian, whose back was turned towards him, gazing over the water. And it dawned on him that he was there for murder, and that the figure in front was he whom he was intended to kill. As he looked, a cold clammy hand touched his shoulder, and, looking round, he beheld with terror a spectre clothed as a monk, grinning ghoulishly into his face.

"See!" it whispered, and snapped its fleshless jaws, "see, thine enemy, the man who stands between thee and wealth! Take him unawares, for the waters of the lake which thou beholdest are eager for blood. Lose not the golden opportunity."

The apparition laughed with mocking encouragement, and Holt wavered no more, and the bright moon smiled at his victim and lulled his suspicions, so that he heeded not the steps on the pass. So his foe was upon him before he had time for defence. Even as he raised his eyes in mute appeal to the stars, he was whirled into the cauldron beneath.

And, as the Indian fell, my client perceived that he had the face of Neville Goodwin.

Holt woke with a start. The dream had done its work. It gave him the idea of a picnic to Crater Lake.

Americans and Englishmen have different ideas of a picnic. In America every one works hard, looking after the horses, fixing the tents, keeping up the water supply, providing and cooking the food—no one is idle, all work as hard as they do on the ranches, perhaps harder. In England the general idea is, who can be most idle—and as a rule there are a number of ties for that honour.

All the party in question had plenty to do. They had taken it in turns to drive, and the task had been no light one. Waggons have a nasty trick of breaking down at a critical moment, perhaps in a narrow pass with a wall of rock on one side and a precipice on the other. No driver can guard against such eccentricities. It is "purely dependent on chance," as the ruined gambler says. We, Dispharnes' emissaries, know better.

A wet dew covered the ground, saturating the men's clothes, the food, the blankets. Nothing kept it out. A more dismal picnic could not have been found outside Oregon. A heavy depression hovered in the air, diminishing to zero whatever hopes they and entertained of a cheerful repast. The Californian's overalls came halfway up his legs, rendering him a most comical figure I was the only one who could appreciate such a spectacle; my mortal companions were all crouching round the camp fire. The cold damp penetrated to their bones; two of them at least cursed the mission that led them thither. Kneeling on the damp sward, I whispered to my client that the time for action had arrived.

Neville Goodwin had left the group, and had almost disappeared into the mist. Observing, however, that he paused as if afraid to proceed, my client called out genially —

"It's all right, youngster, keep right on. The lake is half a mile away yet. Have a good walk and give your circulation a chance."

Whether Goodwin believed him, or despairingly resigned himself to his fate, is not for me to say. I had my ideas on the subject, but declined to commit myself. He certainly

walked straight forward, the eyes of all following him.

He might have gone thirty or forty yards when he came to a standstill. The plateau had ceased. He seemed to stand on the brink of another world, with an impenetrable atmosphere before and beneath him. He stared helplessly, vainly trying to pierce the thickest mist he had ever seen. "Now or never," I murmured to my client, who, arising from the fire, had cautiously followed the retreating figure.

A large piece of rock attracted my attention ; it lay half-buried in loose soil, sharp edge uppermost, not a dozen yards from where Holt was walking. I directed his eyes towards it. He needed no second prompting ; with a cunning agile movement he darted towards it, and in less than a second it whizzed in a straight line for Neville Goodwins' head.

The crash was soft and irresistible—no mortal skull ever withstood such a blow. The bone splintered to pieces, and, as the boy tottered forwards, brains and blood oozed in a sickly mess over his cotton shirt.

There was no cry, no call for help, no moan ; nothing but the soft smash that interrupted for a moment the mist-wrapped silence.

My client stood for a second as the body disappeared from view ; then, without waiting to hear it strike the water, wheeled slowly and walked quietly back towards the camp.

And that was the last I ever saw of Edward Holt ; for of a sudden my sandals put themselves into motion, and I was borne away towards the sun—away from earth, back to my king Diaphernes.

THE |FOURTH MISSION

CHAPTER XIV

THE SPIRITUALIST SOCIETY

THE room in which I found myself was small and cosy, with a deliciously soft carpet, low chairs of some green wood, a Japanese screen from Kobe, several good oil paintings, and a variety of knickknaks—a lady's boudoir.

There was a fragrance of some subtle essence hanging

about everything I touched, like the breath of a fading violet. It was especially evident near the writing-table, where pretty multi-coloured stationery, dainty penholders, ink in a vase of green bronze, and a collection of richly-bound books, were arranged most methodically. The little book-case was exquisitely designed, with quaint Jacobean carving. Then there was a workbox, whose open lid revealed a bewildering assortment of knitting-needles, reels of cotton, and skeins of coloured silks. But the dressing-table was the most noticeable. The mirror was large, its face perfectly free from any trace of scratch or dust. The drawers were of mahogany, with wrought-iron handles. There were things that told me my dainty lady was not above trying to improve upon nature, there were silvermounted boxes and bottles labelled with suggestive names. Nor did she neglect her hands—witness the handsome set or manicuring requisites. It would take me too long to enumerate one half of what I saw in that sumptuous room, or to speak of the array of shawls, dresses, lace, and jewels. She must have had at least twenty bracelets.

I grew impatient to see her—my new client—the more especially as she was a woman. I hated her already! stood and watched the leaping red flames in the grate, and compared them with the grey wreathing smoke. It was like watching an impetuous young soldier mocking a grizzled veteran. Then the oddly-shaped glowing coals took on themselves a resemblance to the outline of the pit of the lost. Ah yes! there was much to contemplate in the fire.

Raising my eyes to the wall above the mantelpiece, I beheld the portrait of a very lovely girl. But the feature that riveted my attention was the chin—so prominent and massive, yet so gracefully formed—such as is indicative of will, of what is commonly called “push”—and still it was beautiful. I saw vast possibilities in that chin. The eyes were dark, neither brown nor grey, but deep blue, deeper blue than the deepest of the sea, with a setting of long, curling eyelashes. Yet there was no true soul in the depth—only animal passion. Power or money perhaps—would kindle those eyes as no spiritual emotion could. The brows were straight, fine, dark, and very striking. The nose was finely chiselled; the mouth wreathed in a

smile that even in a painting was not easy to interpret. It might be amusement—or mockery—or something a little more sinister, perhaps. The teeth just showed, white, and even, and not too noticeable. Her complexion was pale; if truly rendered, too pale, I thought, for a healthy woman.

While I was still looking at the portrait, the cuckoo on the clock poked its head out of its bow and cried four times. While the last stroke vibrated, the door opened, and a girl stood on the threshold.

It was, unquestionably, the original of the portrait.

The artist deserved all credit. His work was faithful in its perfection, even cynically so, for he had contrived to render the woman's character as significantly as her beauty. A single glance showed me that she was one of those whom allegorists describe as having chosen the gate and path which was broad and smooth. I persuaded myself that this mission would not be a difficult one to perform.

The firelight made a very effective tableau of the girlish figure, with its slender, perfect symmetry. She wore a dark costume, with a collar of deep crimson velvet. The sleeves were loose, just drooping over the wrists and accentuating the slim whiteness of the pretty hands, with long-pointed fingers and carefully polished fibert nails. She wore an engagement ring, and her right hand also gleamed with jewels.

Gently closing the door, she came across the room and wearily threw herself down into the armchair which she drew up to the fire. I took up my position by her side, and read the history of her soul.

My new client, Ida Temple, was an orphan; her parents dying in her infancy, left her penniless, at the mercy of the world. Fortunately for her, a sister of her mother turned up unexpectedly and was inclined to play the role of Good Samaritan. This worthy lady, Miss Elisabeth Woodward, was wealthy and eccentric. She had strange hobbies, loved to do outlandish things, and was, above all, a man-hater. She would not allow a man to enter her house, nor visit where she was likely to meet any; would never allow her niece to talk of any—and this was the skeleton in Miss Oda's cupboard.

Miss Woodward was rich—reported fabulously so; and had no one with any claim on her except my client. She

patrinised many charitable institutions; and that often leads, in the case of whimsical old ladies, to a making of strange wills. So her niece must be careful to fall in with her views and never to outrage any liking for the opposite sex. This was a difficult piece of simulation, for Ida's passions craved for male society; moreover, her heart was given to an individual man. It involved clandestine meetings in parks, at balls, theatres, and concerts, and when a mind once lends itself to petty deceits, it is not always willing to stop at small things. Miss Temple had a comfortable, a luxurious home, with a liberal allowance and every domestic indulgence—except one. She might not entertain at least, not those whose company she wished for—girls of her own age and elderly spinsters counted for nothing, of course.

Like a graceful tiger she loved to wander in sunshine, to revel in the warmth of adoration; to torture, for the pleasure it gave her to inflict pain. The hearts of men were her playthings, she had a right to them all, as absolute as the right of the feudal lord over the possessions of his vassals.

Naturally, one so lovely, and presumably rich, was not without admirers, for Miss Woodward had not gone the length of denying her the right to mingle freely in society. She had heard their pleadings unmoved, dismissed their suits almost with insult. Yet even the goddess of Beauty is not invulnerable, and one day Cupid drew his bow, and the aim was sure.

She met her match. In trying all her artifices to win an obstinate heart, womanlike, she lost her own! Hubert Murchison, a thorough man of the world, was not blind to the possible advantages of the position; and so they became engaged, though as yet it was a matter almost of secrecy. There was no one to inform Miss Woodward! Murchison was by profession a barrister, who in the prevailing scarcity of briefs, added to his income by coaching a few pupils. He had travelled in the East, where he had had the good fortune to fall in with an Indian prince anxious to study the English law. The barrister's manner with strangers was singularly attractive, and he had easily secured this lucrative addition to his occupations.

My client leaned back in her chair in the utter abandon

of laziness ; her dainty feet refter on the fender, her hands lay on her lap, the fingers of one toying with the engagement ring and making it flash in the firelight. The smell of violets that pervaded the room hung about her too. It was all the very refinement of elegant luxury. There she sat, her eyes half closed, thinking in a dreaming manner, yet always plotting and scheming.

"There must be some way out of it," she thought. "But how folish aunt is, and how wearisome it becomes to be hampered like this at every turn. Other girls never are. inclined to—to—I don't know what ! I can't think of anything—that's just it. I wish women had the daring brains of men. Here am I—I settled my heart on Hubert. My heart ! dear me, that same heart that ten—or is it twelve?—men tried for in vain. He's got it. Well—handsome Hubert—how his other old flames envy me ! I suppose it is natural ; I am as beautiful, as fascinating—oh, well, as everything as any other girl in London I may be as rich. It can't be deluded vanity I've been told the same thing soften, that I can't help knowing it. Yet I ought to be happy, and I'm not just because I can't get the one thing I really want, on account of the whims of an ugly soured old maid. I must think—think !"

She was concentrating her mind now with all its powers ; it was my chance, and I did not mean to lose it. I placed my hand on her forehead, and whispered in her ear :

"Could your aunt's whims not be led to take the direction of the spiritualist society? Hubert—séance—mesmerism?"

The girl started, then shivered and crouched nearer to the fire.

"Dear me, how extraordinary ! I could have sworn (and she did swear, for the indulgence is no longer strictly confine to the sterner sex), "that there was some one here who whispered to me. It is uncanny, and the message was such a strangeone. How horribly dark and cold the room is. I wonder am I any sort of a clairvoyant, as Hubert would say ; have I got into touch with the spirit world he talks of? Hubert—séance—mesmerism. It is silly, and yet I can't be mistaken, I heard the words so clearly, and I was not thin king of anything of the sort. It's odd, and rather horrid—yet—ah !"

The girl had grasped my proposition at last, and the perfect cruel face lit up.

"And, after all, it was a good idea. I might persuade aunt to go to a meeting of this spiritualist society. It is fashionable and whimsical enough to suit even her. Hubert will be there—I'll introduce him as the secretary—at his own special request, of course. Yes, it is very good. He will persuade her that she is a medium; she will like that because it is uncommon, and probably she will let herself be hypnotised. And Hubert vows that once a person has been successfully and voluntarily mesmerised, he or she is simply in the operator's hands for ever after. Oh, you spirit, of whatever you are that suggested it, I should like to kiss you! Isn't that something for the belle of the season to say? I hope you are properly flattered."

And after this, her thoughts became a mere ripple of frivolous nonsense, a shallow brook running and chattering on the sunshine, all merriment and noise and bubble.

Outside the house, tall gaunt trees waved their denuded branches, the crescent moon gleamed like a reaper's sickle. It was a glorious evening, but very, very cold. Yet in the boudoir the temperature rose, and the girl's spirits rose therewith. She was as blithe and as irrepressible as a lark by the time the maid came to announce that tea was ready in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XV

HUBERT MURCHISON was tired. His work had been unusually tiring. The Indian prince seemed to have suddenly gone back in his studies, and to have developed a mania for asking purposeless questions; while the English pupil, thick-headed at the best of times, had drifted into absolute imbecility over Stephen's *Commentaries*. To the coolest temperament, idiots are aggravating; and Murchison's temperament was by no means cool, and his stock of patience limited. Still, he had tact and sense enough to refrain from any indiscreet manifestations of anger. He had been unusually polite to the two young men in pointing out their errors. But the effort told on him; and when he returned to his rooms at Dean's Yard,

Westminster, it was to indulge in a marvellous outburst of swearing. The Indian prince was consigned with many invectives to the nethermost regions, and the English pupil delivered into the personal custody of Diaphernes.

Murchison's room was divided by an archway into two parts. The farther portion had a window overlooking a dismal courtyard, littered with rusting kitchen utensils and seedy bits of furniture. There was a drop from the window-sill of more than fourteen feet—and any one attempting the jump would have to be a good acrobat to avoid the row of sharp spikes directly underneath. There was no exit from this part except through the front portion, neither was there any furniture, and the floor was plainly covered with brown oilcloth. Yet the dull room interested me. I knew it was here that Murchison held his spiritualistic séances.

The front part of the room was very different. A soft Oriental rug stretched from doorway to fireplace, and a cheerful fire burned in the latter. There were two tables, a small round one and an ordinary writing-table. Against the middle wall was a luxurious sofa, and the comfort of the apartment was completed by easy-chairs and a handsome book-case.

On the larger table lay the remains of Murchison's dinner—he had dined earlier than usual, and, expecting no visitors, had not rung for the cloth to be removed. Indeed, he was sitting with his shoes off, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and his feet against the chimney-piece, cursing the fate which had neglected to make him rich.

A gentle tap came to the door.

"Who the deuce?" he muttered, hastily dropping his feet and scrambling into his coat. "Come in!"

The door opened to admit two people. But he saw only one, a girl beautiful as the day, and exquisitely dressed. He viewed her gladly, approvingly, but it was with sensual appreciation rather than love.

"My darling!" he cried, crossing the room to meet her, and kissing her. "What on earth brings you here? But never mind, take off your coat and sit down."

The girl smilingly obeyed.

"I wanted to ask you something, Bertie," she said, drawing off her gloves slowly and noticing with pleasure his open

admiration of her hands. She let him take one and hold it.

"I wish you could come and see me at home," she sighed. "It is too bad of auntie."

"Won't she *ever* change her opinion of man?" Hubert muttered, his face hardening. "It is too ridiculous. I wonder how it originated."

He drew Ida nearer to him as he spoke.

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Her aversions and her likings are both immovable; she is the most obstinate person ever met. Still, this is so cruel."

Murchison gave the expected sympathetic kiss.

"Would it do any good if I were to see her?"

"Oh, no, no! it would be useless, in fact, probably make things worse. But you won't laugh at me, will you, if I tell you a plan I have thought out?"

"Laugh at you? rather not! Tell me all about it, darling."

"You're sure you won't laugh?" She held a finger in front of her face—he caught and kissed it—and smiled as the very incarnation of trustful naïveté.

"I should think I would *not*! Tell me, dear! Nothing foolish could come out of such a dear little head."

"Well—auntie has taken a sudden notion that it is her duty to attend a spiritualist meeting."

"Whew! But, Ida—what in thunder *will* the old lady want next?"

"Hush! Don't be a naughty boy and interrupt. She simply *must* go. You'll get tickets for us, won't you?"

"With all the pleasure in life, darling. I don't see it yet, but I am interested."

"Suppose we attend the meeting—you will be there."

"Dear one, yes! Anywhere that you are."

"Be sensible for once, Bertie. You will be there, and sit where auntie can see you. Observe her closely, and let her be aware of the fact."

Hullo! am I to mesmerise her?"

"Oh, be quiet, you stupid! During the interval you will come up to us and speak to me as if you were a very slight acquaintance. I shall introduce you as the secretary. Then you can tactfully let auntie know that you have made the interesting and important discovery that she is a medium."

"Ha, ha!" The man burst into a laugh of genuine amuse-

ment. "A medium ! Pardon me, my darling, but from what you have told me, I should say she is as unlike a medium as any one possibly could be."

"That doesn't matter in the least. You will do as I bid you sir. She will be interested in you, forget that you are one of those horrid men, and will want to attend a séance. You will hold one for her here ; no one but us there. Instead of spirit-calling, you will——"

The man had grown absorbed in her words ; there was an undercurrent in her tone, an evident leading up to a climax.

"I will what?" he said, rather uneasily. "Not kill her, I suppose?"

"No, no. Only, hypnotise."

"Hypnotise? Good gracious—what next, and why?"

"Because I wish it."

"Darling, that is the best reason in the world, but you can't call it an explanation."

"Well, then, you dear, old goose, it is because, if you once hypnotise her and get her into your power, I should think you could easily blot out her aversion to your sex or else you can't do much! Do you understand *now*?" and she smiled her best at him.

"What a pretty face it is !" ejaculated Murchison with unfeigned admiration, pressing his lips to hers. "I see it now. But, my love, Ida, no one but a woman (and I believe no woman but you), could have thought it out ; yet they say we men have the brains ! I won't disappoint you, darling. It is a difficult, perhaps a rather dangerous game to play. But I believe I can do it, and it shall be done."

More caressing after this—more lying in his arms, her soft cheek against his and her dark curls mingling with his short fair hair, more of the nonsensical phrases in which lovers delight, single ejaculations, strokings of the cheek and meetings of the eyes.

It was late for a lady to be out alone when Miss Temple rose to go. Murchison, of course, intended to see her home, and having wrapped her cloak snugly about her, he blew his whistle for a hansom. The drive to Charing Cross and the journey thence by rail to Blatch Heath occupied an hour or more, and it was close on eleven when Miss Temple rung the bell of her abode in St John's Park.

She kissed her fingers and threw one lingering look in the direction of her fiancé, whose figure showed clearly in the moonlight, before she entered the hall, and the door closed noiselessly behind. Crossing the paved floor, with its handsome design of Egyptian figure-work, she passed into the dining-room. This apartment was brilliantly lighted with electric-sprays, but apart from the fire, would have impressed the observer as cold and cheerless. The paper was too light, and there was no heavy, comfortable furniture. Perhaps the modern unsympathetic chair is more in keeping with our ascetic ladies of the hyperaristocratic order. Other furniture would have been out of place—and other there was none. The chairs were covered in leather, pale blue leather that would have showed any stain had Miss Woodward's guest not all been too highly cultivated to carry dust on their skirts. Only men leave such marks! There were no antimacassars, no soft, luxuriant rugs. A few small tables were ranged round the room, on one albums, on another books. The books were all of one type: *Adam the Real Culprit*, *The Degeneration of Man*, *Why Women Make the Best Doctors*, *Should Men Abandon Professions*, *What Shall We Do with our Daughters?* and so forth. In one corner of the room was a small divan, on which lay an unframed black-and-white sketch. "A Skit on the Feature of the Times—The Millennium." It represented men as engaged in all menial occupations, washing dishes, wheeling perambulators, while some paraded the streets with begging placards, "Pity the Unemployed." Meanwhile the members of the other sex were walking arm in arm, laughing and smoking. I thought it had probably been sent to Miss Woodward as a practical joke. There were no musical instruments in the room, and the walls were devoid of pictures, except for some large photographic views in severe oak frames, arranged at regular intervals. As I said before, the dominant note of the room was one of absolute coldness. Seated rigidly in a high-backed chair, not too near the fire, sat an elderly lady.

She was such a thorough contrast to the conventional prudish old maid, that even I paused for a moment in astonishment. Her hair was grey, but cut short, and her dress was a careful contradiction of everything usually distinctive of her sex. The bodice was a gentleman's short coat and

waistcoat, while her nether garments were unquestionably knickerbockers, fitting closely and displaying limbs neither full nor shapely enough to bear such accentuation. Yet this was the man-hater!

This lady turned on her chair as her niece entered.

"It is very late," she said drily—her harsh tones exactly suited that bony nose and jaw. "Where have you been?"

"Only to a meeting of the spiritualist society."

"And—you had no escort?"

"Why, auntie, women are the rulers of the world. Surely we need no escort."

"Be reasonable, my dear. Men are brutes who would take any advantage over those weaker—physically weaker, of course. It is unsafe for you to be out alone at such an hour, and I trust you will never risk it again."

"But the meeting was so interesting auntie."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it, Ida. I am glad for you to attend instructive meetings which will enlarge your intellect and make you thirst for more knowledge. Knowledge! that is what we women want, and it has long been denied to us. But, thanks to a few noble-minded and courageous women, the cloud of darkness overhanging our sex will soon be dissipated."

But the excitement was too much for the old lady; she stopped, groaned, and complained of a pain in her heart.

"I suppose I must see a doctor," she grumbled.

"Who, auntie?"

"Who? Dr Alicia Marshall, of course, the only reliable doctor in Blackheath. But, about your meeting; you say it was interesting."

"Very."

"Any men there?"

"Very few—none in the least objectionable."

"I daresay not. Ahem! I daresay not! Did you talk to any of them?"

"Only to the secretary—a strong advocate of the rights of our sex."

"Then he is more sensible than the majority. But you shouldn't have talked to him—you shouldn't. But there—you did!" She broke into a little nervous laugh. "Do you think—perhaps you could take me with you to one of those interesting meetings?"

"Why, auntie," and the girl could not hide the flash of triumph in her eyes, "I should be so pleased. You are just the sort of person they want—some fearless leading spirit to command attention."

"Ahem—well, my dear, I will think it over and keep it in my mind. Was there a big gathering?"

"N—no—not more than thirty?"

"And chiefly women?"

"Yes—very few men."

"Young women?"

"I was by far the youngest there."

"Then they were wise fool, who had reached the age of putting aside girlish frivolities and waste of time. Time!—yes, it flies. It seems but yesterday I was your age." The old lady paused. I wondered was it to wipe away a tear; but she only lit a cigarette. "It is strange (puff) how the young fraternise with men (puff)—find pleasure in their empty flattery (a more emphatic puff than ever)—cherish an ideal—and hope to find it! Absurd! (puff, puff, puff). I was fortunately not so constituted—I always looked on men as silly and dangerous. They admired me, said pleasant things about me, sent me verses, pestered me with attentions, and got no answer. I wonder how many girls could say as much, eh?" The old lady put down her cigarette; she smoked less from liking than as a matter of principle.

"You were unique, auntie," Ida replied, trying to conceal her weariness with a smile.

"Unique? I suppose I was. Ah, the old days are gone—yes, I'll go to your meeting. It is select, of course?"

"Lady Jugenhop, Lady Fitzhurse and Mrs Harrison—they go," was the demure response.

"Yes—well, I will go too."

My client displayed some anxiety as she glanced towards her aunt's costume. This difficulty had not occurred to her before. How could she be seen in the company of such a guy? It would make her the laughing-stock of the room. Besides, the hall-porter might refuse to admit her. Were women allowed to masquerade in men's attire? And at her aunt's age it was too ludicrous. It must be managed somehow.

"Auntie," she said slowly, stooping to pick a thread from

her skirt (how useful stray threads can be at times), "I don't want to vex you—you know I don't mean to be rude—but, will you—I mean, what are you going to —"

"Well, what is the matter—speak up, child."

"Are you going to—wear——?"

Miss Woodward fairly jumped. What a question! With her coldest expression she said icily: "What am I going to wear? Be good enough to explain yourself."

The girl was equal to the occasion. She appeared genuinely pained and distressed.

"Forgive me, auntie dear," she said gently, "but it is a rule of the society that ladies do not attend in rational costume."

Miss Woodward wore an expression of wounded dignity.

"And now, perhaps, you can interpret the words, 'rational costume.'"

"Oh, they only mean an imitation of masculine clothes."

She saw her blunder too late. Heraunt broke in vehemently.

"What!" she shouted. "You dare to hint that I—I wish to imitate man! I? And man the abomination of my life! Oh, to think of such ingratitude. You whom I adopted, clothed, fed, educated, to say this! Are you a woman or a viper? Are you——"

Her niece gently interposed and chucked the tirade.

