

Rosa Mundi and Other Stories eBook

Rosa Mundi and Other Stories by Ethel May Dell

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ROSA MUNDI

A debt of honour

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THE PREY OF THE DRAGON

The secret service man

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THE PENALTY

Rosa Mundi

Was the water blue, or was it purple that day? Randal Courteney stretched his lazy length on the shady side of the great natural breakwater that protected Hurley Bay from the Atlantic rollers, and wondered. It was a day in late September, but the warmth of it was as a dream of summer returned. The season was nearly over, or he had not betaken himself thither, but the spell of heat had prolonged it unduly. It had been something of a shock to him to find the place still occupied by a buzzing crowd of visitors. He never came to it till he judged the holidays to be practically over. For he loved it only when empty. His idea of rest was solitude.

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He wondered how long this pearly weather would last, and scanned the sky for a cloud. In vain! There was no cloud all round that blue horizon, and behind him the cliffs stood stark against an azure sky. Summer was lingering, and even he had not the heart to wish her gone.

Something splashed noisily on the other side of the rocky breakwater. Something squeaked and gurgled. The man frowned. He had tramped a considerable distance to secure privacy. He had his new novel to think out. This invasion was intolerable. He had not even smoked the first pipe of his meditations. Impatiently he prepared to rise and depart.

But in that moment a voice accosted him, and in spite of himself he paused. "I want to get over the breakwater," said the voice. "There's such a large crab lives this side."

It was an engaging voice—a voice with soft, lilting notes in it—the voice of a child.

Courteney's face cleared a little. The grimness went out of his frown, the reluctance from his attitude. He stood up against the rocky barrier and stretched his hands over to the unseen owner of the voice.

"I'll help you," he said.

"Oh!" There was an instant's pause; then two other hands, wet, cool, slender, came up, clasping his. A little leap, a sudden strain, and a very pink face beneath a cloud of golden hair laughed down into his. "You must pull," she said; "pull hard!"

Courteney obeyed instructions. He pulled, and a pair of slim shoulders clad in white, with a blue sailor collar, came into view. He pulled again, and a white knee appeared, just escaping a blue serge skirt. At the third pull she was over and standing, bare-footed, by his side. It had been a fairy leap. He marvelled at the lightness of her till he saw her standing so, with merry eyes upraised to his. Then he laughed, for she was laughing—the infectious laugh of the truant.

"Oh, thank you ever so much," she said. "I knew it was much nicer this side than the other. No one can see us here, either."

"Is that why you wanted to get over?" he asked.

She nodded, her pink face all mystery. "It's nice to get away from everyone sometimes, isn't it? Even Rosa Mundi thinks that. Did you know that she is here? It is being kept a dead secret."

"Rosa Mundi!" Courteney started. He looked down into the innocent face upraised to his with something that was almost horror in his own. "Do you mean that dancing woman from Australia? What can a child like you know of her?"

She smiled at him, the mystery still in her eyes. “I do know her. I belong to her. Do you know her, too?”

A sudden hot flush went up over Courteney’s face. He knew the woman; yes, he knew her. Was it years ago—or was it but yesterday?—that he had yielded to the importunities of his friend, young Eric Baron, and gone to see her dance? The boy had been infatuated, wild with the lure of her. Ah well, it was over now. She had been his ruin, just as she had been the ruin of others like him. Baron was dead and free for ever from the evil spell of his enchantress. But he had not thought to hear her name in this place and on the lips of a child.

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It revolted him. For she had utterly failed to attract his fancy. He was fastidious, and all he had seen in her had been the sensuous charm of a sinuous grace which, to him, was no charm at all. He had almost hated her for the abject adoration that young Eric's eyes had held. Her art, wonderful though he admitted it to be, had wholly failed to enslave him. He had looked her once—and once only—in the eyes, judged her, and gone his way.

And now this merry-eyed, rosy-faced child came, fairy-footed, over the barrier of his reserve, and spoke with a careless familiarity of the only being in the world whom he had condemned as beyond the pale.

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone," she said, with sapphire eyes uplifted confidingly to his. "She isn't—really—here before the end of the week. You won't tell, will you? Only when I saw you plodding along out here by yourself, I just had to come and tell you, to cheer you up."

He stood and looked at her, not knowing what to say. It was as if some adverse fate were at work, driving him, impelling him.

The