"I beg pardon, auntie, if I even let you think for the moment that I meant anything of the sort. I only tried to explain how certain people use the words."

"Then you yourself think differently?"

"Why, you taught me yourself, auntie."

"Could any one compare me with a man?"

"*Certainly* not," the girl spoke with emphasis, for she was thinking of Hubert.

"Well, I am glad you have some sense left, Ida. I had begun to suspect that you were devoid of my gift of sober reasoning. Now, give me a hint in this dress matter, for if I go to your society's meetings, I suppose I must not run counter to the whims of its members."

"Couldn't you wear your black gown?"

"The one I threw aside years ago?"

"Yes—it is as good as new—and of a description that never goes totally out of fashion."

"As if I cared about fashion, silly girl! But I will think it over; and, as I suppose you want to go to bed, you may shake hands."

For this curious woman never kissed—a kiss was the very sign and emblem of treachery—above all, the treachery of man. And this was an eccentricity on which my client congratulated herself. Hubert's lips were one thing, and those of this cold spinster quite another.

She ascended to her own room, and an hour later I sat at the foot of her bed and watched her sleeping, and the dream phantoms I called floated in through the window.

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE ST JACOB'S HALL

AFTER long consideration, and changing her mind half a dozen times over the matter Miss Woodward decided to attend the meeting, and to alter her style of dress for the occasion. It was a double victory for my client, and had been marvellously easy in the gaining. Before proceeding, I must say something about what had lately been passing through me, for I, who was all mind, can hardly say „through my mind."

From my first introduction to Diaphernes, until the close of my first mission, I had been solely dominated by love for my master, and thirst for distinction in his service, with a bitter hatred of all outside his rule. At times the remembrance of my own earthly wrongs and of Crawley Langton almost drove me to frenzy—I would fain have sought every corner of the universe to find and torture my enemy. At other times, I was a prey to a kind of lethargy mingled with sadness. These moments grew more frequent, and I seemed to fall under some adverse influence, which accompanied me to the earth and became more clearly defined in the course of the second mission. I almost disliked the evil I was doing, and longed to be free. It grew into a pining for liberty, and, like all who experience woes themselves, I learned to sympathise.

Once, as I was watching my client in her room, I actually turned to leave her free from baleful promptings. A message of warning from Diaphernes came to remind me of my pledge

—and I offered a moment's resistance before my feeling changed, and I returned with all my being glad with the joy of my strange servitude. Again I loved Diaphernes and wrought the harder for his sake.

A while after, I was again moved with sadness, and fell into a state of despondent indifference. I hated my mission, and shrank from the name of my master, and I cried for death. But the revulsion of feeling came again, and I set myself to the task of winning the soul of Ida Temple to atone for my momentary defection.

Enough—let me return to the mission itself.

The meeting of the spiritualist society to which my client and her aunt had been invited was held in the larger room of St Jacob's Hall, near Buckingham Palace Gate. It was an excellent, fashionable and central spot for the headquarters of the society. And the society itself was fashionable just then. As a rule, its meetings were extremely well attended.

On the evening of which we speak there were perhaps four hundred people present, mostly gentlemen, with a sprinkling of ladies. I cannot say that the latter were prepossessing. They were almost, without exception, bony, ill-shapen, anæmic women, short-sighted, and wearing very unbecoming spectacles on their unhealthy faces.

I have said ladies were in the minority. Gentlemen filled the larger part of the hall, and strange specimens they were, too. Old and young, some smartly, others shabbily dressed, with shiny, ill-fitting clothes—a curious collection of human beings indeed. By 8-30, the room was full, not a seat vacant, and the temperature rose, the air became hotter, more stifling, more humidly suggestive of packed humanity.

There was a glare of electric light, not becoming, merely brilliant, emphasising the pallor and general defectiveness of the faces present. Entering the hall with my beautiful client, whose attractive figure and fair face caused a turning of heads, I was at once impressed with the uninteresting nature of the audience. Ida Temple seemed curiously out of place among these people.

Yet, instead of seeming wearied or disappointed, her eyes searched the crowd eagerly. The seats reserved for her and Miss Woodward were in the centre of the room, and to reach

them they had to pass down a long line of chairs. On their way, the girl leaned on the back of one chair for an instant, and a young man whom I recognised as Murchison glanced quickly round. A quiet look of intelligence was interchanged, too quick to attract Miss Woodward's attention, and when they sat down the aunt had no idea that the good-looking young man whose eyes were respectfully scanning her face was other than a perfect stranger to her niece. In spite of her aversion to his sex, she did not object to his scrutiny—in fact, she rather enjoyed it. After all, there were men *and* men, and this did not seem like one of the common order; he was handsome, distinguished-looking, and possibly intelligent. Then, too, he appeared to be broad and tall, and there was woman enough in her to appreciate the sign of strength. Her feeble old heart fluttered at this stranger's evident attention as it has not done for very many years. All around, there was a hoarse murmur of voices like the rumbling of the breeze in an old-fashioned chimney, or its moaning among the rafters. But the sound ceased suddenly when Professor Thirroul stepped on to the plat-form, and, with a bow, commenced his harangue. Episodes, concerning Madame Joan Urquhart of Reves, a clairvoyant of enormous reputation, figured in the commencement of his speech. He mentioned that she had successfully answered questions put to her by eminent men relative to their absent friends, and had given them full particulars about those deceased, such as were impossible to have been hinted to her beforehand. One gentleman, having lost an uncle, for whom he had entertained great affection, questioned her about this relative and his present state. She gave a perfect description, both physical and moral, of the chief characteristics of the deceased in this world, then she stated that he was as present in a land full of flowers and fountains, but she could not tell its name. He was recognisable, only his features were no longer those of mortals. Furthermore, he was very happy, and would not wish to return to earth.

All this nonsense appealed to my sense of humour; I saw so keenly the absurdity of these clairvoyants pretending to commune with us, and claiming power over those fifty times more powerful than their puny selves. But,

by the mass of those present, it was received with faith, and not a little awe.

In all, the first speech lasted an hour, during which time the worthy professor was careful not to allow the sensational element to wane. I noticed how absorbed Miss Woodward became, as he proceeded. The subject was not wholly new to her; she had read articles upon it with the avidity she always displayed towards any out-of-the-common proceedings. In her enjoyment, she had forgotten the observant stranger, and only remembered him when Professor Thirtout left the platform.

To her surprise, as he looked round, the gentleman left his seat and slowly came towards her, much hampered in his progress by the close rows of chairs. Halting in front of Ida, he made some commonplace remark, but he spoke with a quiet deference that pleased the strange old lady.

"Evidently a man of good breeding and of no ordinary talent," she thought, and actually smiled as her niece spoke.

"Auntie, may I introduce Mr Murchison, our secretary?"

The young man bowed.

"I hope Miss Woodward did not think me unpardonably rude," he said. "I know I did stare harder than etiquette allows, but I had an excellent excuse."

Miss Woodward was softening rapidly.

"I feel quite flattered, I assure you," she said, with something grotesquely like a coquettish simper. "But do please tell me your reason."

"But you may be offended."

Hubert was standing, in the easy attitude of one well used to ladies' society; his insincerity seemed to me so clearly stamped upon his face that I wondered others did not comment upon it, till I recollected that "society" men and women probably had not keen eyes for their common failing.

"Tell me!" she persisted.

"I was assuring myself," he answered gravely, "that you would make an excellent medium. One rarely meets one wholly in sympathy with our friends in spirit-land."

Miss Woodward's countenance brightened visibly.

"He really is a very nice young man," she thought; adding aloud. "Do you truly think so?"

"Yes—truly, Miss Woodward. I may say I am convinced of it." Then, lowering his voice as he observed some people near at hand paying unnecessary attention to the conversation, "One has only to glance at some faces to read rare spirituality sympathy—earnestness—a mind different from the ordinary type—but, perhaps this subject is distasteful to you. I know many people find it so."

"Oh no, Mr Murchison! I take a great interest in anything capable of enlarging our minds and extending our ideas. I think you are in some way connected with this society, you said?"

"I am the secretary, that is how I met Miss Temple."

"And do you usually have such a large gathering?"

"Indeed, yes. Sometimes we can hardly find standing room. But would you like me to point out to you some of our more distinguished patrons?"

The young man's chivalrous attention was winning its way. Miss Woodward felt twenty years younger in mind; perhaps all men were not such degraded creatures as she has imagined.

She readily acquiesced, for like most ladies who love to be considered "select," she was slightly inclined to what ordinary people call "snobbishness."

Murchison smiled at her evident eagerness.

"Do you see the lady over there—in green?" he whispered; "she is the wife of Lord Edcastle; the one to the left with the mushroom-shaped hat is Sir Ralph Mahony's eldest daughter."

Miss Woodward was delighted. The heavy atmosphere of the room became precious since it could be breathed in common with these. Lady Edcastle, the friend of royalty!

"Dear me," she murmured. "What a refined person Lady Edcastle is. One can see that she inherits the good old blue blood of England."

"Not from her father," rudely ejaculated a man on Miss Woodward's right, "the over-fed old brewer, nor from her mother, the——"

But Murchison tacfully intervened and drew off his new friend's attention, just as she was turning, bristling with wrath, upon the discourteous interrupter. Then the conversation was stopped by Professor Pitkin's appearance on the platform.

For another hour the audience was treated to accounts of supernatural occurrences hathered from strictly authentic sources, and brimming over with unadulterated horror. Most of them concerned apparitions whose only delight and occupation was to appear in tangible form and terrify nervous men and women into fits.

I myself, a denizen of the spirit world, knowing what a rare and difficult matter such materialisation is, could afford to be amused at the idea. Doubtless the stories were told on perfect good faith, arising either from an overwrought condition of brain, or the supremacy of a stronger will commanding the imagination of a weaker. When the last word had been spoken and the meting dispersed, we mingled with the crowd, passing slowly towards the doorway; a cold rush of air came in from the outside.

Murchison attended the two ladies until the last moment. "Permit me," he said gallantly, helping Miss Woodward to struggle into her intricate and antiquated cloak-garment. He did not speak to my client, but had Miss Woodward perceived the look and pressure which accompanied the final hand-shake, she might have changed her mind concerning this most desirable "secretary."

"Only think, my dear," she said gleefully to Ida that night, as they sipped their coffee in front of the drawing-room fire, "of my being a probable medium. Yet, do you know, I *have* always felt in touch with the nobler elements. On one occasion I thought your mother spoke to me; she seemed to say, 'Lizzie, Lizzie, don't read by that light, you will hurt your eyes!' She was always so anxious about my sight, poor dear."

"What do you think of the secretary?" said Ida with a carelessness that was almost overdone.

"A most charming young man—not a bit like most of his sex. Clever undoubtedly, and well-mannered, and so wonderfully correct in reading character. But," with a return of her asperity, "he is a man! Dear, dear, what a pity."

"Are you still so bitter, auntie?" asked the girl, with a winning smile, as the firelight kissed her cheeks and the crimson band at her throat, and darkened by contrast her hair and eyes. She was a nymph of the night indeed.

Miss Woodward frowned. She has almost been trapped into a weakness, and womanlike, tried to get out of an awkward position.

"My opinions are of course unaltered," she said sternly. "I can't imagine why I endured seeing so much of this Mr Murchison, except, indeed that it opens the way to something I have long desired."

"And that is——?"

"Don't be inquisitive, Ida. There is nothing so detestable as an inquisitive person. You never learnt such an odious habit in this house, I am sure."

"I beg yout pardon, auntie. I really didn't mean to be inquisitive, and of course I have no wish to ask about anything you do not want to tell."

"Sensibly spoken, my dear. But," the old lady went on as if half ashamed, "as you are so sensible, I think I may tell you. I want to attend a séance."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock and the beating of the two hearts, the elder throbbing with anxiety, the younger with triumph. The yellow flame burned and flickered, uncertain as a woman's word, while the coals glowed red and the grey ashes slipped through the bars. Then a half cinder fell with a noise, and my client answered, as if recalled to the present by the sound :

"I am sure Mr Murchison would arrange a séance on your behalf, if it is not too great a favour to ask of him."

"My dear ! He is a man, and men were only intended to accommodate us. Don't be ridiculous."

The old lady sat severely upright, she was wrestling with the prejudices of her whole life. Could she set aside her antipathy towards man, even for a moment? Like most staunch upholders of a fanciful doctrine, she had quite a circle of disciples, women past their prime, either embittered by circumstances or wilfully eccentric. She had been the leading spirit among them. Seeing that all her associates respected her, and in a great measure drew their inspiration from her, any sudden change of attitude would surely cause a panic, and might lead to the dispersal of the Men Hater's Club which she had initiated. If she accepted a favour from Murchison—and it became known—the proof of her degeneracy would be complete.

"If I attend a séance it must be kept private—mind, my dear, *strictly* private."

The girl guessed the reason at once.

"You need not fear any indiscretion on Mr Murchison's part, I know," she retorted, a little too warmly, rising and leaning her arm on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, have you any foundation for that statement?"

"No, auntie, except, of course, his official position in the society, and intuition. It was a fairly strong, reliable face, I thought," she concluded, with a yawn.

"Yes, I thought so too. Well, it is bed-time now—we must talk this over to-morrow. *Au revoir!*"

CHAPTER XVII

THE POWER OF HYPNOTISM

UP to his point I had found my task easy : indeed, beyond the suggestion about the séance, there had been nothing for me to do. So I did not expect to meet any serious difficulty as I prepared to accompany the ladies to Murchison's rooms.

A thick yellow fog, like foul wet linen, hung over London. Traffic was well-nigh suspended, and the electric light all but useless. There was a choking dampness in the air, and poor old Miss Woodward coughed incessantly. The progress of their motor-car was irritating in its slowness, and she became so short-tempered and fidgety that I feared she might decide to abandon her visit. Once, when Ida made some allusion to the draught blowing through the ill-fitting window, the reply she received was so savage and unladylike, that I began to wonder what success I should have had if the aunt and not the niece had been my charge. Even as I wondered, I felt a sudden grasp on my shoulder, and before I had time to think of defence, I was violently precipitated out of the vehicle into the steaming road.

My astonishment at the attack was so great that I must have wasted a few seconds in bewilderment, then realising that serious opposition was on foot, I rushed back to my station. As I got to my cleint's side, I heard her aunt exclaim :

"It's tomfoolery, after all, Ida. Tell him to return—I don't think I'll go on."

The girl was yielding. Indeed, I was only just in time.

"Tell her she must go on," I whispered, pressing my left hand hard on her fair forehead; "that all is arranged—that if she fails this time, she will never get another opportunity."

But my client proved an unwilling listener. She was tired, and a little nervous, and more than half inclined to withdraw from the expedition. What had seemed a feasible means of overcoming her aunt's prejudice, now appeared unpractical and even dangerous. Fear of discovery, terror lest any mishap should occur and her aunt be injured, joined with the pricking of a late awakened conscience, and she leaned forward to call to the driver.

I persevered, and a desperate struggle took place in that narrow vehicle. Feeling that hand again on my shoulder, I gripped it above the wrist, and throwing out my right arm, found the rest of the impalpable interfering form. I knew it was that of Sagatheela, who met my attack by pressing her other hand on my mouth, forcing my head back from my client's ear. But I placed my right leg between her two feet, and I clutching her, we both fell together. The floor of the vehicle offered no obstruction to our ethereal forms, and we sank through to the ground. So the remainder of the controversy was left to the girl's free will; but I was overjoyed, on regaining my place, to find that she had been swayed by me.

"Ha ha, Sagatheela!" I laughed, "I am still the stronger."

"Oh, Agonostes," she sighed, though I could not see her, "will thine eyes never be opened to thine own perversity? Oh, if I could but compel thee to see and understand!"

And before I could finish the mocking sentence half formed on my lips, she slipped through my grasp and passed away, leaving me alone.

The car was still pursuing its way, and Miss Woodward leaned back resignedly against the cushions.

We rolled down empty street after empty street, only meeting here and there the flash of a policeman's lamp in the sombre mist, or some half-befogged street light glimmered obliquely in at the window as we plunged again into

the yellow obscurity. The solemn voice of Big Ben rang out from afar, and I thought of the slime of the river, and how one Paul Penruddock, had contemplated it in his hours of suffering ; and all my hatred and revenge welled up afresh. I gloated over the victim at my side—a woman, heartless, beautiful, and wealthy, dead to all pleasure, belonging to an intriguing sensual society outside the world of human sorrow and striving—corrupt in its luxury and ever under the surveillance of Diaphernes. It was revenge, and it was sweet and satisfying.

In my exultation I twined my fingers in her hair and thanked my master for the hour.

At last ! The car drew up at the door of Murchison's abode, and the driver muttered, 'Thank 'Heaven for this 'here mercy !' as he managed to make out the number on the door. Miss Woodward shivered and drew her shawl closely about her as she stepped across the damp pavement—everything was so cold, so foul, so unnaturally silent. with nothing to be seen except the fog. The outlines of the motor-car were almost lost, and when she slipped the fare into the driver's hand, it seemed to Miss Woodward as if he were a being from another world; while his voice as he growled, "Trust a bloomin' lidy to give a pore cove no more than his fare," might have come from across the sea.

Both the ladies were glad to see the door open, and to be once again in the land of the known. The electric light was most dazzling after the outside darkness, and their eyes blinked and strained as they ascended the staircase.

As I have already described Murchison's room I need not revert to it, except to observe that a heavy curtain now divided it into two distinct parts.

As they crossed the threshold, their host came to meet them. There was nothing about him to suggest the element of the weird. He appeared, on the contrary, the very embodiment of cheery hospitality, in perfect harmony with the blazing fire, the snug room, and the dainty waiting table of refreshments.

"How good of you to come. Miss Woodward !" he exclaimed, helping her off with her cloak, and scarcely able to repress a start at the sight of the odd masculine attire it has covered. "I sarcelly flattered myself that

you would do me the honour on such an uninventing evening."

Miss Woodward smiled—such a smile as seldom relaxed the lines of that rigid mouth.

"Of course I have," she said; "you know, ladies do keep their promises sometimes."

Murchison glanced at his fiancée, whose eyes seemed to say, "Go on—all's well!"

"Shall we have some tea, Miss Woodward?" he went on politely, as the old lady was warming her hands by the fire. "I am sure, after your drive—and a most unpleasant one it must have been—you will be glad of something to help you forget it."

"Thank you, you are very considerate," said the old lady aloud, adding half to herself, as if oblivious of his presence, "how very different from most young men!"

The meal was immense success. The tea was most delicious, full of the very aroma of the far East. Never had Miss Woodward tasted crisper buttered-toast, no more luxuriant strawberry preserve. The man, the food, the conversation, the fire, the room were so wholly at variance with her expectations, that she found herself wondering if she were in a dream. Her mind was carried to the days of her youth when, girl-like, she had liked unconventional tea-parties; and the wave of memory made her very sad.

"Why, auntie, how silent you are!" The girl's voice recalled her from her musing.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Murchison," she said apologetically, "I was so busy listening to my niece's prattle that I forgot my own conversational duties."

There was a note of sarcasm on the words that made Murchison mutter: "Queer old cat! I believe she is jealous of Ida!" But with the courtesy which seemed as second nature to him, he said aloud, "Are you feeling in the mood for our séance?"

He could have laughed aloud when the old lady's eyes opened like gooseberries.

"It is incredible," she said, "that such a very earthly young man can have any sympathy with the occult world."

"I admit the incongruity," he replied, with a smile, "but, irreconcilable as it may seem, I am full of sympathy—simply bubbling over with it."

"How wonderful!" said the old lady, leaning back in her chair, and gazing at him without a doubt as to his sincerity, "when will you commence?"

"As soon as you are ready, Miss Woodward."

"I am ready now," she said. But she was inwardly apprehensive, and noticed the change in his face as he crossed the room to the bell. Before, he had been cheeriness personified, now he seemed to have grown stern. The cloth removed, at a word from Murchison, the three drew up their chairs to the little round table. It was then that he put his first and only question to Miss Woodward.

"Have you any knowledge as to how these séances are worked?"

"None whatever," she replied, and he carefully concealed the satisfaction her answer gave him.

Fixing his eyes steadily on hers, he slowly issued his instructions.

"I want you," he said, "not to take your eyes off mine, be perfectly passive, and let me, as it were, look into your brain. Do you understand?"

The old lady felt uneasy. The whole room seemed to have undergone a transformation, the fire had dwindled down and the electric lights had been replaced by an oil lamp. It was so gloomy that it made her shiver.

"I—am rather nervous," she said. "*Must* you look at me so? You frighten me."

Murchison merely indicated by a nod of his head that she must obey. The silence was intense. My client was but an observer of the drama, enjoying rather than otherwise the spectacle of her aunt humbled into submission by a man. A clock outside struck nine. No other sound broke the awed hush, and the power of Murchison's gaze grew and grew; it absorbed all his energy, and little by little did what was required of it.

His victim lost all strength of resistance. She had a horrible idea that the man's eyes were getting larger and larger, more and more brilliant, and would continue to do so until they pounced down upon her and swallowed her up. She became unconscious of the room, of the furniture, of herself—of everything except those eyes. An irresistible lethargy stole over her as the coils of a serpent wind themselves

round the helpless body of its prey. If her life had been at stake she could neither have moved hand nor foot. Her last thought seemed to be "Am I a medium, and is this the spirit-world?" Then Murchison gently removed the hand he had been for a few minutes resting on her forehead, and turned with a sigh of relief to Miss Temple.

"I think she is safe for the present, but it was hard work."

"You haven't killed her?" queried Ida, a little anxiously, peering into the white old face.

"No, no, dear; don't worry! She has merely succumbed to the influence of mesmeric force and is in a state of torpor. I can arouse her quite easily."

Feling my opportunity had arrived, I drew closer to my client, and breathed into her ear:

"Perhaps your aunt can answer questions?"

Miss Temple started slightly.

"Could you make her speak?" she asked Murchison.

"Why?" he said a little sharply. "What do you want to know?"

"But *can* you?" she persisted, smiling up in his face.

"Yes, I think so," he replied hesitatingly. Deep down in his breast the remains of a conscience sometimes troubled him. A flicker of the fire emphasied the rare beauty of Ida's face, but he could not help remarking how little pity there was in it, only eagerness and a little curiosity. She would be a cool-headed surgical nurse, he caught himself thinking.

Now she laid two fingers on her aunt's pulse. "It is quite regular," she whispered.

"Do you know her normal pulsation?" asked the man.

"Oh yes, quite well! I love dabbling in doctoring. Now ask her something."

"Well, what shall it be?"

"Oh, anything. Her age—only be quick."

"All right! She won't come to until I allow it. Miss Woodward," he suddenly adopted a hard, high monotone, "please inform me of your age."

There was no change in the peaceful outline of her face as she answered as calmly as if were a most ordinary question, "I am seventy-two."

"Is that correct?" asked Murchison of Ida.

Yes—go on—another."

"When was your birthday?"

"March twenty-third."

"Is that right, Ida?" Murchison felt possessed by a sudden interest, as if it might lead to something.

His fiancée nodded affirmatively.

I should have been feeble indeed had I not used the time to further my own object. Placing my arm round Ida's slim waist, I was about to whisper in her ear again, when a soft hand pressed upon my lips and I was drawn irresistibly backwards. The walls, the chair, the table, seemed to recede rapidly, my body seemed to be weighted with flesh, heavy and helpless. How long the backward motion would have continued, I knew not. Suddenly I remembered the promise of Diaphernes and sent forth an appeal for help.

It came. Nerved with strength, I checked the movement and brought myself resolutely to a standstill, then, with a sudden movement, freed myself from that soft encompassing arm, so that my swift sandals bore me back unhindered to the side of my client.

Not an instant too soon.

She was just considering if it would not be well to let her aunt be awakened without further risk.

"Nonsense," I said. "All girls want to know their future—yours rests with her."

"Nay, heed him not!" I heard the persuasive accents of Sagatheela. "Spurn his false counsels. God before the devil always."

"Pooh!" I sneered, "you are no child to heed such drivel, or else the devil is another name for common sense."

"Sometimes, people blame common sense when it is the devil's doing," continued my enemy. And I felt that my client leaned to her rather than to me. Her soul was sliding from my grasp. It meant victory for one of us within a moment, and, at this crisis I could not help wondering at the woman's own ignorance of the contest for her soul.

"Do not wreck a life's happiness for a whim," I cried. "Think of Hubert—for her words must nearly concern him too."

Slowly and meditatively she yielded, and I heard the well-known sigh of anguish. "Again—again— oh, Agonostes, wilt thou always prevail?"

"Yes," I exulted, "for eternity. By man's own choice my master is stronger than thine."

"'Tis a lie, and thou knowest it!" she retorted, with a fine scorn in her voice. "Yes, 'tis hard to bear the shame and the struggle of it. Oh, Agonostes, didst thou but know all!"

I laughed aloud at this outburst, and my mirth made the very shadows quiver. Yet the man and woman heard it not. Ida was speaking, and she was half-frightened at her own proposition—

"Ask her what she means to do with her money."

The man took a step backwards.

"Why?" he asked, trying to speak naturally. "Why should you ask such a question?"

"For both oursakes, Hubert. I want to hear about her will."

"Ah!" The man's face hardened, the power of her beauty crushed fear, pity, manliness, everything that restrained him. He became her tool, and, Adam-like, he fell. But surely never since Adam did a sinner give himself so voluntarily to his fate. I listened with the self-congratulation of a conqueror to his next words:

"Yes, I understand. Miss Woodward, you are rich?"

"Yes." There was no alteration in the intonation.

"To whom will you leave your money?"

A look of pain became visible on the victim's face, her eyebrows contrated, her eyes pleaded for pity. She seemed to wrestle with the words drawn from her unwilling tongue. Once I thought she would stop, my client thought so too, and nervously gripped her lover's hand. The strain of the moment was intense, the darkness of the room deepened, and the shadows assumed veirder forms, but it was too tense to last. Relief came.

"If Ida marries she inherits nothing. If she remains single she receives half, the other half to go to the Dogs' Home."

That was all. The old lady relapsed into her previous state of passiveness. The eccentricity of the last clause would doubtless have been amusing at another time, and in other circumstances—but as it was, its humour was too

grim to please. To the listeners it was of the gravest import—it meant a lifelong old maid or else a pauper bride.

Murchison, like most wordlings, was quick and decided in action. No sooner had he heard her speak than, beautiful and fascinating as Miss Temple was, he knew she would be worthless to him if she came to him dowerless. It would spoil all the promising prospects of his future. The girl seemed half to read what was passing in his mind, and it added to the misery and indignation caused by her aunt's words. Her breast heaved with ill-suppressed anger, and the wild gleam of excitement hung in her bright eyes, while a strong flush changed the pallor of her cheeks. A woman of her temperament, driven to bay, is apt to be dangerous, and I noted with pleasure the cruelty in her tightened lips and the flash of her teeth as she burst out passionately:

"Oh, it's a dastardly will!"—the delicate nails crushed into the tender palms—"it is outrageous—and to think she is my aunt! Oh, it is hard!" The voice wavered, and I thought she was on the verge of tears. However, she controlled herself, and said, "Why can't you say something, Hubert, instead of staring like that?"

Murchison smiled—not quite, the pleasant smile to which she was accustomed.

"What am I to say?" he asked, tugging at his moustache, and shifting from one foot to another. "You heard what she said. What can I do?"

"You are a man. I wish I were one!" she cried fiercely. "Surely a man's brain could meet all emergencies. Think of something, quick!"

Again that smile made her turn cold and apprehensive. She felt frightened, sick, Murchison said coolly, "You forget—it is woman's wit that is supposed to find its way through all difficulties."

The girl's eyes flashed. She was about to answer him with the scorn he deserved—for even her infatuation could not misread his hesitation—when she suddenly paused, and with a complete change of expression, due to my interference, she leaned forward and looked at him long and hard. Then her words broke ominously through the silence of the room, and a strange yellow flame flickered up in the fire as if in answer.

"Isn't it in your power? Make her change it!" (How I laughed at Sagatheela's fruitless efforts!)

Murchison only stared for a moment. He was seeing his fiancée in a new light, and the revelation was somewhat staggering. But time pressed, and again he yielded to the woman's insistent will.

"Yes," he said, "I believe I can. It's rather an awful thing to do, but, by Jove, Ida, you are worth it. What do you suggest?"

Sagatheela tried to intervene.

"She has been kind to thee," she murmured, "stay, before this has gone too far."

"Rather think of thy lover," I put in.

"All her care of thee as a helpless and deserted child—a girl whom she tended with a mother's devotion—of home, comfort, everything. Ingratitude is indeed base in the sight of God. Turn back!"

"Half her income to a Dogs' Home!" I reminded her. "If thou wilt obey her unreasonable whims, she will estimate thee as equal to a dog! And she might yet change and leave it all to dogs."

"Or to thee, from love won lovingly. Try the better way." How eager Sagatheela could become in extremity.

"Hesitate," I said, "and lose thy lover!"

"Be patient," urged Sagatheela, "and save thy soul."

"Thy soul or thy lover?" The words rang in her ears.

"Thy soul!" pleaded Sagatheela.

"Thy lover!" I cried in passionate frenzy.

Again she chose—her lover. I heard a long, low wail as of a woman whose very heart was torn by sorrow—and Sagatheela glided sadly away as the girl said quickly:

"Make her, force her to draw up another will. She may not live long—she is much feebler than she used to be."

"But how about witnesses? There must be at least two. Whom can we find?"

The girl pondered a moment.

"It doesn't much matter whom we have, so long as you are here. Let me think. Ah!" as I insinuated a suggestion, "I have it now. Auntie will come here, you mesmerise her, and then we send for a lawyer. You know she never would employ a lawyer, so that anybody will do—

that is to say, any one we can trust. Auntie will tell him under your influence that she wishes to draw up a new will. He will do it and you can make her sign it."

"What a brain you have!" the man said enviously. "But you have still forgotten the witnesses."

"Indeed I haven't. I know the very people."

"And they are——?"

"Hush! It is quite time you roused auntie. See me to-morrow evening, and we will settle everything."

When Miss Woodward awoke from her torpor she gazed in a dull, vacant way at the four eyes fixed so earnestly upon her. It was some moments before she realised what they were. At first they hung above her in space, glowing like lamps, then the outline of faces and bodies grew around them, and they were no longer nameless, disconnected things, but human eyes—and slowly, very slowly, she identified them. Memory reasserted itself—the room, the chair, tables, and curtain—then she suddenly recollected why she had come there.

"What has happened?" she asked eagerly.

"You have been in a state of clairvoyance, Miss Woodward,, said her host, coming to her side, „and a better subject I have never seen."

The old lady scanned him closely.

"Do you really mean it, Mr—er——?"

"To be sure. What did you feel like?"

Miss Woodward shook her head sorrowfully.

"I can't recollect. I only feel like a person just awakened from a long dreamless sleep. Please tell me something of what has occurred."

"Why," said Murchison, leaning back easily in his chair, "it was like this—Obeying my instructions, to the letter, you allowed yourself, so to speak, to decentralise. Your soul left your body and undertook a journey. You told us of many strange things of wanderings in a very beautiful land with bright sunshine and far-stretching meadows, you described minutely the occupation and the clothing of its inhabitants. Some you found engaged in pursuits such as ploughing, others spent their time in playing tunes on wonderful instruments whose names you could not escer-

tain. You talked with one of these people who told you she had only just found her freedom, and had been lately an inhabitant of this earth."

Miss Woodward interrupted in bewilderment :

"Can this be true?"

Murchison put on an expression of injured dignity, and my client half uttered an ejaculation of rebuke.

"Your niece will corroborate me, I think," said the man gravely.

"Is it true, Miss Temple?"

The young lady inclined her head stiffly.

"Certainly," she said. "Auntie, I wonder at you questioning Mr Murchison's word."

"I beg your pardon, Mr Murchison," said Miss Woodward, in puzzled self-defence. "But it seems so odd that I said it all, and can't recollect it."

However, before she took her departure, her incredulity wore off, and she even persuaded herself she had seen and heard the things suggested.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr Murchison," she said.

"Pray, don't mention it, Miss Woodward," he responded gallantly. "I am amply recompensed for the little trouble I took, if you were pleased."

"It was delightful!" she said. "It is not often I am so well entertained. Now, you must come round and see us!"

"I shall be most happy!" he replied, while Ida could hardly believe her ears.

"Yes, old lady, I won't forget your invitation," murmured Murchison, as the door of the motor-carriage shut with a bang.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SPIRIT IN THE LITTLE BACK ROOM

SEVERAL weeks passed, bringing no important change. Murchison paid a formal visit one afternoon, and had later been invited to dinner. On each occasion Miss Woodward received him cordially, and by her demeanour, betrayed only too well the power he had gained over her. In fact, she agreed with everything he chose to say on all subjects but one—and that one was marriage. She clung tenaciously

to her belief that no woman should marry before thirty, and few after it, giving as a reason the unhappy married lives many of her family had led. Above all, she held to her intention of forbidding matrimony to her niece absolutely, once and for all.

"Marriage," she said, gazing into the fire, „may suit a few, not majority of us. As for you, Ida, I forbid you ever to do so foolish a thing. Do you hear me, child? I forbid you."

"I don't want to marry, auntie," she replied, uttering readily the lie I put into her mouth. And there for the time being the matter had ended.

All the while the conspirators' plot was progressing A lawyer had been found in the person of an old school-fellow of Murshicon's, a man of limited means and a still more limited circle of clients, with a wife and many children, and a daily growing dread of the Bankruptcy Court. A promise of a few hundred pounds made him only too glad to fall in with Murchison's proposal, and he readily consented to be as silent as the grave.

One evening my client was sitting in her boudoir, gazing pensively into the fire. It was a habit of hers from which she seemed to derive an extraordinary amount of pleasure I sometimes wondered why, knowing how genuinely unimaginative she was. Yet in the red coals she saw pictures, faces of friends and enemies, labyrinths and turnings, even prophecies. "I must poke it again to see what changes come," she said, suiting the action to the word. The roof of a very beautiful cavern fell in with a crash, the walls, staggering under the debris, tottered on their foundations, leaned forward, and sank almost noiselessly into a shapeless mass; then, as if striving for a fresh lease of existence, agitated by some invisible agent, they swayed to and fro. With a convulsive effort they threw from their midst a curious black ember, in shape remarkably like a coffin. The girl drew her little foot back hastily as the missile almost touched it.

"What can have caused that?" she said; adding with a shudder. What a funny shape? What can it mean?"

I took up my station at her side.

"It means," I whispered, "Death."

"Nothing of the sort," and I recognised Sagatheela's tones again, "it merely means danger."

"Yes," I acquiesced easily, "danger of being thwarted, therefore take heed to strike first."

"Nay," Sagatheela, "pause lest thou cast thyself into the pit that has no bottom. If thou carry out the evil intentions thou hast been weak enough to harbour in thy bosom—beware."

"If thou wouldst turn coward when one bold stroke would win all," I argued, "then beware indeed!"

The girl seemed perplexed. She leaned back in her chair, and her brows contracted.

"I wonder what I had really better do?" she murmured half aloud.

"Is it not true?" I ventured to whisper insinuatingly, "that Miss Woodward has a weak—a very weak heart?"

The girl shuddered and tried to think of something else, but I went on ruthlessly:

"To those so afflicted, death often comes quickly—a sudden shock——"

"Oh, I munstn't! I can't think of such horror," she cried wildly, hiding her face in her hands, while her glossy hair gleamed in the firelight like polished ebony.

Sagatheela interfered to reassure her.

"Then banish the painful thoughts, ease thy misery by falling on thy knees and confessing the sin meditated to Him, the Forgiver."

"Fool!" I hissed, and I struck at my enemy to drive her off. "Fool, always a meddler, why comest thou on such a futile errand? This woman is by nature mine, and will never listen to thee; depart then, and leave me the spoils of the easy victory that must be mine."

A soft hand, the hand whose touch I had come to know and hate, was placed gently on my shoulder—and the low voice said:

"Thou overratest thy strength, Agonistes. Immortal as thou art, thou art not alone among immortals. I too have an endless life, and I knew thee when thou wert still Paul, and in sorrow. How different art thou now!"

"Yes, thanks be to Diaphernes, I am!" I cried in a thrill of savage joy. "I was weak then, but I can hold my own against thee now! And what of thy boasted love and care for that same Paul? Didst thou not watch him suffer, starve, and die? How now?"

"I strove for Paul even as I strive for Agonistes," was

the reply ; "and for all that was, or was not, thou shouldst blame the devil and his agents, and not me."

"Oh, cease such babbling !" I thundered, and turned again to my client.

"The happiness of thy life," I told her, "lies in the hands of one woman, and she would rob thee of all that woman claims as her best right. She can, and will, strip thee of all things unless thou submit. Is this justice? And wilt thou surrender passively? Wilt thou yield, or win, thy over? Why should she live to spoil two lives? And is it a question of living? A shock *might* kill her—but who says it *will*?"

Throughout the afternoon and evening, Ida Temple could not drive the thought from her mind. Her aunt, noticing her unwonted silence, enquired its cause with solicitude, but only received an abrupt reply. So the old lady sighed, and sat still, her hands on her lap and her eyes gazing into vacancy—wondering perhaps why God made her niece so beautiful and yet so cold, so unresponsive.

I felt my success was assured when my client, bidding her aunt a curt good - evening, retired upstairs and wrote a note to Hubert Murchison. It was not a letter—only a few words in a clear bold hand, written on flagrant delicate paper that would convey to him more clearly than any words the personality of the writer. The message was such as made me laugh at Satatheela, for I could read Death between the lines.

Two evenings later, the party of three met again in Murchison's room. Everything, even to the buttered toast, was the same as on the previous occasion, and the room was even cherrier and more comfortable. Ida never remembered having seen Miss Woodward in a lighter or happier mood. Her conversation was most versatile ; she chatted on politics and education, soared to discussion concerning ethereal bodie, and gravely debated on the theories of Darwin. She never flagged, but talked on merrily, pausing only to taste the crisp toast or drink the delicious tea served in the tiny cups of real Worcester.

Murchison never ceased to interest her. She was always discovering some new side to his nature, and that something more likeable than all before. He was not only a spiritua-

list, evidently, but a scholar—a politician—a prince among entertainers—a man with a vast assortment of fascinating hobbies. There was no subject of which he hid not seem to have some knowledge, and she could only admit to herself that he was a most wonderful young man.

By the time the table was cleared and the chairs duly arranged opposite the heavy baize curtain, she felt that she would like to own this young man as her son. She was beginning to be sorry she had said so much to him on the matrimonial topic. Perhaps no one would be better fitted to train Ida in the way she should go Miss Woodward's way—than this very clever young man.

Her thoughts had reached this point when she became conscious of his gaze fixed on her. She at once looked up, and their eyes met. Again it was a repetition of the other evening, and she gradually fell away into a heavy sleep, far away from the room or from any cognisance of its occupants.

When she was in the depth, of the mesmeric trance, dead to all that was passing around her, Murchison, beckoned to my client, who left the hearthrug where she had been standing and came at once to his side.

"Quick!" he said. "Be quick and arrange the chairs for our visitors. They were to be here at eight you do, don't show any signs of agitation."

The girls shrugged her shoulders with a slightly scornful smile.

"Do I look agitated?" was all she said.

"No," admitted the man. "I can't say you do. But—quick, darling. Ah, here they come."

A sharp ring below, and the heavy tread of skirt-hamp-ered feet told the sex of the first visitors. In a moment the door opened to admit them. One was a middle-aged dame with ruddy cheeks, pale blue eyes, and a distinctly inquisitive cast of nose, scarcely the sort of person one would have brought into a delicate business, had not a closer observation shown that one of her eyes, as evidenced by the whitish opaqueness of the retina was practically sightless—pro- bly through cataract, whereas the other was myopic and defective. The other visitor, a prim little person in metho- distical black attire, was short-sighted also, and moreover almost stone deaf. Consequently, there was nothing much to fear from either witness. Ida had chosen well. Mur-

chison, with his unvarying courtesy, stepped forward to greet them as they entered. He had first taken the precaution to cover Miss Woodward's eyes with a large pair of blue spectacles.

Everything seemed perfectly regular to the two ladies, and they were quite willing to accept Ida's prettily-anxious explanation that 'dear auntie was worried and tired, and, she feared, not at all well.'

The lawyer then arrived, a colourless, shabby little man, above all things palpably poor; and the "how do you do's" and preliminary commonplaces being over, they assembled at the larger table.

The lawyer approached the old lady, and in a suave voice asked whether she still wished the document to be drawn up. Neither of the witnesses observed the cool steady gaze that their host never removed from Miss Woodward's face. Nor did they notice that her words came with an effort, as if she was trying to leave them unspoken and could not. In a slow, almost stammering voice she said:

"Yes, I wish to make my will, believing before God that my days are almost at an end."

The witness who was not deaf changed colour a little at this speech. She was an old acquaintance of Miss Woodward, and had always regarded her friend as such a hale and hearty old lady. In a certain unpleasant manner it reminded her that she herself was no longer young. She winced, and said with a dry little cough:

"Why, Lizzie, you've many long years before you yet. We women aren't so frail as we used to be."

Miss Woodward did not even glance at the speaker, but replied in the steady voice of a soulless automaton:

"I have come to the end of my span of life. I know it. That is enough."

The words came slowly and almost painfully, and my client looked at her aunt with something like terror lurking in her eyes. The tension of the whole proceeding was terrible for any whom its issue concerned deeply. Murchison kept outwardly calm, but his soul was fretted with feverish anxiety.

"Come, sir," he said, touching the lawyer on the shoulder, "we must not waste time. Miss Woodward is very tired."

Miss Woodward then proceeded to dictate in the sam-

hard, high voice her "wishes"—which were speedily transcribed on the parchment. No one interrupted; with the exception of a needful word or two from Murchison, all in the room maintained an impressive silence. The deaf lady stood on the hearthrug, the inquisitive one—I can think of no term to suit her better—stood in front of her, and by her side was Ida. When the will had been drawn up and only the signature was needed to complete it, I leaned over the lawyer's shoulder and read what he had written.

"This is the last will and testament of me, Elizabeth Anna Woodward, of Amber Park, Blackheath, in the county of Kent, spinster. I give, devise, and bequeath all my real and personal estate of every description to my niece, Ida Alicia Temple, absolutely, subject only to the followings; I desire that the sum of £500 be paid within three months after my decease to the treasurer of the Dogs' Home, Channings Road, Lee. Further, that the sum of £300 be paid within the said time to the Promoters of the Spiritualist Society."

Then followed some unimportant bequests to friends and servants. Finally :—

"And I hereby appoint Hubert Murchison sole executor of this my will, and revoke all previous wills by me at any time made, and declare this to be my last will and testament. In witness whereof, I hereunto set my hand, this day of in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and "

"Signed by the said Elizabeth Anna Woodward in or presence, who in her presence and the presence of each other hereby subscribe our names as witnesses.

"HARRIET SARAH PARKER of ' spinster,
"MAUD JUBILEE JENKINS of ' spinster."

Murchison leaned forward and placed the pen in the old lady's hand, guiding it on the sheet of paper. He explained the action by a confidential nod towards the witnesses, as much as to say, "She is a bit bewildered and needs help."

Every one was looking at her, but never expecting anything unusual to happen.

Her hand was actually on the vellum and the pen had made a few strokes, when something occurred which was

as unexpected to me as to then. The electric light went out, leaving the room at the mercy of the firelight, which shot up in weird blue flames. The wind howled and shrieked in the chimney like a thousand fiends in torment. To the horror of all present a violent agitation took possession of the baize curtain. It shook and strained as if under the influence of invisible hands, and the sound of many pacing footsteps was heard in the little alcove behind.

I looked eagerly at the spectators. In each face I read fear,—not fear of any ordinary degree, such as is evoked by an accident or hairbreadth escape, but absolute servile terror, fright that blanched the cheeks, froze the blood, and fixed the staring eyeballs. No one could speak or move. The two witnesses tried to scream for help and could not.

My client's guilty conscience arose blank and awful. In vain I tried to stifle it. Sagatheela was there to accentuate it. "Pray," I heard her say, "pray for God's help in this awful moment." And I believe the name of Christ was on Ida's lips when I spoke in her ear, and she left it unuttered.

Anything was better than suspense—and I believe the first feeling was one of relief when the curtain was flung violently aside to disclose the horror beyond.

Even I, immortal as I was, quailed on seeing That which stood there—while Miss Woodward started out of her trance, uttered one little low cry, and sat still. There in the center of the alcove, the moonbeams streaming around it like a phosphorescent halo, stood, or rather crouched, for its back was bent and its hands rested on its wide-spread knees, as fearful a figure as I had ever seen in the great Avenue of Gloom itself.

It resembled neither man nor woman, but was grimly suggestive of both. With a low circular skull, eyes of lurid green, a wide distended mouth, and lips wreathed in a horrid mocking smile, the thing faced us in all its baneful wickedness. It might have stayed there a minute, possibly less,—long enough, at any rate, for it to be unforgettably imprinted on the minds of those who saw. The skin of the thing was of that sickly white usually attributed to leprosy. It shone with all the offensiveness of its putrescent nature.

What it was, whence it came, I knew not, nor could I form a better theory than that of its being some earthly

elemental spirit, created by the internal gases of the earth, and made visible by the evil medium of some one in the room.

The time of its appearance must have seemed centuries long to those on whom it bent its bestial leer. It departed suddenly as it came, and the heavy curtains swung together.

The lawyer was the first to speak. He was nearest the electric chandelier, and sprang to it and pressed the button. He did this several times before his efforts were rewarded, and the room was illuminated once more.

Then looking around, he cried in a hoarse, strange voice :
"My God, what has happened? Let us all get out of this as soon as we can."

And Hubert Murchison, ghastly pale, sprang to the side of Miss Woodward. The old lady lay back in her chair, her head hanging forward and sideways, and the jaw dropped low over her neck. There was no room left to doubt what had happened.

"She's dead !" he gasped, as his auditors gathered round, and he pointed with shaking forefinger to the rigid face.

"It is the hand of God," said the lawyer solemnly ; so solemnly that two of those present bowed their heads. Then, gripping his host's wrist, with hands as cold as the dead themselves, he pleaded : "Come, come—let us get out of this ! It is awful, it is hell !"

And as if stirred to life by the words, with one accord they trooped after him out of the room, and into the biting cold of the street, leaving the place in the possession of Death and Mystery.

A few weeks later, inquests and inquiries satisfactorily staved off or satisfied, one at least of the group had come to view the tragedy with calmer eyes. No previous will could be found, and my client, as next-of-kin and with the half-signed document to prove intention, was heiress to the greater part of her aunt's large fortune. She was only a little impatient that, in accordance with the prejudices of society, a decent interval must elapse before she fixed her marriage day.

I left her gazing reflectively into the great mirror in the boudoir where I had found her first, the sweet smell of violets hanging around her as of old.

"Yes," she said to her laughing reflection, "I have no soul. I gave it to the devil, and he can keep it safe for me. It pays best after all."

My sandals were pulling me onwards. I had won—and a less potent messenger might watch her now, as a small army can occupy a land wholly subdued by the victor. I took her in my arms and kissed the full red lips for joy and for their very beauty, and with that last tender farewell, leaped away and upwards, out of the bounds of the finite, hurrying to tell Diaphernes what I had done.

THE FIFTH MISSION

CHAPTER XIX

AS TOLD BY GEORGE OSWALDSON

CAN any one overpraise the charms of Bournemouth? Is there another such watering-place in Enlgand? If I were a poet, nothing could afford me fairer scope for my verses than the pine-clad chines, full of natural beauties and rich odours. If I were an artist it would be long ere I could exhaust the subjects for my canvas—no greener vales, no bluer skies, no more romantic walks could be found from John o' Croat's to Land's End. But I am neither poet nor artist—only plain insignificant George Oswaldson, and I never want to enjoy a holiday more than I can do here.

In the morning I take my bath, not in a few inches of cold water, but out in the glorious sea, as blue as the sky itself. Then after I have heartily breakfasted, I stroll out again from my lodging in St Michael's Road, past the Mancetler and Glenraig boarding-houses, out on the West Cliff, and thence down to the pier. For the princely sum of two-pence I can hear one of the best bands in Engl nad, and enjoy the spectacle of the hundreds of holiday-makers who tramp round and round the shelters, all in their summer's best.

When I am tired of studying this trudging humanity I need only walk a few yards to reach a smart little sailing-boat, and bargain with its owner for a run across the bay among myriads of other white sails. If I want to tempt

the deep further, there lie the *Brodrick Castle* and the *Monarch*, ready for the cruise round the Isle of Wight or to the Channel Islands. In the evening, when the sun has lost its fervour, the winter-gardens, full of choice flowers and enchanting music, offer many attractions ; and, as I turn homewards, Bournemouth goes to sleep under the crescent moon, and, wearied with pleasures, do likewise. No, there is not another watering-place in England dare enter the lists against Bournemouth !

To me 19—promised to be an eventful year. Indeed, the crisis of my fortunes must shortly come. I was even now expecting to hear the result of my final examination for the London B. A. Much depended on this result. Should I fail nothing remained but to pack up my few belongings and migrate to the States. Should I succeed, an honourable career lay in front of me.

I must make my position clearer. Both my parents died shortly after my birth, and Fate handed me over to the care of an uncle—a well-meaning man, I know, but hard, terribly hard—a Scotsman. No man could have taken more pains with my moral welfare, nor shown me in a more pointed manner how well the devil caters for the British public, and how ready he is to thrust his menu under our notice. I am certain that, if all my uncle has told me be true, he will have heaven pretty much to himself.

Business men generally lack the power of appreciating anything devoid of business interests, and have no sympathy with the young, who would prefer a profession to trade. My uncle wished me to enter his gea-house in Glasgow, and threw out gentle hints that I might get something worth having at his death if I stuck to the business. I, however, refused. We quarrelled, and as he had money and I had none, the odds were strongly in his favour. After a long struggle he agreed to allow me one chance, on condition that if I failed I should enter his business. I was loath to consent to his condition : but I went to London to read for my degree, intending, if successful, to become a schoolmaster.

Neither the matriculation nor the intermediate gave me much trouble, and I was congratulating myself that Fortune was smiling on me when an unexpected calamity upset my reading and threw me into a state of nervous alarm.

My uncle married again !

It would have seemed, bad enough had the lady alone been the question. But she, too, had been married before, and she brought a little son with her to the house in Glasgow. She was a scheming woman, and she worked upon my uncle's affections so completely that not a particle of his regard was left for me. "Home" soon became a mockery, and I came to look back upon the past with a yearning that was almost unbearable. More than once I felt madly inclined to put an end to my existence, and find myself a new home in the Shadowland, far from all daily annoyances.

After this domestic calamity my prospects underwent a change. My uncle's love faded away, and he grew to regard me as an encumbrance, and a useless piece of furniture which wanted removal. At last he told me that, did I fail in my examination, there lay before me, not business, but emigration, with just money enough to keep me alive for a few months. Then, it, seemed, I must be claimed either by the purlieu of the West, or by the grave !

The examination was in July. In August, with a samll cheque in my pocket, I managed to run down to Bournemouth, to have a breath of fresh air after my hot weeks of study in the south-east of London. It was twenty years since we had so hot a summer. My landlady remembered the last. Bournemouth had had a splendid season, every house in the town crammed with visitors, and with the exception of one thunderstorm, no rain had fallen from the fourth of August till the fifteenth of September. What wonderful memories old women have !

Tramp ! tramp ! tramp ! Fat women, old women, thin women, young women, all kinds of women pass in front of me. The men do not interest me so much. You see, my uncle had always warned me against women—they were the devil's satellites, and most of them had the evil eye. This was before he married. Since then I have spared no pains in looking into women's eyes to see where the evil lies.

Here comes a girl with a queer eye—such a queer eye, the lid half drawn over the pupil. But there is no evil in it. And here (jingle, jingle,—why do they all wear such a profusion of bangles to rattle as they walk?) come three girls arm-in-arm, with smart, upright carriage, and frank, daring eyes. I see no evil in these.

Look at this girl as she approaches, all in white except for a large crimson hat. Why crimson? To suit her complexion? She has beautiful dark eyes, but they are not evil. She is shop-girl, I am sure. Look at the two large buttons on the back of her dress; they have the very air of saying "What can we do for you this morning?"

Here come a troop of servants—yes, they must be servants. How slovenly their walk is! Look at their dresses buttoning up the back, their large boots, their watch-chains at the breast. Their eyes? Oh, brown and grey, mere openings in a rather shiny surface. Evil? Why, good gracious no!

I grow quite weary in trying to discover something to bear out my uncle's statement. The eyes of these women are perhaps not saintly, but certainly not evil.

A canvas awning has been spread over the place where the band plays, but arriving too late to obtain a seat beneath it, I have to be content in my post of observation outside, squashed on between a stout matron and a nervous little lady who is knitting—who knows what. It is hard to describe in its present stage—possibly a comforter, or a portion of baby's clothing. I give it up, and rivet my attention on the passers-by; for some still defy the relentless sun. It may make them uncomfortable, but it does not conceal their best clothes from those sitting down. How! envy these folk their apparent thoughtlessness as to the future!

"My future," I muse, "is black enough. At the best, if I have passed, I shall be a slave, working on and on at the beck and call of generations of small boys—saving a few pounds a year, if I am fortunate, against the inevitable loss of strength and power which waits for us workers like a hideous oo-gey."

I am busy studying the face of a pretty girl—the first undeniably attractive girl I have seen to-day—when a figure looms across my vision and blots her out.

Muttering an expression that would have convinced my uncle of my utter profligacy, I glance up and recognise one of my fellow-lodgers in St. Michael's Road.

"What the deuce does he want with me," I grumble.

"Sorry to interrupt your meditations, Mr Oswaldson," he says, in the grave voice little men of the dapper kind so often assume, "but this telegram arrived half an hour

ago, and guessing you were here and thinking you might want it, I brought it with me."

Last night, I had snubbed this little man to check his advances, sufficiently to offend him, and his was a type to require good solid reason for taking offence. Why had he taken this trouble to do me a good turn?

"Much obliged," I murmur. Yet on taking the yellow envelope I feel an ominous promonition of its contents.

"Failed in mathematics, Simpson." It was from my tutor.

"Bad news?" queries my fellow-lodger gently.

How could I swear at a man who speaks so sympathetically? "It is so bad that it couldn't be worse. What do you think of that?"

There is such a bitterness in my answer that it appears ruder than I meant. My sympathiser heaves a sigh, whether for my sorrows or my manners I know not, and turning slowly on his heels walks down the pier.

What an I to do? Drown myself at once and be done with it? The blue water looks too pretty to hurt much. Or go to Glasgow and beg to be taken into the business in *any* capacity? Or pack my belongings and get on the first liner from Southampton to New York. I spring from my seat, somewhat scattering my neighbours as I do so, and without waiting to see them pick themselves, up. I return to my lodgings.

All the pleasure in life disappears. I realise the gulf between myself and these careless crowds. The Christy minstrels easily winning their cheap applause, the cabbies gossiping with the policeman, the hearty boatmen—every one has probably a home and occupation, however poor it may be.

I could eat no luncheon, and lay on my bed, uselessly planning and thinking, till at four o'clock another telegram :

"Your uncle died this morning, heat apoplexy. Oswalson."

The shock of the news, coming as it did on the top of the first disaster, was terrible. Man as I was, I gave way to a fit of hysterical crying.

Unsympathetic, stern, cautious as my uncle had always been, he was yet all I had to care for, all I could call my own. And now that he was dead, gone in an instant, I felt

the loss as keenly as if we had lived closely united on the most affectionate terms.

Death was indeed my enemy. In my infancy he took from me both my natural protectors, and now, when I was almost helpless, alone and unknown, he had taken even the poor reliance left to me. I had no need to think of my financial prospects ; there was but one—pauperism.

I knew not a penny of my uncle's money would be mine, it would all pass to his wife, my implacable enemy. What could I do with £20, my scanty wardrobe, and a small library of valueless books. I had no trade, no references, no business training, I knew myself to be medically unfit for enlistment, and did I turn to the West, I had not the strength for the rough ranch life. Truly my case was a puzzling one, even to a good mathematician well up in all the problems men have been fools enough to work out. And I am no mathematician, merely a fair classic, with the unpractised qualities of most men who revel in such studies.

But pauperism need not mean the workhouse. There were other byways down which paupers may wander—which should I choose? Some professions were open to me, after all. A crossing-sweeper's life might not be so bad as it looked—even a burglar's life does not always end in gaol—even—even—but I stopped short. Desperate enough to take my own life, I yet could not lay hands on another.

Weary with trouble, I left my almost untasted supper, and wandered out into the delicious cool of the evening. Quite by fore of habit I found myself in the wintergardens, and instinctively directed my course to the building whence issued strains of music. Going to my usual corner, I threw myself upon a lounge and watched the crowd with almost my old interest. Then I fell asleep and dreamed.

In my dream I was still in the building, but upstairs, ensconced in a snug post of observation, watching the moving masses. And down the gallery, swaying to and fro, keeping time to the music, now quick, now slow, I saw a ghostly figure—a yellow-haired man with a short ragged beard and pale blue eyes, such eyes as seek death and may not find it. So haggard, so spectral a being seemed strangely out of place in the gaudy assembly. Then the blue eyes met mine and I shivered, and shrank in cringing fear into my corner, for I

knew that he had some terrible secret influence over my fate, and that it was an influence for evil.

When I looked again he had disappeared. No—there he was again, his pale wicked face peering from behind a palm, like one contemplating a crome and greedy in anticipation of it. His eyes were fixed on the girl who sat in front, and I knew that he meant her harm. Again he vanished, and I looked for him in vain. Then a cold moist hand touched my cheek—all the lights in the building gave one flare and died out. I was left alone in the dark with the horror. I felt a cold breath on my cheek, and, with an agonising effort at escape, I plunged forward and was awake.

A man in a snuffy coloured knickerbocker suit was sitting contemplating me half-a-dozen yards away. There was something in his expression that worried me ; we both seemed to have a dim puzzled reminiscence of a former meeting. What tricks memory plays us, and to what petty devices it sometimes stoops !

I strove earnestly to recall when and where I had met this man—his watery eyes with curiously fair lashes, his overhanging brows, the highly developed perceptive group in preponderance over the reflectives—I have dabbled in phrenology—the thin, narrow jaw. All the while I stared at him, he stared at me. So we played this fool's game, like two new schoolboys, wishing to speak, yet afraid to be the first.

Taking advantage of a lull in the music, I hazarded a remark.

"Pardon my rudeness in staring," I exclaimed, swinging my feet off the lounge to the ground and sitting up. "I am under the impression that I must have met you at some period of my existence, but when and where I cannot for the life of me remember."

The man started at the sound of my voice. It seemed to give him the cue he sought, and he replied, not without cordiality :

"Why, bless my soul, you must be George Oswaldson."

"Yes," I replied, still in a maze.

"Don't you remember Jack Andrews, who shared a study with you at Giggleswick?"

Now I have it ! This snuffy coloured man was one of

my old schoolfellows, rather a scapegrace I remembered a, but good enough fellow for all that.

"I should think I do remember you!" I replied, giving his hand such a hearty shake that he winced. "And how goes the world with you? Upon my word it does me good to run against some one who knew me in my palmier days!"

"Eh? why—what's wrong?" There was not exactly a pleasant glitter in Andrews' eyes. They used to be bold, truthful eyes; now there seemed a nasty cunning underlining them. "Is it financial trouble or domestic affliction?"

"Both."

At this he grew so eagerly interested that I was astonished. Why on earth did he look like that as if he wanted to probe my character to its depths? Did he think I was a drunkard, or a cut-throat, or did he fancy I was going to ask him for money?

"Down on your luck?" he said. "Damn queer thing luck is, isn't it. Oswaldson?"

"Yes, luck's a queer thing" I agreed. "I never had much, though, so I can't discuss it. Luck has never been at home when I paid my morning calls."

"You don't say so, George! I'm sorry to hear it, upon my word I am. I've had my bad luck too. When I left Giggleswick I went West, to that most ungodly hole, the State of Oregon—does your geography hold good for that?"

"Oh, I know where Oregon is, right enough."

"Well, if you know where it is, take the straight tip and don't go. It's a hell-trap. Like a greenhorn I went out with a thousand pounds capital, invested it in a ranch, had fever and Heaven knows what, lost half my stock, and couldn't raise enough money to keep me in tobacco. I led a dog's life for two years, and came back, broken in health and pocket. At my wits' end I reached London, looked for work and found none—at least none that I could do. Pen-driving may have charms for some, but it has none for me. Well, George, pardon me if I'm too familiar, but I feel like your pal over again—I was at the end of my tether and was thinking of a trip to the next world when my luck changed."

Andrews paused—and a spasm of sudden pain convulsed his features, leaving me more perplexed than ever.

"Your luck changed—yez," I said, trying to keep up an

air of indifference, for I saw that several people were watching us attentively.

"Yes, it changed."

"For your financial or moral good?" The question slipped from me I knew not why. I felt it was a mistake Andrew's face became livid.

"Moral good—what in thunder do you mean?" he hissed, as if it hurt him to articulate.

"Oh, never mind, go on—I was only chaffing"; I tried to laugh, after a perceptibly awkward pause. "The tide turned, and——?"

"And I am no longer in dread of starvation," he whispered, leaning his face close to mine. "I no longer think of the warehouse, or of begging, or of a crossing in the city, but——" He paused, and I watched him suspiciously. He trembled all over. Had my question struck the key-note of a guilty conscience? Was he afraid of any one in this vast assembly? Or was he mad?

"But you are afraid of some one or something," I said, for I was determined to probe the mystery to its depths.

"Yes, George, I am,—horribly, hideously afraid. So afraid that a nightmare is nothing to it. Do you believe that there is a devil, and can he be incarnated in the form of a wealthy philanthropist? Does Satan ever leave hell and wander in our midst, a man visible to mortal eyes, on the lookout for victims to carry out the damnable ideas of his brain? Do you believe this?"

Yes, the man was mad! What could I do? To begin with, it was best to humour him.

"Yes," I said soothingly, "of course, of course. We all know of the eccentricities of Satan, his many hobbies and the delightful facility his ethereal conditions offers for gratifying them. Why, I dreamt I saw him only a few minutes ago; he was a tall thin man with a yellow beard and very, pale blue eyes."

I stopped, for Andrews' expression made me turn sick and cold, as he stared at me with dilating eyes, and a look that I hope never to see again on mortal face. Then he said, with a forced smile:

"Oh, you know all about him."

"About him?" I asked.

"Why, the *Chief*—*him*, of course."

"The devil, you mean?"

"Yes, the devil if you, like; it's the best name for him. Are you fooling, or was he really here?"

"Who do you mean? Are you crazy?"

"No more than you are. That's enough! Is he here?"

We were playing at cross questions with a vengeance; one of us must be mad or drunk.

"I don't know anything about the Chief, or what you call him. Who or what is he?"

Andrews had recovered his composure and replied drily:

"For a man who doesn't know a person you described him awfully well."

A grim foreboding seized me. "Are dreams always nothings?" I wondered. It was my turn to tremble now.

"An autumnal evening, evidently," said Andrews, with a hoarse laugh, as he noticed it.

"Colds are catching," I said, snappishly enough.

"There, don't let' squarrel, Oswaldson," he replied almost affectionately. "Times change, and we with time, I know—but, hang it all, you can't have choked off *all* fellow-feeling and *all* wish to talk over Giggleswick affairs."

"We are both in trouble; what's the good of talking of dear old times that won't come black?" I answered.

"You are in trouble then—really?"

"I am pretty well. If you want to know, I am left in the world with a few pounds and not a living friend. Pretty critical, isn't it?"

"But you are one of us?"

"One of us?" I repeated mystified. "What do you mean?"

"Look here, George Oswaldson," he said sulkily, "you may as well be candid. Why can't you admit that you know the Chief, if I do? I am one of his satellites—so there, you have me on toast."

"But I'm in a fog." I exclaimed, "the man I described was a figure in a bad dream I had just before I awoke and saw you. There was not any actual person."

"You are very cautious, George, but I'm too old for such gammon. Why tell a lie about it?"

A sudden idea came to me. I might derive some benefit from solving this mystery—so for perhaps the first time

in my life I diverged from the truth and resorted to crooked tactics.

"Well," I said firmly looking him so full in the face as to cause him to shift his gaze uneasily, "I have met the Chief—but I am not yet one of you."

Andrews breathed hard.

"You have met him and yet have not joined. How is that?" Then he muttered, but I heard, "Odd—odd—I thought the Chief never failed." Aloud he added, "But why didn't you join? There must be some extraordinary reason."

"Because," I interrupted, "I was a fool!"

Andrews laughed aloud.

"Ha, ha!" he shouted, "a fool. You're a smarter chap than I should have thought, George; the world has sharpened your wits. You refuse a tempting offer—such an offer—and call yourself a fool. What a joke! Why don't you laugh?"

"Because I'm in no laughing mood," I retorted, "and because I may yet join."

"You don't say so?"

"I do."

"Well, that's all right. The Chief will be here shortly—in fact, we expect him any moment; and a fresh member is wanted. Bad business, that of our last departure—but there, of course you haven't been sworn in, and I can't talk about it. There's a vacancy, at any rate."

"Anything in it?" I asked carelessly.

"Yes—why, didn't he tell you?"

"Bo—that is—not exactly. What's the figure?"

"For a complete success £100, for any attempt, if proved genuine, £50, additional of course to the £200 a year stipendiary as member."

"How many are you now?"

"Only three."

"And your full complement?"

"Four."

"Its' a small society evidently."

"Yes—and select."

"Select?"

"Yes, and with a binding oath."

"I see—once in, no getting out."

"Not until Davy Jones lays his hand on your shoulder and says 'Come' ; then you leave the league without much time to say good-bye. Davy Jones won't be kept waiting."

My temperament is, I think, peculiar, at least for a Scotsman. I am impulsive, and wholly reckless of my own personal safety. I have always been ready to enter any escapade, regardless of consequences, for sheer love of excitement. My father's nature was, I believe, the same. So in my present case, with little to lose and a prospect of starvation, I was not loath to jump at such a means of support—and Andrews' mysterious warning rather attracted than deterred me. A secret society removed from the drudgery of everyday routine, and emolument into the bargain !

"If you are in earnest, I am," I said. "I am willing to join your club as soon as possible ; will you arrange it for me?"

"For auld lang syne, George, I will ; and for the good of the cause, I will."

"Why, you are a bit of an enthusiast," I laughed.

"Every one becomes so. It is *his* influence."

Our conversation was interrupted by the band striking up the national anthem. This being a polite reminder that the evening's entertainment was over, we exchanged cards and retired to our respective abodes. Thus ended the first link in the strange chain which was to envelop me so closely during my stay at Bournemouth.

CHAPTER XX

A LUNCH AND A VISION

A WEEK had passed since my meeting with Jack Andrews, and my little store of money had so far diminished, that I was doubting whether to wait a few days, or make tracks at once for Southampton. However, the fascination of Bournemouth prevailed, and refused to let me go. The tramp of the pleasure-seekers on the pier, the sound of the band, the breeze over the water, the very blueness of the sea, itself conspired to hold and influence me.

So a whole week passed, bringing no good tidings, but a confirmation of my worst fears. My uncle's wealth was

left in bulk to his wife, not a penny, nay, not the fraction of a penny fell to my share.

"We are very sorry for you," the widow wrote, "but after all my husband did for you in his life-time you ought not to expect more. Your education was a great expense, and I am sure he was always liberal to you in the way of pocket-money."

She didn't say she would be pleased to see me, if I dropped in for afternoon tea, for instance. Perhaps she was afraid of my appetite ; or perhaps she did not want to waste hospitality on one who could not repay it.

I began to sum up affairs for the hundredth time—fifteen pounds in my purse, a few clothes and other poor sundries. What next? Await Jack Andrews' pleasure or decamp to the States?

Thinking deeply. I halted by the wayside—in other words, opposite the door of the club, and about a dozen yards away from the pier entrance. I tossed for it ; the penny came down head—Bournemouth won. I turned on my heel and strolled off along the beach, determined to see Jack Andrews without delay.

I ascended St Joseph's Steps towards the West Cliff Hotel. It was one o'clock, and, as I guessed, I found him at luncheon. He looked in better spirits than when I had seen him last—less careworn, more sprightly. With a smile that was almost jocular he bade me "sit down and lay in"—an invitation I was not slow to accept, thinking of a humble piece of bread and cheese in St Michael's Road.

"Pretty girl, that," he observed, nodding towards a table across the room. Following the direction of his glance, I encountered the eyes of a girl certainly not more than twenty years of age.

"Yes," I said in a half whisper, "she is pretty."

"I hope," he continued with something like a sigh, "the Chief won't come across her." Then in the half-absent manner that had puzzled me before, he added as if to himself, "She is too young. Let her be for a bit."

"What the deuce are you jabbering over?" I asked, taking another look at the girl. Yes, she was pretty—even very pretty ; nothing insipid or dollish, but a prettiness approaching actual beauty. Her golden hair—natural golden, too

—hung in curls over a compact forehead ; her eyes were blue-grey, her nose short and straight, her chin clearly defined without prominence. I also noticed that she was plainly dressed in dark blue, showing off her fine figure to perfection ; and as she rose to greet a gentleman who entered, I realised that she was just the ideal height for a woman.

She had other friends with her—so even if she wished it she could not indulge in a *tête-à-tête* with the newcomer. Opposite her sat a girl somewhat resembling her in expression, but shorter and less striking, with almost black hair!

I was wondering if they were sisters, when Andrews spoke. "Do you know who that is with them?" he asked, drumming on the table with his fingers and trying to catch the newcomer's eye.

"No—how should I?"

"Nothing—I only thought you might." He kept on drumming a peculiar rattling sound, beginning with the little finger and running laong to the thumb, there times—loudly, softly, and then very loudly. After a moment the stranger turned his head and surveyed him leisurely.

"No," I thought, "I never saw you before ; I don't want ever to see you again." Men may be ugly and yet pleasing—there may be a nice expression and a redeeming smile. But this man's ugliness was repulsive. "Who is he, then?" I asked.

"Tom Tombs. Not a pretty name, but it rather suits his profession," and Andrews gave one of those hoarse chuckles that led me to doubt his sanity.

"Tombs?" I said, as quietly as I could. "an undertaker, I suppose?"

Another chuckle, more hideous than before.

"Not exactly, in the arbitrary meaning of the word—but—he—belongs to the Society."

I grew interested. This Society had a peculiar style of members. "The girl—who is she?"—I asked, finishing my meat and leaning back to wait for the next course.

"Miss Freeman. You see the other girl?"

"Yes."

"You'd hardly imagine they were sisters. Some men admire the dark one most. She is not so lively—rather reserved—but in her style as pretty."

I noted the name ; and persuading myself it was ridiculous

to hope to know them—I, the poor outcast, they beautiful and doubtless wealthy—I turned the conversation from the subject.

We talked for some time before I broached the actual purpose of my visit.

“Will you join, at once—to-night?” he asked. Then added, after a prolonged study of my face, “I don’t advise you, mind, as a friend. The other evening I spoke differently, partly because I thought I’d rather have you enrolled than a stranger—and partly because I read your face wrong. You seemed so desperate—so unlike the Oswaldson I knew at Giggleswick—I thought you might suit us. You know there is no going back once you learn the secret—to be one of us you must kill your conscience. and——” his voice shook and sank to a hiss, his face paled, and his eyes gleamed like points of steel— “by your deeds you hold your life at stake. If you fail in what *he* tells you, you incur his wrath, which is terrible ; if you succeed you damn your soul. You will have money enough, but will be a slave and more wretched than a squalid gutterboy. Think well !”

He sank back exhausted and waited for my reply ; there were beads of perspiration on his forehead.

Then a curious sensation stole over me, carrying me far away from all human neighbourhood, to a nameless place wrapped in a blinding mantle of mist. I seemed to float on clouds, thousands of miles away from the busy world, alone, yet not alone for in the fog two figures were dimly visible. One was that of a woman—I could see the long hair falling to her waist, the other was like that of a man. But such a man—superhumanly tall, unnaturally coloured ! The woman seemed to assume an attitude of pleading, and pointed in my direction. The great man shook his head angrily and motioned her away. Then she placed a hand on his shoulder with a sudden movement that he had not time to avoid. As she continued to plead he seemed for a moment irresolute—but just as I expected to see him yield and let her pass, he was stirred by sudden fury, and shook off her hand. Then to my horror he sprang at her with a savage gesture of his long arms, and tried to seize her by the throat. They swayed to and fro like those engaged in a struggle for life, and I was astonished at the strength of the

woman, for the man could not thrust her aside. I struggled hard to move, to go to her assistance ; but seemed glued to the spot without the power of speech or motion. How long the fight lasted I knew not, but slowly and surely the huge man prevailed. His great hands sought her throat ; he would murder her, and I must see him do it. One more struggle, and all was blank. The fight was over, and the combatants gone mysteriously as they came. I felt the cold mist cut into my flesh, the damp settling on my limbs. Again a figure loomed before me. I recognised the murderer, and, strangest of all, I was no longer repelled by his appearance. Perhaps, after all she deserved it ! I remembered the words of Otway, "Every woman is at heart a rake." A lurid light through the mist formed a halo round the strange man's head. I saw his face—and then again lost consciousness.

"Been having a nap, sir?"

There was nothing supernatural about this voice, nothing spectral in the portly figure from which it proceeded. I rubbed my eyes and found myself still sitting at the table in the hotel room, and a waiter regarding me with a broad smile of amusement.

"Where's my friend?" I asked.

"Gone out an hour and more, sir," he replied, pocketing a shilling which I slipped into his hand. I felt very foolish and blamed the two glasses of excellent claret in which, after my week of low living, I had indulged.

"He left this note for you, sir. "The gentleman," says he, meaning you, is having a nap, he's a bit done after a long walk. So don't let him be disturbed ! With that off he goes. A nice gent is Mr. Andrews, very much liked by every one here, sir."

"Indeed !" I said, heeding the contents of the note more than the fellow's chatter. "Well' I had a long nap. Goodday !"

Leaving the hotel, I returned to my lodgings, thinking over the message from Jack Andrews as I went.

"Be here at 8.30 this evening."

And, as I determined to obey, I fancied I heard a sob, a long sob as of great sorrow, coming from a knot of pine-trees on the cliff. But when I looked in that direction, I saw nothing but the trees, and their grotesque shadows on the yellow soil.

CHAPTER XXI

THE REASON OF THE BROTHERHOOD

PUNCTUALLY to the second I presented myself at the West Cliffe Hotel, and was shown into Room 36.

Before my strange dream I had hesitated whether or not to listen to Jack's friendly warning, and I had felt more than half influenced by it. But after the dream I wavered no longer. I felt a strange wild longing to plunge into the mysteries of this unknown society, for weal or woe. So I decided to take the final step and leave the rest in the hands of fate.

The room into which I was shown was a kind of drawing-room, plainly but comfortably furnished, with dark green leather chairs, a round mahogany table in the centre, and a sofa under the window, also the usual complement of the usual pictures, indispensable, from the proprietor's standpoint, to satisfy the artistic cravings of his guests.

Leaning against the mantelpiece, with an air of easy indolence, stood the man I was already beginning to hate, the man I saw in the dining-room in company with the pretty Miss Freeman. If I thought him repulsive then I did not retract my opinion now. Somehow I was assured the dislike was mutual—for in the quick glance we exchanged I read distrust and aversion at once. The other stranger was more prepossessing—a slight, fair young man with close-cropped light hair, blue eyes, and a fair moustache. He wore a light grey suit eminently becoming to his sunburnt complexion. Andrews, rising from his seat on the couch, shook hands and introduced me to his companions.

"Mr Tombs—Mr Oswaldson."

My enemy—for my quick imagination had already advanced him to that dignity—gave me a cold handshake, allowing his fingers to remain in mince for the briefest time possible.

"Mr Dowson—Mr Oswaldson."

This grasp was much more cordial, though the blue eyes remained hard and keen and the lips compressed.

No one spoke, and there was an awkward silence, unbroken till Andrews offered me a cigarette. Then an odd impulse came over me, and I blurted out :

"How did you get to know the Freemans?"

I addressed the remark to Tombs, and an angry wave reddened his sallow face. I thought he was on the verge of telling me to mind my own business, but, controlling himself, he only said casually :

"Met them quite by chance on the pier."

"Did you speak without an introduction?"

"Why not? Girls like them aren't particular."

This raised my anger. He was plainly a man of the type I most thoroughly abhorred—a man of the world who regarded all women from his own vilely low standpoint. I was puzzled to know why girls like Miss Freeman should condescend to be seen talking to him, and remembered an axiom of my uncle's that "women always liked the biggest blackguards best." I felt I must say something, so went on, as carelessly as I could between puffs of smoke :

"If you rate the Freemans' company at such low value, I wonder you cared to address them—at least on such a public spot as the pier."

The fellow's eyes glared—he looked as if he wanted to swear—and I was glad to realise that he hated me as much as I hated him.

"Oh, confound it !" he said, flicking a tobacco-ash from his sleeve, "no one knows me down here, so I'm not very particular."

"Nor apparently are they?"

I could not restrain the words, and Tombs started like an angry bull.

Andrews and Dowson drew nearer, one from the window, the other from the table where he had commenced to write, and Jack intervened. "Come now, you two, don't fight already. Why, you've only been introduced about three minutes ! Let the ladies alone. If it will satisfy you, George, I'll guarantee their respectability. As to letting a stranger speak to them, why, this isn't London ; it's done at every seaside place all over England, in the holidays. It doesn't involve a society acquaintance afterwards, and chaperons go in the background for July and August. If Tombs has different ideas—why, he has every right to express them, provided no insult is intended. Don't be an ass, George !"

In spite of this conciliatory effort on Andrews' part, Tombs

scowled darkly at me, and I met his scowl with a decidedly contemptuous smile.

So matters remained, and no one feeling inclined for more conversation, we kept our thoughts to ourselves. It was half-past nine, and the wonderful „Chief” had not come. Had he any intention of coming?

I crossed the room and looked out of the window. A glorious evening ! There were a few clouds, but the crescent moon peeped out between and threw a narrow streak of light across the sea. The road was brightly illuminated and almost as clear as day. Swarms of people tramped up and down in the pleasant coolness. Just as I was listening to the whistle of a steamer crossing the bay, a slight disturbance behind attracted my attention, and I turned quickly round to confront—the Chief.

Never-never till the grave itself engulfs me, can I forget that meeting ! For the man standing on the threshold in a light grey suit and to match was the figure I had seen in my dream in the winter-gardens—the vampire of the gallery—the harbinger of my evil destiny. Here then was the Chief—and I understood what Andrews meant when he spoke of the devil. The others, who were prepared for his coming, were almost equally disconcerted. Jack, pale and trembling, was the first to acknowledge his greeting ; the others slowly followed his example. Then my turn came.

“Who is this?” Nothing to show if the speaker were pleased or otherwise—a cold, impassioned voice. The blue eyes set in the white face scanned me steadily.

“Who is this, and why is he here? Tell me !”

Andrews came to the rescue.

“He is an old friend of mine, sir—George Oswaldson, adventurer, who, being just as we were when you took pity on us, desires to enter your service.”

“His qualifications?” the cold eyes fixed me still.

Jack answered for me.

“The same—despair, and no alternative but suicide.”

“Is that so, Mr Oswaldson?”

“It is, sir,” I replied with an effort. “All my worldly goods amount £15 and two suits of clothes. I have neither relations, friends, nor prospects except emigration, which means starvation ; or that which my friend has just mentioned.”

"Come here. Let me examine you."

I knew I was trembling when I walked up to him, and sat down in obedience to a sign. Something cold was laid on my forehead, and I was at his mercy. Quickly and carefully he examined the formation of my cranium, passing from group to group of affective or intellectual faculties. Now and then the fingers paused, and they seemed to sink into my brain and drag from it a mute confession of its own defects.

No one spoke during the examination. The three men stood watching intently.

"You are not my style," came the measured words at last. "Your disposition is not in sympathy with mine, nor is your character firm enough to endure the dangers which beset the lives of others."

Thinking he was about to dismiss me, and rendered desperate at the prospect of losing as it seemed, my only chance of earning bread and cheese, I seized him by the arm.

"Only try me, sir! I will prove faithful to the utmost in any charge given to me." It seemed pitifully weak and cringing, thus to go almost on my knees to ask a favour, yet I could not do otherwise. But I might as well have pleaded to a spectre from Hades, as to his bloodless man with the lack-lustre eyes. Did he hear me, or were his ears incapable of conveying sound to his brain. Would he answer, or were those white lips to remain irresponsive?

The glare of the electric light under which he stood added to his death-like appearance. The cheeks looked more cadaverous, the eyes more weird. Strange shadows crept from the walls and closed around me, and the Chief's appearance seemed at moments oddly mingled with that of the copper-coloured murderer in the mist. Many other deluding fancies gripped my imagination, as I stood and waited hungrily for his answer.

Greedy faces, with leering eyes and wicked fangs, hung round the walls, the tawdry picture-frames gave birth to ungainly monsters, the furniture creaked mournfully, and the smell of blood, fresh, newly spilt blood, assailed my nostrils. Yet he answered not.

The room whirled around. My companions faces were distorted into aspid countenances awry with spite and

malice—a veil of darkness fell over me—suddenly a flash of blinding brilliance forced upon my notice these words :

“IS THY SOUL, THINE TO BARTER?”

I know not if I saw or heard them ; they stung my smouldering conscience as the lash stings the back of some recalcitrant animal. For a moment a fire burned within my bosom, the memory of bygone vows to adhere to truth, virtue, and beauty. But the dispassionate voice of the Chief broke the silence, and the impulse, with the phantom forms, was gone.

“George Oswaldson !”

I was fully awake, keen, and attentive in an instant. The suspense was terrible.

“George Oswaldson, by your own desire you came here to-night, with the intention of joining the Brotherhood of the Women Haters?”

There was a death-like silence, suggestive of grim horror, and awful foreboding of what was to come. For men like these, the title of “Women Haters” could be no empty sound.

Was it the face of a man on which I looked, or that of some evil thing?

He spoke on. “Ten minutes ago I had no desire to admit you to the secrets of our Society, but I have changed my mind. I believe that your temperament is such that you could work yourself up to any degree of resentment under certain circumstances—even to that extremity of hate which inevitably ends in murder.” The last word had a violent effect on all present. The fear on my companions’ faces gave way to a wolfish greedy cruelty. Their jaws tightened like those of brutes till the muscles stood out in lumps, their lips grinned savagely, their eyes flashed in hideous glee. “Murder !” It came out with a hissing sound and was prolonged till the whole room echoed “Murder.” The moon went behind a cloud, the stars shrank away, and everywhere, from beach to cliff, from pinewood to sea, echoed the long, low whisper, “Murder !”

As for me, I lost all power to speak, to retract, to fly ere it was too late. I had to listen as the even, metallic voice went steadily on :

“For the last time—do you wish to join us?”

Something like the heated poisonous breath of some

loathsome creature seemed to pour into my left ear. Conscience made one feeble struggle—but I crushed it down and said firmly, "I do."

"You understand that once in possession of our secrets, nothing cancels your membership except death?"

And once more my better self strove to assert its right and keep me out of his bondage. And again that something breathed into my left ear. I thought of the money, the means of living—and assented.

The Chief turned to the others, and raising his hand with an impressive gesture, cried in a new, ringing voice of command :

"Gentlemen, you will take this man to you as a brother."

And the voices replied in unison :

"We will !"

The Chief went to the door of the room and stepped out cautiously into the passage, leaving us four together. No one spoke, but I felt the eyes of the three upon me, till he re-entered with an almost silent tread, carrying an oil-lamp in his hand. The chimney of the lamp was removed, both wicks lighted, and Andrews thrust a long, pencil-shaped piece of steel, fitted with a glass handle, into flame. For minutes—to me it might have been hours—we stood and watched him at his task.

When the end of the iron was heated to the Chief's satisfaction, I was bidden to seat myself at the table and rest my face upon it. This was more than I bargained for, and a grim spirit of resistance arose in me. But at a sign from the Chief I was gently seized by Tombs on the right hand and by Dowson on the left, and pushed into the chair he indicated.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr Oswaldson," the terrible man said in a soothing tone, so different to any of his former phrases that I wondered anew ; "we are not going to cause you any injury beyond the trifling momentary pain which this iron will inflict. It is a preliminary which all the brotherhood have willingly undergone, and which will be a lasting sign of your enrolment in our service."

"Ah—h !" I had now clenched my teeth firmly enough to prevent that cry of weakness escaping ; and in truth the smart was acute enough. The Chief, however, spoke on :

"Now, gentlemen, since our new brother bears the insi-

gia of the skull upon his body, and has thereby become pledged to the secrecy of our society, we may unfold to him, step by step, the nature, work, and object of the fraternity of Women Haters, of which, as he knows, I am the head, the prime instigator, treasurer, secretary, president, and life and soul besides ; while you, gentlemen, perform the useful function of limbs, yet each one liable to be amputated for the safety of the body. You George Oswaldson, will now swear in presence of us all, by the God who made you, by the life in your body, by the soul which came from the darkness and will go back thither, that you will faithfully carry into execution, to the letter, every order of any sort received from me. That, even in the fear of sudden and awful death, you will never swerve from your purpose, nor divulge any secret of our Society, nor the names of your fellow members. Do you swear?"

Can you imagine in what frame of mind I heard these words? If I had been in my ordinary senses, less wrought up to overwhelming excitement, less in awe of this singular, terrible Chief, I believe I should have even then, at any risk, refused the awful oath. But alas ! I was no longer the George Oswaldson of a week ago. I had yielded my will and could only obey in trembling. The moments that followed burned into my mind as the branding iron into my flesh. I was the helpless victim of my surroundings, the plaything of the night and of the hour, as, unresisting, I passed into my bondage. Word by word, syllable by syllable, I followed him as he pronounced the oath. It was done. I was bound to him irrevocably.

Andrews was sent to see that there were no eavesdroppers in the passage ; and then the mission of the brotherhood was revealed to me in all its hellishness.

"Our duty to the cause," the Chief commenced, facing us full, as we stood like a row of schoolboys opposite their master, "is to root out from the world all such women as are unprofitable to mankind. You shudder—poor, untried weakling as you yet are ! Listen ! Long ago, the company of women gave me pleasure. As you have perhaps done, I saw much of them ; I was willing to believe that they were beings of a slightly better nature than man ! I fancy I admired and respected them. Everything fair

and good seemed to belong to them, and I—well, I was different then, too.” The words seemed almost forced from him ; for the first time I detected a subtle change of expression in voice and manner, which he speedily subdued. „Then things changed. A series of dreams showed me the falsity of such primitive delusions. I saw, in ungarnished nakedness, the baseness, vileness, and treachery innate in woman. And then there came to me the voice of a master, bidding me to enter into his service of Revenge ; take up the flaming sword and go forth, with the watchword of *Eden*, to purge the world of this plague. So the grandest mission that has yet fallen to the lot of man has been appointed to me. Do you wonder that I am proud of it? So I move, and, by the power that is given to me, I know the women of whom the world must be rid ; and I never hesitate. From town to town I go, marking here and there, and sending secret word to each member of the brotherhood of what he must do. If he fails, and is captured by the law of the land, he knows that he himself must bear the penalty in silence : if he escapes he receives half the reward of success, provided I am satisfied that he has done his best. For me, I know I am safe, so hidden in mystery is my dwelling-place that not one of the brethren could betray me if he would. I am with you when you least expect it, and what you do I have sure means of knowing. You have given your will to mine, and over a distance of miles I can convey to you clearly what you must do. Never hesitate, or I shall know it. If you dream of rebellion, I shall know it too. For your reward you will receive an annual income of £200 paid quarterly at an address which I will allot to you ; for every task fulfilled £100, for every *bona-fide* attempt £50. I may tell you that it is very rarely that a brother has been captured, and then only when he failed to obey my orders to the letter. So, above, all, be fearless. My methods are simple yet untraceable. And that, I think, is all,” he said, dropping suddenly from the oratorical to the conversational style. “I see it is nearly midnight, and our worthy friend the landlord has some scruple about respectable hours. Mr Tombs will tell you what you have to do at present ; and here, Mr Oswaldson, is your first cheque. I daresay you will find it useful, together with the address of your future head-

quarters. Good-night, gentlemen." And with a curt nod to each the Chief was gone.

For a few moments we remained talking, about Bournemouth amusements chiefly, for I do not think any of us dared to speak of the Chief. Andrews mentioned that he was to leave Bournemouth next day, Dowson that he must go the day after. Neither mentioned his destination. So Tombs and I alone were to remain. I managed not to shake hands with Tombs, got out of the room, and once under a lamp, stopped to read the Chief's instructions: "Clarendon Hotel, Waterloo Road, S. E. Call there on September 30th and await orders."

It was the eighteenth of August. I had more than a month free, and with money enough to live in comfort. Free! Yet a slave, in the service of surely the vilest society that ever tainted the earth.

Somehow, out there under the stars, I could not realise it. I tried to pray to the God whose name I had so recklessly used, to pity and forgive me. And I swore another oath that never, at any cost, would I perform any of its awful work. Yet I had no scruples about the payment I had received. I needed it sorely, and the grim possibility of cheating this vampire out of his blood-money pleased me for the moment.

Suddenly a cold blast of wind swept past me and stung with its chill. Again I was in a world of phantoms. The broad white road assumed a weird, unreal aspect; the silent pines began to bend to and fro, with a cry in the rustle of the leaves. The sea darkened, and the waves lapped hungrily at the shore. The baying of a dog made me start in terror, and the moonlight danced in grotesque circles round my feet. From nowhere came a thrilling whisper—"Think not to cheat the brotherhood"; and it was in the unforgettable voice of the Chief. Turning fearfully, I expected to see him gazing at me between the trees or leaning against the white wall around the edge of the cliff. I did see a shadowy figure crouching behind a seat and peering at me through the woodwork. Was it—no—not the face of the Chief?

"Ah! Mercy! Help! Take it away!"

A cruel, sinister face, lean and coorep-coloured, inhuman and devilish. It left its hiding-place and advanced towards me in the moonlight.

"Christ, help me !" I cried.

The figure stopped, the face seemed convulsed with pain—and another figure, slight, womanly, and shadowy, seemed to glide between us. Then both disappeared.

I turned, and with a sickening fear at my heart, ran till I found refuge in my lodging in the St Michael's Road.

CHAPTER XXII

AGONOSTES TAKES UP THE TALE

OF all the souls I have been bidden to win for my lord and master, for few have I toiled as I did for the soul of George Oswaldson.

All the clients I had previously had to deal with helped me by their natural tendencies—they listened willingly, if not greedily, to my words. Ida Temple and Ralph Webster would have always turned to me rather than to Sagatheela—and it was the same with others—but not with Oswaldson.

There was no deep flaw in his character, no tendency to vice; not even the desperation of crime as an alternative to his crushing poverty swayed him wholly. He was not given to slander or sensuality, but, to my misfortune, was strongly inclined towards a high ideal of honour and manliness. If I could have tempted him to drink or gaming, I might have ruled him; but I could not. He was a simple minded, conscientious man, reckless at times, and, unlike most Lowlanders, wildly romantic. In this I saw his weak point and played on it.

My campaign opened with a success—I overpowered Sagatheela in a struggle which, for some reason or other, my client was permitted to witness. He was a Scot, and endowed with a portion of what they call "second sight"—so that, on occasions, his mortal eyes could win a glimpse behind the veil, and this troubled me—for I loved to work under cover. Yet I thwarted him here—for I met him as a man.

The first success was followed by several failures—then I gained another ascendancy, and he allowed himself to be sworn into the society. I thought I had conquered, but then followed a worse defeat. This extraordinary man still dared to *pray*—and while he could do so, the hands of

Sagatheela were stronger than mine. But could Sagatheela fight the new admixture of the mortal and immortal?

As George Oswaldson returned from the meeting, I went a little ahead, and instinctively becoming aware of an antagonistic presence, I sought refuge in one of the wooden shelters.

Whether through Sagatheela's influence or not I know not—I became a source of the utmost terror to my client. The humour of the situation struck me, and I was about to enjoy it to the full, when he uttered those awful words! In an instant I was helpless in the grasp of Sagatheela, who thrust me from the path as easily as if I had been an evil dream—and I had perforce to leave her victorious.

Early next morning Oswaldson finished his breakfast—a more substantial meal than he had latterly had—and strolled down towards the sea. It was a glorious morning, and all Bournemouth laughed in the sunlight.

Leaning against, the seat at the foot of St Michael's Road, facing the bay, and thinking of nothing but the beauty and gladness of her surroundings, he saw Bertha Freeman, the younger and taller of the two sisters. There was an unconsciousness, and unaffectedness about her that magnified her prettiness into beauty.

George Oswaldson stopped about a hundred paces off, and, under the time-worn pretext of lacing his boot, was able to spend a good minute and a half in observing her.

The girl, suddenly aware that she was no longer alone, turned round and looked at him with wonder in her blue eyes—and a quick thrill of a new sentiment passed through the heart of the young man.

It was absurd—meaningless—yet his steadfast and admiring gaze fell to her dress before that look: and then deliberately travelled back to the pretty face again. He finished and urged by impulse, advanced nearer—the barriers of etiquette were forgotten; he came to a halt, coloured to the roots of his hair, tried to say something and forgot it in the saying, and finally, with much stammering, blurted out—

“Ev—good—morning—oh—excuse—er—would—you tell me the time?”

There was a sudden flash of merriment in the blue eyes, though the bright lips remained demurely grave as she replied, “Oh, certainly—it has struck eight o'clock.”

Summoning up all his courage, he continued :

"It's delightfully cool—the weather, I mean," he said, as nervously as if he *could* mean anything else.

"Yes, it is——" she answered—then half to herself, with the slightest emphasis on the last word, "very cool."

George started. Was her innocence mere finished coquetry?

After a few more ordinary remarks, which she answered quietly and without giving him the slightest hint to remain or to depart, he grew bolder, and asked if he might walk with her along the cliff.

"And my sister will come too—yess, with pleasure," Miss Freeman replied, at the same time beckoning to a girl at the door of the Pendennis Boarding-house.

The elder girl attracted him less—and during their stroll, such conversation as took place was confined to the other two ; she took no part in it.

How much one of the three enjoyed that short ramble through almost fairy-like surroundings, it would be hard to describe. He was transported from the torments of hell his soul had been enduring for the past hours, to paradise, with an angel for guide and companion !

Whenever she looked to her right, she met the eyes of the young man filled with adoring admiration. Was she leased? Perhaps. Girls like to enjoy the widening influence of their beauty. If they stopped to consider before exercising their power, perhaps hell would not be so thickly populated with their victims.

Yet I must acknowledge that Bertha Freeman felt some of the responsibility of her charms. She saw much to like in the simple-hearted youth who had stammered and stuttered—there was something refreshing in the deferential, un-modern air he assumed towards her that rendered him rather *distingué*. But he was a mere acquaintance, and she had no intention of letting him make any mistake in the matter.

This I soon discovered ; so, doubtless, did Sagatheela, and rejoiced thereat. For Oswaldson's peace of mind, it might have been well if he had found it out ; but he did not. They chatted about their respective homes (poor George had to invent one for the occasion) ; they talked of London and the shops, in which he began to manifest a sudden interest ; its

right had his ideal to display such worldly tastes?) It brought back his doubts as to her sincerity, visions of possible lovers, of foolish badinage and cheap glitter. Then the elder Miss Freeman remarked that they often had several "boys" to tea on Sundays; and "boys" conveyed to George's mind a sharp pang of jealousy. He wanted to ask if any of them found favour in her eyes—were they handsome or rich—but he dared not—yet.

The hour passed all too quickly, and as he watched the girls returning to the Pendennis for breakfast, all the reality and the pleasure of his life seemed to be concentrated in the slim, blue-frocked figure, with its crown of golden hair. Only in the zenith of youth can man's love live in day-dreams wholly; when the heyday of boyhood is over, he looks on the practical side of things with eyes more critical and less generous.

George had not reached the age of scepticism—he was hardly more than a boy, and less worldly wise than many boys. A certain Scotch caniness warned him against dissipation—as he would have said, there were things in which the devil had the best of the game, and these he avoided. Otherwise, he was innocent and unsuspecting as a child.

Is it likely. I can hear some one question, that this level-headed youth should act in such an inconsistent manner—fling himself headlong into a criminal society, and try to rush into an intimacy with a strange girl seen during a seaside holiday?

Inconsistent perhaps, but it is the inconsistencies of life that are true.

Besides, he was desperate, he had me for his prompter—while the romantic faith of his father's nature was developing under the gentler influence of Sagatheela. Yes—I smiled when I saw this. Besides, he was young—and when was youth either stable or rational? Ten days before he was in the abyss of misery—now his soul was soaring among the fleecy clouds of the August morning. In imagination, Bertha Freeman was already his bride—no consideration of parents, of ways and means, of anything, only that sweet home in which they could be together, far from the din and bustle of other people. There is nothing she desires that he will not give her, dainty dresses, picturesque hats, fragrant flowers,

jewels. He suddenly remembered she wore none, not even a ring. Of course she would want a carriage—he gravely considered the colour of the footman's livery. For himself he wanted nothing but the right to gaze into those blue eyes.

The acquaintanceship so oddly struck up on the cliff was not dropped. There were really very few nice young men at Bournemouth, and as Oswaldson was undoubtedly "nice," the Freeman girls were not sorry to avail themselves of his company and escort. The elder remained reticent—the younger always bright and chatty. They sat in comfortable spots he chose among the pines or on the sand, accepted his opinions, and listened to his anecdotes, in a manner most soothing to a young man's vanity.

When he told them of his Scotch home he would quaintly drift into the local dialect, so that they often laughed outright—but always good-humouredly, so that he could join them. Speaking of his lonely days in his uncle's house, an unconscious pathos in his voice appealed for sympathy; and he received it, which was most wonderful and beautiful of all. He was not the first man who had mistaken kindness and pity for love.

Whether the conversation were merry or serious, his eyes in their admiration seldom left the mobile face of the younger girl. What a perfect profile, what tiny wayward curls! And those eyes, were they ever the same? Yesterday they were pensive, to-day laughing—sometimes they would soften with a strange light, and then his heart beat faster and he vowed to win or die.

But she would never accompany him without her sister. One day, by a rare chance, the elder girl having wandered off to gather heather, he found her alone and asked her to go for a sail. She refused, with a smile of half-mischievous pity. Another day he met her going to post a letter, and the same request met with the same answer, but no smile. Oswaldson went home and worried over it all night.

It was the last days of August. They remember it at Bournemouth, for the sun surpassed all its former achievements; the "oldest inhabitant" never remembered anything like it.

The Freemans and Oswaldson directed their steps towards Alum Chine. The white beach walk was not comfortable even for men in their flat soled shoes; for women it was simply

abominable, the daintily-shod feet sinking until the high heels disappeared, and sand does not respect the stocking! Each stride became an effort, and the knowledge that they were hot and had ceased to look their best was not without effect on the feminine temper. Angels that those girlish figures may sometimes appear, yet they are all daughters of Eve, and inherit much from her intercourse with my master.

On the occasion in question the sand was more pervading than ever. The heat was stifling, the very breath of the sea choked. And the Freeman girls vented their discomfort on my unhappy client.

Nevertheless, so infatuated was he, though writhing under their rebuffs, that he consoled himself by remembering how he had heard that nothing was more uncertain than the temper of a girl in love!

"For goodness sake, Mr Oswaldson, do let us sit down! I've had quite enough of this wretched walking." His ideal shook the sand from her little foot impatiently.

"Where then?" he asked, feating his eyes on the yellow hair, and longing to kiss the lips that were so pretty even in their pouting.

"Oh, here, there, anywhere—where the sun isn't! Under the cliff, that will at least protect our backs. Oh, don't stand staring, *please*—I'm being baked alive!"

George was rather surprised at the last burst of pettishness but, deciding that anger enhanced her beauty, was not hurt only hurried to choose a resting-place.

He found one under the cliff, and there they subsided—the girls against the great brown wall, he lying at their feet, in such a position that he could now and then get a glimpse of her face, without quite dislocating his neck! He watched her playing with the sand, letting it dribble through her fingers, shyly laughing as she sprinkled a little on his coat. It was so innocent, so guileless—he let her tease him, and loved to watch the movement of the delicate white hand.

"A penny for your thoughts?" she asked at last, her eyes brimming over with mischief.

It was a thrilling moment. In an anxious voice, lowered so that her sister might not hear, he said:

"Do you—really—wish—to know?"

It was unmistakable. She coloured, while her sister, who

evidently had heard, gave a short cough that was suspiciously like a note of warning.

He was about to repeat the question, and more emphatically, when she suddenly leaned forward with the lightest of laughs, and with her stick tilted his hat over his eyes. Before he could recover, her sister spoke :

"When do you intend to leave Bournemouth, Mr Oswaldson?"

"I have not made up my mind." Then he added to Bertha, with a faint lingering expression, "It all depends upon circumstances."

"Where do you go then?" pursued the elder.

"Oh, back to London, I suppose." His tone was not complimentary—he was wondering why the Creator allowed two girls in a family.

"You will come and see us perhaps—we live at Black-heath." It was a "society" tone, without the faintest shade of cordiality in it. Oswaldson decided that the dark girl could be exceedingly disagreeable when she liked.

"Of course I will," he said eagerly enough. After all it was an invitation, though it might have been differently given. Again, to the younger, he added, "If you care to see me."

She smiled indulgently. „We are always glad to see our friends."

"Then you classify me in the list of your friends?"

Perhaps, for the instant she forgot the rôle she meant to play—perhaps the spirit of mischief, or perhaps her evil genius from Monelpisia predominated. At any rate she did not answer, only let their eyes meet, and he thought it was enough.

He was too wholly intoxicated to perceive a figure, dark and sinister, threading its way along the beach toward their corner ; or to notice the flash of anger that for just one second pervailed in the eyes of the elder sister—he saw nothing but Bertha's glance, and felt that at last they understood each other.

"You haven't given us your address," she was saying gently, Before he could reply, her sister broke in :

"Really, Bertha, he isn't going to-day—are you, Mr Oswaldson? And I expect you knows lots of girls in London, and won't care to burden yourself with two more to call upon. Isn't that so?"

She looked at him very straight, very resolutely—and there was something in her face to make him afraid. He only muttered helplessly :

“No, I assure you, my circle of lady acquaintances in London will be strictly limited to you.”

“Ah—so you say—Mr Oswaldson.”

“And so I mean !” He did not wish to be rude, but it was, to say the least of it, abruptly spoken.

“Sh ! Sh !” interrupted Bertha, shaking her finger with a delightfully tantalising gesture and then laying it on her lips. „Don't bite her head off !”

“I thought you approved of men with tempers, Miss Freeman?”

“So I do, but,” with an arch laugh, “I prefer them at a distance.”

The encouragement in her eyes would have fired the heart of a more experienced man than Oswaldson.

Stretching out his hand, he laid it caressingly on hers—and she, still smiling down at him, let it stay.

Her sister looked round and frowned ; there was an ominous pause before she spoke.

“Did you tell Mr Oswaldson we expect father and mother down here at the end of the week?”

Bertha bit her lip confusedly—my 'client attributed it to bashfulness.

“No,” she said—there was a hardness in her voice which puzzled him, and she disengaged her hand and busily thrust her fingers into the loose sand, “I didn't think it would interest him.”

“By the way, Bertie,” the dark girl went on, “you heard from Tom to-day. When is he coming?”

There was no mistake now. The colour that sprang to her cheeks made the blood leave Oswaldson's.

“Tom—is that your brother?” he tried to say lightly, but he hardly knew his own voice.

There was a pitying softness in his ideal's eyes—but she did not speak. Her sister did, with a kind of solemn triumph in her tone.

“Her brother? Oh, dear me, no ! her fiancé.”

This was a grand point for me. Those few words did more to influence George Oswaldson's soul than any I could have

breathed into his ears. Bravo—what a check for Sagatheela !

During the following few moments of silence, the dark girl wondered what he would say or do. The boyish face was drawn with pain, and the troubled eyes seemed like those of a far older man.

Then he spoke with an effort—a few words of formal well-wishing. He did not go away however,—and the conversation became fitful and meaningless.

Just as they started to go homeward, the figure I have already mentioned, and which had been watching the whole scene from a distance, unobserved, came forward. It proved to be Oswaldson's particular aversion. Tombs. Even his arrival was a relief. He looked from one to the other and laughed—gratingly and coarsely.

"If you are walking towards the West Cliff, I will come too—unless," here he pretended to notice Oswaldson for the first time, and with a look warned him not to claim previous acquaintance—"unless I am *de trop*. I'll clear out if you prefer it."

But Miss Bertha assured him they would be glad of his company—and paired off with him, leaving the other two to follow.

George retained but a vague recollection of that walk afterwards, he answered his companion's remarks wholly at random. There had been a mighty fall of hope, and he had not yet cleared his mind of the *débris*.

When they halted before the house, however, he heard Tombs say :

"Then you will be at the end of the road, just by that seat, at ten o'clock sharp. No', don't fail !"

She laughed lightly.

"Oh, I always keep appointments. *Au revoir*."

With an aching sense of humiliation Oswaldson left them. He did not even say good-bye, nor glance back at the trim figure that paused for a moment in the gateway with a pitying remorseful look at his slowly retreating form. I believe that at that moment Bertha Freeman was nearer to tears than she ever had been before, or was often likely to be again.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SOUL SAVED

THE sun continued to beat on sea and shore—Bournemouth was making its fortune. The visitors idled, smoked, sewed, knitted, flirted, read, slept—all agreeing that summer was summer this year—just as if it had never been so before.

Through all the changes that the sun and moon brought to pass, George Oswaldson lay sleeping.

Tired with the heat, broken in soul and body, after a pretence at a meal, he flung himself on his bed, all dressed as he was, and fell into a heavy sleep, I myself the watcher of his slumbers.

If I had been the sole controller of his mind, with no one to oppose me and give him contrary advice, I could have filled his soul dreams of vengeance, so that he would have wakened ready to seek out and slay the girl who had hurt him so sorely, but—always “but”—I had not only to contend against his natural tendencies, in themselves generous, but also against the advantage they offered to Sagatheela. I knew she was present, though I could not see her—the rubbing of the dark sandals on my feet conveyed a warning of peril.

No one came to arouse Oswaldson. In those happy, careless days he had fallen into the habit of having his supper left in the parlour, so that he took it when he happened to come in and felt inclined for it. He slept on, unmissed; and this is what he dreamed :

It seemed to him that, hastily putting on a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, without waiting to find a cap, he stepped out into the road and made for the cliff. Glancing at his watch he saw it was late—almost midnight. The solemn sound of a church clock filled him with a sudden indefinable dread, and he hurried on, almost expecting to find himself pursued by some one or something.

Drawn by an irresistible force, he descended St Joseph's Steps, all the while feeling sure that he was not alone, but followed by something evil. There was no one in sight, yet there was a sound of foot-steps as if hundreds of people were running over the loose sands—running away from some great and terrible danger.

To his right the headland of Swanage jutted out, a towering height fringed with ragged rocks that glowed curiously in the moonlight, here a pointed naked orag, there a flat islet covered with shiny seaweed—and there again—merciful Heaven ! some strange brown object half hidden in the water, like a great brown serpent waiting to strike, The cliff sides were seamed with precipices, and from each one a phosphorescent light showed forth grotesque shapes that made him shudder with their foulness. To the left the shores of Boscombe sloped away, and the sand gleamed yellow and unbroken.

Urged on by unseen hands, he went down to the water and stepped into a boat which was waiting. With nervous hands and apprehensive glances he seized the oars and shot out from the beach to the open sea.

Every object on the shores he passed stood out un the moonlight, magnified beyond recognition. St Joseph's Steps seemed alive with skeletons that gnashed their teeth after him, and fought and scrambled among themselves with sharp, cracking screams, for foothold on the slender ladder. Gradually the stars seemed to take shape, and hang in mid-air with demon faces ; great rocks that were never there in the day-time sprang mysteriously from the sea and loomed ahead. The waves swelled, the wind increased, and howled and howled in his ears, while the white spray hissed against the cliffs. Then followed thunder and lightning, while the whole sea boiled up like a great cauldron of whirlpools. There was full danger on all sides. Now he was balanced on the crest of an angry wave and menaced by the things that peopled the air—again he was down in the trough of the sea, in a yawning pit filled with horrors—and this not once but many times. Finally, he lost an oar ; and flinging himself into the bow of the boat, covered his face, only to feel himself, and the frail craft with him, going down, down into the cold water that tried to drown him and could not.

"Surely", he gasped, "death will be merciful and end my torture." As he spoke, the choking sensation vanished, and a sudden hush supervened, and the natural warmth of his limbs came back. A delicious half slumber fell upon him—he experienced a happiness as great as his previous misery. Visions of the most perfect kind—green valleys,

fragrant flowers, glittering streams, gentle-faced girls singing and dancing and becoming to him—filled all his imagination. He was lying on a bed of soft grass and daisies, near a rippling stream, and shaded by wonderful trees, where gay-plumaged birds fluttered and sang with a hundred different voices. As he looked, the waters of the stream appeared to collect in one spot, where they rose into a fountain tall as the trees and bright as new silver—and forth from the arch of it stepped a maiden of the most radiant and dazzling fairness.

Her eyes were so sweet and kind that he felt no fear, only admiration and an instant glow of love. He fell on his knees and begged her to take him for her knight, let him follow her, serve her, and above, all protect her from the men of the evil world. She smiled—oh, such a smile, and leaning, forward gently laid her hand on his forehead and smoothed back his hair. At her touch the happiness of the gods flooded his soul, and he cried aloud for very love and joy—and at his cry there leaped into each face the spirit of recognition, and they saw in one another George Oswaldson and Bertha Freeman.

Recognition in her face gave place to pity—and a change took place; she was gone, and instead, in her place, with folded arms and changeless countenance, stood the Chief of the Brotherhood.

"To-morrow," rang the metallic voice, "she dies! She is mine to love, mine to kill, and her soul is mine. Will you save her? To-morrow she dies!"

He raised his voice so that the woods and skies reechoed it—and my client awoke with a start.

But the effect did not wear off. He heard a woman singing beneath his window:

"Honey, my honey—oh come, my love to me."

He had met his love in dreamland and plighted his troth. Was she, then, to die? By Heavens, no! not if his life could save hers. His heart was full of the glory of impending sacrifice, and I knew again that Sagatheela was strong.

He sat in thought. Suddenly there flashed into his mind a dim recollection of an arrangement between Miss Freeman and "that hateful brute," as he politely designated Tombs.

Now Tombs was a member of the Brotherhood, and for

the work of the Brotherhood—ugh I—remained at Bournemouth. Also, Tombs was not a man to indulge in mere flirting with a girl like Bertha Freeman, neither susceptible enough to fall in love nor sensual enough to please his beastly nature; so why did he seek her company? Why, did he stay in Bournemouth at all. The Chief, George remembered, had handed Tombs also a packet. O course it might contain his quarterly stipend, yet—somehow he did not think it did. There was only one other and most horrible alternative—Bertha Freeman elected for death by the will of the Chief—Tombs the chosen instrument!

The cry that burst from his lips summoned Sagatheela to his side, not me. Acting upon impulse—her influence, for mine was as nothing—he seized his hat and dashed madly from the room.

Desperate plans rushed through his mind as he hurried along the road, now filled with couples taking their after supper constitutional. More than one turned to look at him, for such a pace was not customary in ease-loving Bournemouth on a night when it was almost too warm to go to bed, and the candles collapsed in their holders. At the foot of the road he collided with a cholerick old gentleman, and heard a candid opinion of himself expressed in choice language. A few yards farther on he ran over a little boy. Feeling that in this case he had gone perilously near to a coroner's inquest, and wishing to think without further mishaps, he crossed the road and sat down on a grassy eminence that overlooked the bay.

A silver path like the wake of an unseen ship divided the dark water into two parts. Now and then a red or green light gleamed far out at sea, and the lamps were still twinkling on the promenade. But the pier was in darkness and the pleasure-seekers were turning homewards. His thoughts were not in accordance with the peace of the night. He was trying hard to be calm, to act wisely—and among a host of more or less impracticable ideas, one alone stood out as feasible, and that only to be carried out of his cruel tormentor, Fortune, favoured him for once.

It required, at least, prompt action. With an earnest prayer to Heaven to help him, he sprang up, and incautiously stepping on a loose stone, slipped with a crash into

the road, to the edification of a group of rowdy passers-by. But nobody offered to play the role of good Samaritan, so, a good deal shaken, but fortunately uninjured, he picked himself up, and made the best of his way to the West Cliffe Hotel.

The hotel porter eyed him superciliously, and Oswaldson, standing on the lowest step, weary, excited, and shrouded in white dust, with a rent in his nether garments, hardly presented an imposing appearance.

In answer to his enquiries for Mr Tombs, the porter looked him over carefully, wondering was he mad, or only drunk. "'Ere's a go", he soliloquised, "broken down and 'alf off 'is 'ead with beer, or may be trouble. A chap with such a pbiz could do a murder, I reckon. It makes me creep." Then aloud, "You wants to see him?"

Point number one scored for George. Tombs did live here.

"Is he in?" he asked eagerly.

"No, he ain't—gone the club like'e always does, and won't be back for 'alf an hour, I expect. Will you leave a message?"

"No, let me wait in his room. You needn't look at me like that, I'm not a burglar, though I daresay I don't appear very respectable. I came a bit of a sprawler in the road—tripped over a stone."

Rather amused, and muttering something about a "balmy cove," the porter led the way along the wellfurnished hall and up the stairs to the second landing when he knocked, "just to make sure," as he said at Room 42, and receiving no answer ushered Oswaldson in.

My client's heart beat fast as he locked round. It was a good-sized room, with bay-windows opening towards the sea. The bed stood in an alcove. The other furniture consisted of a few cane chairs, a round table covered with writing materials, a sofa littered with manuscripts, a few books, and a small black trunk bearing the initials T. T. in white lettering. The little clock on the mantelpiece showed that it was 11 P. M. Time was flying, and unless he could do something at once his visit was useless.

First, he wanted to get hold of the packet given to Tombs by the Chief. Would he leave it in his room? How was it to be recognised? for he had only had a glimpse of it. He remembered that Tombs had worn a Norfolk coat, and slipped

the letter into the breast-pocket. Also he had noticed as a curious fact that the envelope was a bright yellow, an unusual colour that he believed he would know again. There was a Norfolk coat hanging on the door. He searched that first. Then with catlike steps and light fingers—expecting every moment to hear the door creak and to confront his enemy—he went through the pockets of other clothes and underlinen, and passing over nothing not even collars he thoroughly overhauled the chest of drawers. He glanced at the clock. Ten minutes were gone. There was a step on the corridor, it came nearer, it stopped at the door—then, oh, thank Heaven, moved on.

He turned to the trunk, the manuscripts, the papers on the table—no, it was nowhere to be seen. In despair he was about to give it up and quit the room when something he had not observed before, attracted his attention. It was a Bible. Mere curiosity and the oddity of the idea, led him to pick it up. It was ridiculously light for its size.

His eyes sparkled—it was a cunningly made dummy, after all. Five minutes of the half-hour he had counted on remained. He sought like a frenzied man for the opening. Two of the minutes elapsed before he discovered it. It swung open almost unexpectedly at last, and he had his reward. For, gleaming wickedly in the electric light, lay the light bright yellow packet.

He opened it quickly, transferred the contents to his own pocket, replacing the wrapper where he found it, and hurried out.

"I can't wait longer," he told the porter. "Never mind any message, I'll see Mr Tombs myself to-morrow."

"All right, governor," said the man sleepily.

Again Fate helped Oswaldson, for Tombs returned another way from the club, and they did not meet. George's flight home was even swifter than his exit. He locked himself into his room, and carefully spread out and perused the fatal sheet.

"EVERYWHERE YET NOWHERE.

"August 10, 19—

"TO THOMAS TOMBS, ESQ.,
*Member of the Brotherhood of the
 Persecutors of Eve.*

"By the will of Providence it is decreed that the next to

fall under the vengeance of the Haters of Eve is Bertha Emma Freeman, youngest daughter of Thomas Freeman, M. D., of Sunny Oaks, Blackheath. This girl, young in years, is old in all the qualities which rendered her mother Eve abomiabable; and so is selected, through my humble instrumentality, to die the death. Learn then, O faithful servant, that she is to be found—in company with her equally accursed sister, who only awaits her turn—at the West Cliffe Hotel, Bournemouth.

“If thou hast indeed obeyed my will, and art in full sympathy with my influence, though miles may separate us, thou wilt have sought her out before this reaches thy hands.

“Learn, then, to know her well; exert thyself to please her, gain a foothold in her regard, flatter and increase her vanity. Profess to be wealthy—this goes far with all her sex. Take her out, treat her well—see thou hast no rival—then prepare the end.

“Over the heather that surmounts the hill above Dursley Chine there is a grey path—it leads to the brink of a precipice, full a hundred and fifty yards above the beach. If thou standest there, thy feet will be on a projecting ledge. Also, thou wilt be hid by two full-grown beeches, on either side, and screened from prying eyes. Is not the spot well chosen, my servant? Thou shalt bring this girl hither—openly, and in the morning and of her own free will; force her not, rather wait her inclination. She is courageous enough, the edge will allure rather than repel her, and a very small touch will do the rest. Act with decision. Raise an instant alarm, be outspoken, helpful, and above all broken-hearted. Remember, she *would* not be restrained, she *would* see the cliff over the very edge for herself. A small bruise obtained in the useless effort to save her would serve thee well. Be wise, and there is no danger—and thou knowest where to find the gold that shall be paid to thee within the week.”

It was not signed. This was all. The cruelty and hatefulness of it was revealed to the man who sat there staring at the paper, too sick at heart to think of rest or sleep. For more than an hour he remained in the same despondent attitude, his chin resting on his hands, racking his brain for a chance of saving her.

At one moment it seemed to him that he should inform the police ; yet he hesitated. It meant such hateful publicity, and again they would not believe his wild story, and act wisely and in time. No—he would try to see and warn the girl first.

Little sleep visited Oswaldson as he tossed uneasily on his bed all night. I slipped my hand from time to time over his forehead—it was burning. Hard as I struggled, and Diaphernes must have known it from my frequent appeals for aid—straining myself to my utmost, never leaving that bedside, Sagatheela was stronger still.

If I gained his ear for a moment, she would win his attention back the next. Her low laugh of happiness at each new advantage goaded me to fury.

When immortal meets immortal in such a struggle, such violence of force is used as would put to scorn the puny efforts of mere mortals. Yet no personal harm can be wrought other than thrusting aside or hurling to a distance, for our flesh does not tear, nor our blood flow. We spirits fight for time !

So all my attacks on Sagatheela led to nothing more than brief temporary advantage—a gain of a few paltry moments. Throughout the night we plied each other sore—she prevailing.

It was not till seven o'clock that Oswaldson slept. Then nature gave, in, and he did not open eyes until a maid came to the door and told him that breakfast was nearly cold.

He sprang up with a start. How late it was, how much there was to do ! He dressed, snatched a hurried morsel, with small regard for the laws of mastication, and set off for the Pendennis.

No sooner had he started than he became aware of a strange feeling of indecision. The Chief had used no idle threat ; the power of that tremendous oath and all pervading influence was dragging at his soul once more.

He began to be sceptical about the use of his mission. What a fool he was to take all this trouble, to expose himself to this risk, for a girl who had played skittles with his heart merely *pour passer le temps*.

Why in the name of common sense should he do it? He remembered the Chief's certainty of his own methods—if

the doom was so inevitable, why delay it? Why not let her die now—and get it over? It would be a d——good thing.

Just as he got to this last stage, I felt assured of victory, and leaped into the air with joy.

And I believe Oswaldson would have slunk sullenly homewards, assuring himself that it was no affair of his, when some perverse accident—or influence—showed him the figure of Bertha Freeman coming towards the gate, and looking, I doubt not, divinely fair in his eyes.

His simple unselfish love swelled up in a torrent and swept aside the current of mere will. I heard Sagatheela's soft laugh of content as he walked up straight to the girl.

"Miss Freeman, may I speak to you for a moment?"

She looked startled at his earnest tones, and wondered what he could have to say. Did he mean to accuse her of robbing him of a life's happiness—or merely to beg for her love? But she was a kind-hearted girl, and really sorry for the mischief she had thoughtlessly done—so in an unusually gentle manner she consented. At the sight of those blue eyes looking so kindly into his own, he grew hot and cold all over, he could hardly restrain a love appeal, and began muttering some incoherent somethings that made her wonder if the heat had affected his brain.

So long as she remained cool he was embarrassed, but when she got tired and a little cross, and rather sharply told him she had an appointment to keep, he found his cue, and broached the subject without any further to-do.

"Miss Freeman, I heard you promise to meet Mr Tombs at 10.30," he began, but she interrupted icily :

"Is not that my business, Mr Oswaldson?"

It was clear to her that he was suffering from a bad attack of jealousy ; she had known men affected in that way before.

"I know it is, but forgive me, Miss Freeman, I only want to be of service to you. Don't—for God's sake, *don't* go out with him."

The suspicion that his brain was turned began to make her uneasy. She saw a new expression in the eyes usually full of adoration of herself, misread it, and instinctively moved away a few steps.

"You think I am mad !" he cried, raising his cap to brush

away the perspiration. "But you need not be afraid of me—it is he—that man Tombs—he will kill you."

She was certain of his madness now, and felt faint and weak with fear. But with a great effort she made a show of composure and said, forcing a laugh :

"Aren't you drawing it rather strong, Mr Oswaldson? I confess I have never discovered anything of the hired villain, the stage assassin—you know the sort of style—about Mr Tombs. In fact, I really don't believe he would kill a fly."

Most men when driven to extremes have a trump card to play. George Oswaldson had—it lay in his pocket. He quickly put the momentous letter into her hand, only saying :
"Please read that."

She was on the point of doing so when a third person came upon the scene. It was Tombs himself.

A death-like silence fell on them. Bertha Freeman looked into the faces of the two men and realised that the fate of both lay in the paper she held. Tombs did not speak—but the expression in his eyes was one to make her tremble.

Hatred of Oswaldson—germinated at their first meeting and since developed into a full-grown, dominating passion, terror of discovery—for he was a coward and suffered from the craven, abject fear to which only such natures as his descend ; rage at finding himself balked on the verge of success, all sufficed to turn Tombs into a pitiful object enough. He stood and cringed he lost alike self-control and self-respect—and when at last he spoke, it was to give himself utterly away.

"Have you read it, Miss Freeman?" he asked his voice shaking.

"Not yet. Does it refer to you?" The girl was herself again, and faced him dauntlessly, her words ringing with a scorn that made him wince.

He put aside her question with another.

"Did he say so?"

"If you mean my friend Mr Oswaldson he did."

George's heart leaped at the way said "my friend," Oh, it was well worth it—he could die gladly now, thinking of the look she gave him.

"I did," he said, and the men confronted each other. "I not only said that it referred to you, but I explained something of the contents."

Tombs' sinister face went ash-colour.

"You stole it from my room last night?"

"Well—yes, I did!" He could even smile.

"Do you know you ar a thief?" blustered Tombs.

"Then, don't you think you had better give me in charge?"

Oswaldson went up in the girl's estimation ; he was a finer fellow than she had thought, and had evidently risked a good deal for her sake. The paper almost burned her fingers ; with a woman's curiosity she longed to make herself acquainted with the strange secret it evidently contained. Tombs only answered Oswaldson's question with an oath. This was George's chance.

"Kindly remember you are in the presence of a lady," he said. "If you swear again I shall think of referring the matter to the police."

"You will have some difficulty in finding them."

"I assure you they will be found quite soon enough for you."

"What do you insinuate?"

But several people were stopping in the road to find out the cause of the altercation. Bertha scarcely knew what to do. She was too keenly interested in the matter to waive the issue. On the other hand, things were assuming an ugly aspect, with danger of publicity.

"I think, gentlemen," she said, "I am entitled to an explanation. Supposing then, since we are no longer alone, we adjourn our meeting to the beach."

Oswaldson acquiesced ; but not so Tombs. As far as he was concerned, the game was up, and the sooner he left Bournemouth the better, so he trimmed his course accordingly.

"I do not wish to quarrel with any one, Miss Freeman, least of all with you," he said in well-oiled accents. "I only came to tell you how sorry I was to cancel the appointment. Urgent business makes it necessary that I leave at once for London. Will you kindly pardon me?"

The girl was convinced ; she nodded coldly, and without noticing his outstretched hand, addressed herself to George.

"Will you see me to the town, Mr Oswaldson?"

Before he could speak, Tombs struck in :

"I should like to have my letter, please, Miss Freeman. It can hardly interest you ; besides, it is my private property, taken from my room in my absence by this gentleman."

The sneering emphasis on the last word, coupled with a warning glance from Oswaldson, decided her. She refused point-blank.

Whether it was intentional or not I cannot tell, but Tombs certainly did raise his fist with all the appearance of a threat. Before he could lower it again, a hand clutched the collar of his coat, and he heard the quiet, stern command of the man he hated.

"Go away ! And if you ever show yourself here again, it will be the worse for you. Also, you may tell the Chief that George Oswaldson is no longer one of his precious Brotherhood."

This ended the matter as far as Tombs was concerned. An hour later he was speeding on his way to London, *minus* the letter, and with black rage gnawing at his vitas.

As for Oswaldson, he spent three hours in paradise that morning ; and had it not been for the arrival of a young man in flannels whom she greeted as "Tom," Bertha Freeman might have done something rash. As it was, they only parted with a pressure of the hands that meant a sincere and well-understood friendship.

And so my mission ended—in failure. My sandals gave me no more time, and with my tale of defeat, I was borne back speedily whence I came. Nevertheless, I have heard since that the Brotherhood was not to be robbed of its vengeance.

The steerage passengers on the outward-bound s.s. *Bristol*, lost one of their number overboard, on a dark night when the sea was running high. The only man near him at the time of accident told a simple and probable story of vertigo induced by sea-sickness, and neither the captain nor any one else saw any reason to doubt his word.

But the immortal soul of George Oswaldson did not come into my keeping.

THE LAST MISSION

CHAPTER XXIV

REDEMPTION I

FOR some time a feeling of wretchedness that baffles me to describe had been gaining on me. I no longer cared for my work, nor was my being filled with joy when I had to attend upon the throne of Diaphernes. I submitted to enter his presence because I had no power to do otherwise ; because I recognised that the leading of Fate was inevitable. Yet had I reflected candidly on my own loyalty, I must have confessed that I was rapidly losing it.

Ever since a certain night on the platform of the Oregon ranch, I had been conscious of a subtle change in myself ; not unlike the feeling men have when the air is charged with electricity, of intense weariness, together with an indefinable dread of something yet to come. It was in vain I struggled against it, and strove to fill my thoughts with the image of Diaphernes. It would not be shaken off. The personal beauty of my royal master exercised little of its former magnetism, nor could it counter-check the advance of these new emotions.

Much as I hated the incessant trampling up and down the Avenue of Gloom, and the company of those I found there, I now preferred to linger there rather than bow before the throne of the monarch. Lonely, restless, peevish as I was, I had no hankering after the crypt with its hidden,

Thoughts that had been common to me in my mortal days were gradually recurring—memories of higher aspirations, of the shame of evil, of a hope some day to do a little better. I had a craving for something my present life could never give—something—was it possible? apart from vice ; even something nearer to my opponent Sagatheela. For a time I seemed to be composed of two elements, good and evil ; to be acted upon by two equal opposing forces, to be drawn by two pairs of contending hands ; , lying passive the while—I was trying to recollect something that ever and ever eluded me.

It was a face. At times I had its picture almost complete in my mind ; only the eyes were wanting, of the forehead, or the expression of the mouth, or even some smaller but equally essential detail.

It would hover near me, and then, just before. I had grasped the whole, a mist would pass between and blot it out from my vision. So memory ever played me false, flattering me with the near accomplishment of my desires, placing before me the materials for the construction of my fancy, then snatching them away and dashing the whole to pieces. After a while, I would patiently concentrate my faculties in the direction of reconstruction, gather together the scattered fabrics, arrange, prepare, build up one by one, almost to the point of perfection ; and again the will-o'-the-wisp would slide from my grasp and leave me groping in the darkness.

How I bewailed my lot as I plodded on, wishing for what I had once refused, valuing I had voluntarily cast away. It has always been the same, since Diaphernes himself looked across the boundary of Eden ! That which cannot be regained seems most precious ; and the soul must have leaven, for too much wickedness nauseates in the end the same as sodden bread does.

After all, the joys that man wins for the lusts of the flesh, money-grubbing, immorality, intemperance, the setting up of false images, success in earthly things, are merely imaginary. Beauty wastes, suspicion is engendered, every man's hand is against his neighbour ; and the things that were his gladness become the very roots of bitterness. Such is earthly joy, the joy whose ends Diaphernes commanded me to promote. I was learning the falseness of the position, yet feared the wrath of the stronger, and dared not rebel.

Then—that eternal darkness ! I pined for a ray of light, for the sun, the air, and the sky. The giant trees in their grotesque contortions were more hateful to me than ever. The antics of the living branches, tearing and mutilating, ceased to possess even the fascination they had once exercised over me. And that crowd of souls, all melancholy, all evil ! Toiling along in mournful files, they passed me, always seeking to discern what they were never to discover.

Now and again I watched them with some interest : the sight of some red spirit made me wonder if my own colour had the undoubted change within myself. But, if this were so, why were my inclinations leading away from, rather than towards, Diaphernes' work? Would it not be more consistent that I should revile all approach to virtue with more warmth than ever? This, then, could hardly be the cause. I must look elsewhere outside. Some power that not even the precincts of Monelpisia were strong enough to bar out, was influencing me here, sowing the seeds of dissension in my breast, poisoning my mind against my princely master !

Ah ! a breath of my old love for him wafted back to me at the thought ! Weakling, coward, traitor, that I was to harbour such wavering' fancies ! Was I no longer a soldier of Diaphernes? Shame on me for a craven peace-seeker ! What ho ! for war—war—war ! War against the Christian life, against virtue, for Diaphernes ! Let me be in the foremost ranks, leading, seeking, finding, winning ! War ! Diaphernes !

Ah ! a spirit passing pauses to contemplate me. Has he heard that cry? Can I have betrayed my thoughts by self-communing? He moves on, with slower steps than before, and is lost in the shadowy crowd. Then came the turn of the ride.

The half-seen face looms again on the horizon of my imaginings, as a white cloud in the crimson of sunset, assuming shape, yet absorbing, and melting away in the glare ere its completion. But the image is always there—and it ever speaks.

"Virtue is the honour," it says, "without which no soldier can be noble."

Virtue ! Who spoke of that here?

"Seek it," continues the persistent voice.

"Where?" I ask. "Not in earth, where a fragment of shattered humanity alone struggles to hold it : not here, where the spirits have killed it : assuredly not in the inner crypt of Diaphernes !"

"Not with Diaphernes, whom thou no longer lovest, but in the heaven of God," was the answer. "In the love of Christ. Seek virtue—that is, seek Him—and thou shalt

find joy also. Not earthly passing joy, but the great, the glorious, the noble, the eternal. And reflect, has evil ever stamped out virtue? Has the master whom thou servest turned away from Christ one heart that had the will to be faithful? Remember Noah, Moses, Joshua. **Think—**if thou darest—of the Name, of the Love of Jesus.”

The voice grew sterner. “Thou hast long served this king of Monelpisia, and for what? A smile, a nod of the head, a word of praise? Any worthless woman can give more than this: and thou despisest women. Thou hast fought his battles: for what? To see the kindly light of favour in his eyes. Such is the reward a man receives from a woman. So thou hast incurred God’s wrath, drawn nearer to the bottomless pit. And why? Awake, O Agonistes, before it be too late.”

This and many other things did the strange voice say, so many times that the chronicle of my life could not contain them all—for the voice was with me always in the depths of the gloom.

As I walked thus, a prey to conflicting thoughts, I suddenly felt a hot hand on my shoulder, and turning, encountered the stern, cold face of my first guide, Aginarius.

There was a malicious gleam in his eyes and a cruel snarl about his lips. His greeting was characteristic.

“Agonistes, dog of an accursed fiend, bestir thyself: the royal master hath need of thee forthwith. Methinks the honour does not please thee as it should.”

His eyes were upon me and we faced each other in a silence that meant much. At last he averted his glance, caught my hand with such force that his nails sank into my nerveless palm, and in tones that quivered with rage bade me follow. But the rebellious mood was upon me, and I, resenting his discourtesy, thrust him back.

His astonishment pleased me, and I laughed till the greater avenue echoed with the unwonted sound. He had been unprepared for the attack, and had shot into swift collision with another spectre, so that the two lean forms crashed down together.

There were not wanting those who rejoice at the sufferings of others and who do not scorn to strike the fallen. I was fain to interfere to save my late opponent from the gibbe-

ring, jeering crowd that instantly gathered. Strange to relate, they were inclined to respect and obey me.

"Thou shalt pay for this, thou son of a dust-begotten man ! thou thrice accursed spawn from the earth beneath—thou—thou——" his voice rose to a shriek of rage—"a plague of cancers upon thee ! a murrain to devour thee !"

I know not how much longer he would have continued in this strain. It was I who reminded him of his mission. Then he saw fit to desist, and rising, led the way, but this time without touching me. As we departed, a faint murmur of gratification from the watching spirits told me that popular feeling had been on my side. In Monelpisia, as on earth, resistance against oppression, though not always practically aided, generally wins a certain meed of admiration. So, somewhat appeased for the discomfort I had endured, I followed my sinister guide in silence. Down the dark avenue we trod, a gloomy, fearsome pair of souls indeed, in a land devoid of light and air yet rent by gusts of cold, sobbing wind, blown from the nostrils of great, batlike creatures that flew overhead till the leaves shook and rustled as in a temper. Green shades peered at us from behind the forked branches of the wrestling trees, jabbering and jeering.

All were not confined to nooks and crannies ; some followed us in a kind of sad procession, creeping on misshapen lags, clawing the air with pincer-like hands, always ready to turn and seize and rend each other. I saw one monster steal from behind a giant tree and fling itself upon a weaker form, dragging it fiercely to its baneful bosom.

Pity—that strange new impulse within me—bade me stay and succour the entreating victim, but Aginatius turned and sharply rebuked me for the meditated delay. So with furious haste we passed on and left them, thrusting aside such as fain would hinder, and these were many. We pressed onwards and defied them all, and at last came to the crypt of Diaphernes.

Unwillingly enough, I entered, full of I knew not what forebodings. But the pit was closed, and only a tank of golden writhing serpents met my eyes instead.

Moving wearily across the floor I halted before the throne of Diaphernes, standing like a lofty rock in some great wilderness. It was bathed in glowing colours and fa tas-

tically adorned with moving designs that often made me think the throne itself was full of life. And in truth I still believe it was.

While I was trying to assort in my own mind the strange confusion of figures that rendered me giddy, a voice, the incarnation of sweet pathos, awoke the thousand echoes and made me lift my head. Diaphernes, in all the majesty of his beauty, was looking straight down upon me.

A certain indefinable sadness seemed to pervade the eyes which held me spell-bound. They were so large, so deep, so full of meaning. They read me through and through, I knew ; and when he spoke, it seemed to be hardly his lips or the melody of his voice that conveyed his meaning, but the eyes. I had to listen.

"I have summoned thee, O Agonostes," he said ; "to put thy loyalty to the test. Again, beware of Sagatheela. She is not far from thee, but even in these precincts would lure and entrap thee. Avoid her ; bid her begone. She is my enemy and therefore thine. Still one little chance remains to her of winning thee from me. That small chance depends on thy loyalty to me—and methinks thou art loyal."

How could I lie in the face of those penetrating eyes? Yet, while they held me, it was not a lie to say I loved him. Seeing that delay only bred mistrust, I found voice to answer :

"What can be greater than my love for thee, O noblest prince?"

A peculiar smile played over the strong face.

"Art thou so sure of thy great love?" he asked.

"As sure as I am that I stand before thee, that the birds of the air fly, that the billows of the ocean break, that human life does not terminate with mortal breath, so sure am I of my love, O prince."

"Thou speakest well, my servant. Yet methought—'twas but an idle fancy—thy countenance would deny what thy speech affirmed. Art thou still so sure? Answer, and be zealous. A lover does not fear in the presence of the beloved."

As he softly spoke the words, he leaned forward as if to fascinate me with his gaze. Never did he look to me more

like some splendid predatory bird with glistening plumage, holding its quarry in eerie admiration. I stood before him and could not remove my eyes.

There was not a sound in the great hall ; the walls were as still as death, and nothing disturbed the vast silence. I felt as if many hidden eyes were bent on me, many invisible ears strained to catch my answer. The lights within the skulls burnt blue, torches stooped, row by row, in my direction, casting their flames behind them like trailing robes. I longed to look round, to see and defy the watching things, but the spirit who was their ruler held me bound, gazing into his eyes. Yet when speech came to me I waxed eloquent.

"How can I tell thee of my love, O puissant Diaphernes?" I said, "if my deeds on the earth may not speak for me. Have I not fought thy battles and overcome thy adversaries? Or have my puny efforts passed unnoticed, my prayers gone unheard? Compared with thee I am an atom, a nothingness, without power, understanding, beauty or grace. Yet when did I give ear to other counsel but thine, cry to any but thee? Have I not rejoiced in thy presence, lived in and for thy love? Am I not loyal? If thou still doubtest me, believe it is my words rather than my heart that fail. Since my mortal youth, I have been but a poor stammerer, tied of tongue. So forgive, O monarch, these poor words, so feebly representing all that my soul would say."

I paused, and stood in an attitude of supplication, my eyes upturned to him, and my being filled with a tumult of sorrow. By slow degrees the mists which had gathered over my thoughts were clearing away, and my old love reasserting itself with tenfold force. I revelled in his godlike beauty, and bowed myself in adoration. The lights around the hall burned with dazzling brilliancy, the skulls ratured, the walls murmured, and everywhere I heard sighs as of a vast relief. My speech had pleased Diaphernes. He spoke :

"Thy words are not without weight, O loyal Agonistes : neither have they failed to find favour in my ears. Thou speakest as one who should be faithful, and I will take thee at thy word. But indeed thou needest never plead

the lack of eloquence, for words speed from thy tongue as rain falls from the sky, or arrows fly from a host of archers. Learn then for thy comfort, that I trust thee. Never look abashed : for of all the spirits who inhabit Monelpisia, thou hast the least to fear from me, the most to gain."

"Since thou, O my king," I replied, "dost love the meanest of thy subjects, and dost tell him so as a recompense for his struggles, thou art indeed a monarch without equal, and worthy of all love and praise. Fain would I thank thee with my life, but that we immortals lack the power of dying, therefore I can only beseech thee to accept for ever the poor service of my soul."

A gentle approving murmur came from the listening walls, as summer leaves rustle when the west wind kisses them, and Diaphernes, smiling, went on :

"Dost thou remember that in thy mortal days one told thee that the beginning of all evil was in woman?"

"I do, my lord."

"Dost thou remember how thou didst put this to the test, and prove it to the very hilt?"

"Ay, my lord, right well."

"Then hearken. When first I cast off the yoke of God" (he hissed it out with an effort), "and turned My hands against His works, I thought of earth. Alighting on the then new surface of the world, I hied me to Eden, aglow with the dawn of natural beauty, and there found man. No greater wonder ever filled me than I experienced at the sight of that first mortal, so perfect, so flawless. The mechanism of his bones and organs was wondrously complete. I stayed, I watched him as he lived and moved and held rule over every other living thing, in all his words and thoughts and deeds the reflected image of his Maker. For long I waited and pondered. Then my Antagonist created for man his playmate, the weaker, frailer woman ; and before the work was completed, rested from His labour. And I carried on, unseen, the work. Into the impressionable, half-formed character I poured new qualities. I made her such that some of the love man had given to God should pass to her ; I put strange thoughts into the unfilled brain-cells ; I sowed the germs of vanity, cruelty, and selfishness in the unawakened heart ; and still my Enemy rested. Then

I laughed to see the outward form of His handiwork, the beautiful lifeless woman lying stretched out on the ground beside the sleeping Adam—fair enough for one of the angels of heaven, yet inwardly so fit to carry on my work. Then God arose, took up the form of the woman, and breathed into her the breath of life. Awakening, Adam found her bending over him, so like, yet so unlike himself—and from that instant the soul of woman, craving for love, set herself to win his heart. Thanks for the first principles I had implanted, she was ripe for my persuasions; and I led her up by easy steps to the desire for the Tree of Knowledge. She took of the fruit, and having tasted herself, sought the presence of the yet sinless man. And so well she pleaded her cause, her arms enfolding him and her eyes looking into his soul, that his strength failed him and he did her bidding for the love he bore her. Such, O thou that hast been the soul of a man, was the story of the motherwoman, and many of her daughters have been faithful followers in her ways. Around the crimson shade of Samson's faithless bride, myriads of less famous Delilahs form a court, even down to the present day, when they lay their snares for the feet of unwary men. Therefore, my servant, learn this: bend woman to thy will if thou canst, but never trust her. And as with mortal woman, so with the women spirits that are immortal; they will live and win thee if they can.

"Again, I say, beware of Sagatheela. Her day is almost over. Resist her but once more and thou art mine, untroubled. She will try to persuade thee that she loves thee. Do not, I Diaphernes, love thee too? Spurn her then, she is false—false—and mocks thee in her soul. Be bold of heart, go forth, withstand, conquer—remembering that Diaphernes is not only thy sovereign, but thy friend. My help is thine for the asking. Can I rely on thee?"

"Implicitly, my master!" I said firmly, and my voice rang through the vaulted hall, waking the million echoes.

I yielded my will under the spell of those wondrous eyes that never left mine, and fell, I suppose, into a sort of trance for I cannot affirm what further he asked me, nor what I answered. He was by no means displeased, so whatever I said or did must have been in accordance with his will.

As I turned to go, however, his parting words rang out

sharp and clear, and there was a look yet unknown to me on the splendid face. Something in his attitude and bearing filled me with an unspeakable dread. Was he after all an awful fiend, a creature of torment? And was I a prisoner in some nightmare castle, fenced about with breathing walls and accompanied by unsightly phantoms? Was this being in front of me a pitiless torture revelling in the damnation of my soul? I shook in silent terror.

But he waved his hand and smiled, and all was changed again.

"Farewell!" he cried, with a glance of unspeakable tenderness. "Be constant, loyal, and brave, and on my royal word, every soul here will envy thee thy reward!"

Then Aginarius led me forth from the presence; and the walls sighed "farewell" as we passed, and we climbed the groaning staircase into black, blinding space.

Methought my guide was about to turn upon me with malignity, when the sandals fitted themselves closer to my heels and bore me away. And ever onwards as they carried me, the ringing words of Diaphernes followed:

"Be thou constant, loyal, and brave."

The cold dark wind from Monelpisia repeated it, the twisting sobbing trees groaned it out; the stones in the desert echoed it, and it was written in the darting rays of the sun.

"Be thou constant, loyal, and brave."

Down I plunged through the bright blue atmosphere towards the sparking earth, the cruel mother earth, the globe of the mortals whom I hated so.

THE LAST CHAPTER

THE GREAT CRYING OF DIAPHERNES

I STARED around me. Strange! Where had I seen the room before? The bare floor, with its chipped and grimy boards—the tiny fireplace with the crumbling hearthstone, and narrow, cracked, dirty mantelpiece; the black cleft serving as washing-stand and dressing-table combined, the filthy, indistinguishable prints on the walls, the crazy bed in the far corner, it all seemed familiar, and memory was struggling hard to assert itself.

Through the smeary window-pane I saw the broad white road, deserted except for a policeman, and one or two of the utterly homeless and weary; poor wretches denied even the comfort of a doorstep on which to rest their aching bones, and where they might momentarily close their heavy eyelids. They must get up—walk on. Where? oh, anywhere! But if they drop from weariness? Well, we can't help that! I turned again to study the room, and a scene came vision-like before my eyes.

I saw a young man, pale and sickly, with a hunted expression in his thin face, come stumbling over the dirty threshold. He clasped his head with his hands, as if the pain within was more than he could bear.

He staggered to the window and silently contemplated the scene below. Then the roar of vehicles and the sound of voices came rushing through the night air. I saw again the crowded thoroughfare the street alight with lamps, the throng of men and women going their heedless way; everything he saw was seen by me. At last, with a heavy sigh that told of final abandonment, he left the window, threw himself on the bed, and for a while lay still. Then he raised his face, and in the fitful moonshine, I recognised myself.

The puzzle was solved. I was in York Road, in the garret wherein Paul Penruddock had existed and died.

Instinctively, with the memory of that last struggle fresh upon me, I turned towards the mantelpiece. It was the same, only dirtier, more cracked, more tottering than ever, as if an uncautious touch must inevitably send it into fragments; and there in the same place, with the ghostly moonlight full upon it, as it had shone once before, was a little blue phial of roughened glass with an ominous red label.

I was staggered with bewilderment at the coincidence. Must I undergo those too well remembered agonies of mortal death once more? Or had that awful struggle never taken place? Had I only been dreaming things in a fancy-land, where horrible inventions needed no master brain. Had I never entered Mönelpisia, nor seen the beauty of Diaphernes? Was the Avenue of Gloom a mere wandering of a fevered mind?

If such were indeed the case—but my eyes bent downwards and caught the glitter of a pair of sandals. My doubts

died away. I looked again at the ragged bed against the wall. Bed was too grand a name for such a thing, and, truly enough, among the soiled and tumbled blankets lay the semblance of a human being. But the face was obscured by a grizzled beard and tousled, matted hair. I approached, and bending down, closely examined the prostrate form. It bore no resemblance to Paul Penruddock. It was emaciated, drawn, prematurely aged, and wrinkled, hot with a raging fever that was fast sapping its vitals.

This was plainly a man who had led an evil life, and had of his own free will and choice laid down and paved his road from earth to Monelpisia.

I looked again, and read the chronicles of that life within that sleeping soul. Beginning at the latest days, I traced him back from age to youth, and from youth to infancy.

Poverty ! six months in York Road, where he had barely managed to exist, hampered by added years and dwindling health. Years of prison-life within four pitiless walls ; work without pleasure and plenty of work ; food without flavour, and little food ; oaths without limit, foul and damning. A prisoner in the dock ; a string of witnesses, a woman's evidence the most convincing ; a jury without dissent, and the utmost penalty that the law allows.

Further back, the lack of money finds for remedy a deed of forgery ; the pleasures of society are not without their financial exactments, and a dual existence is discovered by the revengeful mood of a woman. A fortune wrongfully obtained leads on through vice to retribution, and a well-known mercantile house loses the services of its managing partner. I stopped with a grim foreboding, and forebore to read further. This aged, dissipated, prison-wrecked creature, in a state of semi-starvation, was assuming a likeness to some one of my earthly days. The bend of the long thin nose and the lift of the eyebrows were associated in my mind with a supercilious nature. I knew the lofty forehead, the trend of the blue veins that formed a V. the shape of the long slender hands. I was not standing by the side of a stranger.

The hands, roughened to coarseness, had yet some traces of former refinement ; the rest of illness had allowed the recovery of form to the filvert nails. Everything about the man tallied with past associations—yet I strove in vain

to fix my wandering recollections. A name was on my tongue ; it was :

Accursed memory, cheating me again ! With thy false leadings thou art indeed a woman. Tantalise me, mock at me, smile on me, promise me satisfaction, win my faith, and—leave me as before.

Still the name plays with my tongue, and I get no further. Again and again I essay—then give up in despair, and finally try again.

At last I am on the verge of abandoning the search, for loath though I am to confess it, the belief that I shall never discover the man's identity is gaining upon me.

Leaning against the wall, and looking at nothing in particular, my eyes by chance settle on a chocolate-coloured stain I have not before observed. Vaguely I wonder what it is and how it came there, till suddenly over it appeared, written in silver like the rays of the moon, the name I had been seeking—CRAWLEY LANGTON.

Some minutes passed ere I was even conscious of active thought : but when I began to think, my wonder knew no bounds. However strange the answer on the wall had been and whatever caused it, at least it had told me what memory refused to say. Without doubt, the man was Crawley Langton. And why had I been sent on such an errand?

Without hesitation the answer came. Diaphernes had allowed me the opportunity of fulfilling the ambition of my soul. My enemy was given over into my hands, even as I had desired. O most wise, most loving, love-compelling prince !

Was it to appease the unspoken restless cravings of my soul that I had been sent hither to make my final stand against the wiles of Sagatheela?

"The vengeance of a man," I muttered, "against the cunning resources of a woman. Well—we shall see !"

And here in front of me lay the man who had made my youth a hell, who had wrecked my boyish ideals, who had stepped between me and my love, and twice blasted all the prospects of my life. Now the circumstances were reversed. I was strong and he was weak. I could make him suffer as I had suffered, be tempted as I was—and doubtless make him fall as I had fallen. Right well I meant to play my part.

"Wretch!" I exclaimed, striding forth and standing in the moonlight—„wretch—abominable oppressor : ir shall be word for word, blow for blow, stab for stab, of all the injuries thou hast done to me. Thou aged coward, years have not proved a shield against the penetration of my vengeance—nor shall sickness exonerate thee, nor pity plead on thy behalf. Where are thy costly clothes, thy handsome gifts bought with the wealth that should have been mine? Where is the strength of thy manhood, the boastful glory of thy youth? Where are the friends who did not disdain to hear thy accusations of a helpless boy? I tell thee, thou art as destitute of allies as I ever was ! And if I was damned for a deed and words which savoured less of baseness than of despair, thou art thrice damned by thy whole life ; and the fiends about the mouth of the pit wait hungrily for thy coming."

There was not a sound to be heard. It was London's silent hour, just before the dawn, when the hordes of night have gone to rest—and those of day are not yet awakened. Where, a few hours before, a man might pause at a crossing and wait impatiently for a break in the long, crawling lines of traffic, there were now empty spaces and the awe of a great stillness. The deadly calm, the cold night air, the weird moonlight, made it like a picture of some plaguestricken and deserted city. It spread from north to south, from east to west, unbroken by louder echoes than the tramp of the policemen on their beat.

It appealed to me with unwonted fascination as I waited in that lonely garret for the sick man to awake.

And the dawn broke with its light in the east. A figure emerged from Tennyson Street, shook out the collar of his coat, smoothed down his trousers, and set off at a quick walk towards Westminster. He was a printer, bound by the ties of modern bondage to be in his place at work by four o'clock.

Another man followed, and another—and by degrees the street seemed to fill with these early toilers. Yet through all the trampling, my client slept peacefully; not an eyelid moved, not a nerve twitched, and had it not been for the slight heaving of the wretched blankets over his chest, he might have been already lying in the clutch of Death.

All outside interests became lost again in the single contem-

plation of my enemy. The world shrank into insignificance, the souls of other men were the merest nonentities. My existence was focussed into my antagonism with this one man.

I looked at him in every light, pondered over every peculiarity, reviewed again a hundred different points in the strange anomaly of his life ; then went through in detail the vicissitudes of my own earthly life, drew from this comparison the same conclusion. Admitt this mingling of ideas one thought was ever paramount, precluding any attempted argument, robbing me of the enjoyment of quiet thought, filling me with the maddening desire to arouse the sleeper, adorning the walls with strange phantasies, floating before my sight, twisting revolving, approaching, retreating. It bore many forms, but always conveyed the same meaning—the vision of revenge.

Was it my excited imagination, or the incoming of the grey dawn, upon the deceptive moonlight—or indeed a visitor from the world of spirits? I knew not : but I saw a white and evil face protrude through one of the panels of the door and stare at me. There was such malignity in the pale grey eyes, such mocking cruelty in the thin, writhing lips, such expectancy in the gleam of the pointed teeth, that I shrank back involuntarily. It was too evil even for me ! But when I looked again the thing was gone. I could not forget it, and leaned against the mantelpiece shaking as if I had been a mortal man stricken with ague. But my faculties soon returned into action ; and I was again swayed by the burning frenzy for revenge.

My glance fell upon Langton. I gloated over the hollow cheeks, the melancholy countenance, the ashen hue that spoke of so near an approach to death. Like a murderer crawling into the hushed apartment of the sleeping, I crept closer, closer squatting upon my haunches like some huge ape. Then I stopped in greedy anticipation, made a bound, and alighted full upon his chest. His breath already came in fetid puffs that suggested an earth-heaped coffin. Cursed dreams were upon him, and the peace of his sleep had passed away. He tossed to and fro, and muttered amid his groaning, "Food ! for mercy's sake, food ! No breakfast, no dinner, no supper ! Nothing to-day, nothing yesterday, nothing to-morrow ! Oh, give me food ! Do you hear ? Oh, sir, give me food, I'm starving ! I'll carry your bag, do anything

for you, all for a single penny ! You won't? You won't even look at me? Then curse you for a hard-hearted brute ! Yes, curse you, curse you !"

His whimperings made me laugh. He continued : "I'm not strong enough, warder ; the work is killing me. I have been used to an outdoor life ; let me do anything but bend over this hateful carpentering. You won't? D—n you then ! The governor? What's the good of asking him, he's paid to treat us all like dogs."

For some minutes he ceased to speak, merely muttering incoherently and breathing in shorter, sharper gasps.

I longed to awaken him. But no ; his lips were in motion again.

"Fourteen years ! The injustice of it ! I shall go mad before the term has fairly commenced. How pleased those vixens look. They would go ten miles to see me hanged, or better still, tortured on a rack. What a fool I've been to spend a farthing on them ! Suppers at the Criterion, rides in the Row ! And here they are to see me sent to slavery and criticise me. We always thought he would come to this. A regular stage villain ! Ah yes, my beauties, I can see you, I know what you are saying. Curse you, curse you all ; curse the day I ever saw a woman. But who is this? Ha, ha, she, is not quite so well dressed as she used to be ! Why is she here? What can she know of this matter? Come to darken my antecedents, cruelty, desertion, et-cetera. Oh, it's too ridiculous ! Deprive a woman of her honour of her reputation ; *her* reputation indeed ! thrown out of work, a wreck ! Miss Alice Carpenter, let me congratulate you on your *debut* as a star comedienne—or shall I say tragedienne? Bravo !"

My client paused. But all my nature was aflame at the name of the woman I had once loved. This gibbering wretch was stirring up my recollections far too well. The name he uttered had completed the link between the present and the past, and, as I then thought, immutably sealed his fate. But he wandered on :

"Paul again ! Drat the boy, with his pale face. But he isn't a boy now—a seedy, out-at-elbows clerk. I wonder if he knew me. With Alice, too. I don't know why I hate him so ; it must be one of those aversions men are born with. But

poor Paul : it is the second time I have ruined him. Poor Paul !”

The repetition of my name in the tremulous tones of exhaustion only maddened me more. It was the character, the tone of these words that touched the keynote of my memory, that revived in their fulness the insults of my boyhood, that placed before me in full detail the picture of the young man and his mother. They galled me even now, thinking over them.

As I listened to the droning voice, the pent-up passions of youth, the bitter indignations of manhood, the ranklings of an immortal hatred, rushed through my soul. When, after years of struggling, buffeting, privation, and despair, a man at length *succeeds*, there is a brief period of perfect triumph which marks the turn of the tide. But, as far as my memory bore me back, I had been a sufferer and an exile, uncompensated. The ambitions of Paul Penruddock had never been fulfilled ; and when on that eventful night Agnostes entered Monelpisia, the soul was filled with new ideas, new aspirations, and a voice was always whispering to me of vengeance.

Long I had thought of, and nourished, vengeance. And this was the hour of my triumph, I sat upon that bed and waited, as happy as Evil could make one who loved it.

The changing light from dawn to day was swelling and increasing, bringing with it the accompanying noise and bustle of a busy town. And still my client slept.

At length one dream more horrible than the rest penetrated through his slumber so that he started into wakefulness. He lay and panted, and his moaning and sighing was pleasant in my ears. It was the first part of my revenge, and the rest was yet to come.

The crisis could no longer be postponed. I felt his pulse and was amazed to find how feebly it was beating. Death would claim him ere long ; and I must act promptly, for it must be my death that he should die. Another thing puzzled me. Where was Sagatheela? Were the warnings of Diaphernes vain and needless after all? At any rate, I must work.

One of Langton's hands was twitching feebly at the bed-clothes, the other lay as if paralysed by his side. His eye-

balls were dull and filmy, the sweat of the tomb was gathering on his brow, and I saw the form of death itself hovering outside the window. The poor fool began again to babble.

"Was I cruel to you, Alice? Did I persuade you to trust me and then abandon you to infamy? Had you not always a leaning towards evil, or were you ever pure and virtuous? If you were, then, as I am at the point of death, I implore your forgiveness."

I was waxing impatient.

"My step-brother? I paid him out for the thrashing he gave me. Mother, mother, why do you look so frightened?" He leaned forward and spoke in the low hurried voice of one imparting a crucial confidence: "Look here, we must get rid of him. We may be poor—he may be rich. It's a good estate—think of it, mother! Well, I've done it! It's hidden in his drawer!" Then his tones changed again to terrified supplication. "Paul, can you forgive me, Paul? Poor Paul—I wonder why I am thinking so much of you. I have a good deal on my conscience. I own it, but nothing seems to weigh so heavy as my sin against Paul. It was a cruel thing—a damning sin."

"It was," I echoed, "damning."

"Will God forgive me?" he droned on. "Can such a sin be washed out in Christ's blood?"

And I answered, "No".

"Sometimes," he maundered on, "I think there is no God."

"You are right," I said. "There is none."

"If that be true, then why do I bewail the past?"

"And why," I suggested, "live a moment longer—why not elude the sting of a lingering death of sickness?"

"Why not, indeed?" he said, and half rose, but fell back with a shudder.

"I must be mad to think of such a thing," he mumbled.

Death had come into the room now, and I could see him waiting. Lucky for me, I thought, that Langton could not also see. My time was short.

"Why mad?" I asked again.

"So unnatural."

"If there is no God, why fear Nature?"

"Not even if I violate her?"

"To ease thy pain? Thou fool, think not of Nature but of thyself—Nature is selfish enough already."

"But—how shall I do it?"

I bent forward and whispered in his ear. My suggestion drove the life-blood from his heart; a momentary flash of madness lighted the dull eyes, and he held out both hands to me, though he saw not.

"Poison!" he gasped. "Poison! Yes, I know it is there."

And he gloated over the word as a miser over his coins.

"Poison—poison!"

It was childishness in the face of death—weird, but not out of place in that haunted room.

Laying my hand on his shoulder, I re-echoed the word. And there we sat close together, the early morning sun peeping in on us through the dirty windows—I holding him close to me, he drinking in the very venom of my mind, while Death held aloof, grinning on us both, tempter and tempted.

"Poison!" Big Ben from Westminster rang out the double-syllabled sound, and the tramp of the people in the streets beat time to it. The air was full of it; the tiny trails of smoke from the chimneys wrote it in grey letters against the sky. The crazy walls trembled, the broken floor creaked, all to the same note, "Poison."

My client raised himself with difficulty upon his right elbow, and I wound my arm closer about him. He tried to rise, trembled swayed, and fell. Again he tried, and failed; and again. And after each attempt the interval was longer, the recovery more painful. My chance was fleeting fast. Then he cried out in pain, and I felt the thrill of agony passing through him. Every instant was precious. I sent the black, damning thoughts pouring from my mind to his.

"Dare I?" he cried. "Oh, dare I? What of my soul?"

"What became of the soul of Paul Penruddock?" I asked.

I felt him wince and shudder, saw the thin lips contract over the teeth, knew that he tried to pronounce some words, and gloated over his failure. I went on pitilessly:

"Paul is dead. His soul, like his body, is dust. All souls, like the concomitant bodies, are built from dust, and to that dust evolution ordains that they must return. And thou hast murdered Paul."

"Murdered Paul? Who says so? I did not know he died."

"Still thou art a murderer. Who robbed him of home, employment, bread, and hope? Is that not being indeed the agent of his death? Is there no form of murder save that done red-handed with an earthly weapon?"

"Then the greatest crime man can commit is charged against my name."

"Yes—for his death is at thy door."

"Who says so?"

"I—Paul Penruddock."

"Paul Penruddock? But you told me just now that Paul was dead—that his soul was dead with him."

I had made an error, but hastened to recover ground.

"Listen! I am, and am not, Paul Penruddock. The men and women who make most impression upon our minds are stamped with such solidity on our memories as to remain there for ever. And so they appear to us in all but flesh and body, and play with our imaginations. Thus then 'tis Paul who speaks, yet Paul himself is nowhere, buried and forgotten in the grave of a pauper suicide. 'Tis scarcely even the soul of his ghost, seeing there is no future state for any soul. 'Tis but his memory, conjured up within mine and thine."

The were tears of anguish pouring down my clients' at the readiness of my own resources.

"And my soul?" he said plaintively.

"Fool! Talk not of souls, and such idle superstition. Man is but a figure in a dream that comes and goes, directed by chance and circumstance. The fear of the future is but a distorted fancy, drawn perhaps from the certainty of human legal punishment, which became indispensable, owing to man's natural passions, and forms the basis of the theory of good and evil. Put aside then the fear of death, and thou wilt be certain thou hast naught to dread—naught in comparison with the lingering agonies of fever. See! arise and drink!"

I directed his eyes towards the bottle, and saw with joy the wistful longing in their depths.

"See!" he echoed. "What do I see?"

"A sure and faithful remedy for all thine ills; the one true friend of suffering man. Rise and drink."

"Poison ! Not that—not that !" He cried aloud and beat the air. I could see the knotty bones almost protruding through the straved flesh.

"Can I, dare I—must I?" he whined, when the first paroxysm of passion was over.

I caught him fiercely in my arms, and sneered—
"Coward still, as ever !"

The taunt stirred up his dying faculties. With a feeble movement he threw off the coverings and slid on to the stained and shaking floor. It was the acme of my triumph I supported the frail and tottering form to its doom—and Death followed. On—to his soul's damnation—conqueror and conquered.

"The hand of Destiny is but the hand of Retribution."

I had heard the saving once and it seemed to fit the moment. As he had been relentless, so had I ; as he had caused my fall, so should I his. Even as he had pursued, hated, and destroyed so could I ! At my mercy, in my arms, lay Crawley Langton, the bitterest enemy man ever had, destroyer of the prospects of my life, seducer of the woman I had, loved libertine, gambler, thief. A noble captive—indeed ! and this was the gift of Diaphernes to me ! I was avenged.

Then, suddenly—and it came with a dull shock of wonder—I knew that Sagatheela was also at his side. And, strange to say, she was not opposing his weak progress, rather acquiescing in my movements. Name of Diaphernes, what new scheme was this? All at once I heard her voice.

"Pray !" she said ; "pray ! For in this last moment. God may give thee grace to redeem a misspent life."

But she did not say, "Turn back !"

He was standing by the rusty fireplace now, and I looked at him with that new, tormenting impulse that urged me to save Aginarius from overwhelming numbers ; that had made me long to stop and help the screaming shade in the awful avence. He was such a poor, suffering, broken thing to deliver to the fiends of that appalling pit, for well I knew that even Diaphernes could never make of him a soldier.

He stood, gazing at the bottle but never touching it ; dazed, stupid, lost to thought, only nattling with the increasing difficulty of physical bleath.

"God is Love," said Sagatheela. And with a voice different from any I had heard, there was so much of hope in it, she spoke to me also, „Oh, Agonostes, God is Love."

And I—was I tongue-tied? What of those warnings of my master?

"Love !" I said. "That is what women talk of."

"I have had enough of love," said Langton wearily. "And yet—the right sort of love must be a good thing. I don't think I ever found it."

I would fain have mocked at love once more ; for once the ready words failed me. Had not, I, too, once loved a woman? I seemed to go out the garret and away, away very far back. It was not in great sinful London—it was not Alice Carpenter ; it was not even the kindly ranch maiden who had comforted the heartsick stranger ; it was certainly not the woman-spirit Sagatheela whom I had never clearly seen. I felt my own touch on the sufferer growing lighter and kindlier—there were trees and birds and pretty things about me ; and somebody loved me—in the right way. Who was it? Fool that I was ! I had vowed my love to Diaphernes ; I had loved none else, and never could.

The form between us was convulsed with pain—and Death came a little nearer.

"Drink !" I said savagely. "How long wilt thou bear this—thou slave under the lash? What was good enough for Paul is too good for thee !"

He braced himself with an effort, and the shaking fingers closed over the blue bottle.

"Paul again !" he quivered. "I don't think I should mind dying if I thought poor Paul could forgive me."

And I laughed—yet mirthlessly.

He had taken the second hand from the corner of the mantelpiece to remove the stopper from the phial. But he was too weak to stand alone, and swayed so that he all but fell. Swift as I had been, Sagatheela had been swifter, and had guided his thin fingers back. To a firmer hold? No.

And once again I wondered what the meaning of this might be. This spirit, who claimed to be so loving and so pitiful, had caused the hand of the sufferer to grasp the shelf where it was broken, rotten, and torn half away from

the plaster already. It tottered—yielded—and gave way. Crash ! with a noise that echoed through the house, with it fell mine enemy, still grasping the blue bottle in his other hand.

Even as he fell, I heard the tinkle of something light and metallic that rang against the rusty fender. Moved by an uncontrollable impulse, I bent forward.

“Do not look—do not look. It is a snare.”

The words were powerful and full of melody. They had all the majesty of a royal command, mingled with the beseeching of a lover. Was Diaphernes here, and speaking to me?

I paused but a moment. With this cload of memory hanging about me, bewildering and limiting every thought and action, I *must* and I *would* see and know all I could.

And there, under the very fingers of my dying enemy, lay a tiny golden cross.

Was it Sagatheela speaking now, or had one said it years ago, and the echo been shut up within the tottering wall :

“Thy mother’s God.”

Truly, I had loved a woman once. Again I was the child Paul roaming in the meadows and plucking the flowers. I saw the dear old resting-places, the familiar corners, the faces of long-dead friends, and, above all, my mother. I remembered many quiet, simple talks in undisturbed cornness ; sweet words breathed at night beside my little bed, soft protecting arms, and the unspeakable tenderness of loving lips.

And my work, my triumph that was to be, filled me with repulsion. I saw myself as my mother would have seen me, in all my loathsome, murderous, self-chosen vileness. My lean brown body, the foul, sealy, shining sandals—and then thoughts of the beauty of the unselfish love in those pure devoted eyes. I cowered in hopeless degradation, even as if she were present, and had found me engaged in my odious occupation.

„Paul thou art changed,” she seemed to say sadly, and I hated myself the more for the sorrow in her voice.

I dropped my client’s hand and stood motionless.

Yet there was another agency at work. My plighted vows before the throne of the inner crypt were not to be

so lightly set aside. I had loved Diaphernes. I certainly feared him. On the other hand there was :

"Thy mother's God."

From far away there came a stern reminder. "Be faithful, loyal, and brave."

Again my hand slipped down to that of Langton. I glanced towards the doorway ; a tall figure seemed to come nearer and nearer until it stood in the room ; the very majestic, presence of the prince himself.

The terrible tension was broken by the voice of the sick man. In the twitchings of his fingers he had dropped the splintered wood and picked up, all unconsciously, the fallen cross. There he lay gasping on the bare boards, the poison phial in one hand and my mother's gift in the other.

"I believe I could love Paul a little, if I thought he would forgive."

Diaphernes spoke not, only smiled. But the smile said more than many words, and I again laid my hand on that which held the bottle. Then a sense of the cowardice of it smote me ; there were the prince, and Death, and I, and our prey a man who was dying already.

"I need not interfere," I told myself. "He is damned enough without me."

"Listen !" said Sagatheela. "What of the forgiveness of Christ, who alone can pardon Paul and thee?"

"I dare not—I dare not. I never knew anything about Him."

"But He knows thee. He cares for thee. He gave His own life that thou, and those like thee might not perish everlastingly. Pray-pray while there is time. And oh ! there is joy in the presence of God over one sinner that repenteth."

"Speak !" hissed Diaphernes.

And I would not.

"If I thought Paul, whom I knew, could forgive," the poor wretch sobbed, "I might believe even in the pardon of Christ, whom I have never known."

"Speak ! Refuse !" thundered Diaphernes.

And I stood silent.

A score of threatening faces gibbered around me, the sun went in, and the air of the room became tepid and stifling ;

but through the mist and vapour I always saw that upturned face and the skeleton-like hands gripping the bottle and the cross. Then the whole room was ablaze with a crimson light like the inside of a fiery furnace ; waves of flame hissed and roared about me ; plantoms from the evil world spread out their filthy claws to tear me, a hundred voices bellowed in my ears ; the walls swung to and fro, the boards lifted up and down the grimy ceiling seemed to close upon our heads, and still I kept my place. Then I felt Sagatheela draw nearer to me in the midst of the horror ; her soft hands touched me, and her quiet voice, unshaken by all the alarms, reached my ears :

"Agonostes ! Be great, and forgive ; Christ, the great est of all, is so forgiving. And thy mother loved Him."

Another instant of silence, and I had chosen. Half afraid, I leaned over and touched the cross with fingers almost as trembling as those of the dying man himself.

"Crawley Langton," I said, "I, who was Paul Penruddock, forgive thee ; even as I pray to Christ to forgive both me and thee."

And the blue bottle fell and shivered into atoms, while its contents flowed across the floor to the very feet of Diaphernes.

There was a cry, so terrible, that it petrified my soul, and before the foulness of the apparition I saw, my emacipated soul turned sick with horror. It was so wholly vile, so repellent, so unapproachably disgusting ; and yet under all the transformation I traced the figure and lineaments of Diaphernes. Gone was all the god-like majesty, the wonderful tender grace, the magic of the deep, far-seeing eyes ; it was only rendered the more horrible by the absolute perfection of form and feature which abode with it even then. Just for a moment of time he hung aloft, the very incarnation of defeated malice, then, with a parting yell which through the room like a hurricane, Diaphernes departed from my sight.

And I looked down at my own body and wondered at its whiteness and symmetry ; and again daring to lift my eyes there, standing on the other side of the recumbent form of

Crawley Langton, was *she*—Sagatheela, whom I had never yet clearly seen. Was it possible there could be such beauty, and that I, Agonostes, might see it and live? In that beauty of love, and of holiness, all the evil things I had said and thought of women vanished like an evil dream. But could she pardon all I had done and said? I knelt on the floor and hid my face.

"Weep not, Agonostes," she said. "Dost thou regret that thou mayest at last behold me?"

"Ah, Sagatheela," I said, "I have been blind—had I but known! Yet, why, is it that thou hast loved me? And I cannot believe that thy love is living still."

"If I ever loved thee, Agonostes, I love thee now; and as for forgiveness, hast thou not thyself learned the gladness of forgiving?"

And together we bent over the form lying so still between us.

"Wait," Sagatheela, „my place is here, and thine with me."

The haggard head was raised for a moment.

"Penruddock—Paul! Good God! it is—it can't be—it is—you! You, the white-faced boy I hated! You—you! That trick! Can you forgive me that? Then again—Alice! Can you forgive me that? You can! Ah! then, Christ, forgive me too!"

A look of peace swept over his face—the evil lines of years were rapidly chased out by the calm hand of my Sagatheela. She had saved us both, and when the end had come and we had watched his spirit glide out into the bright air and vanish, we, too, with one last, lingering look, bade farewell to York Road and the sordid surroundings of poverty and crime.

THE END

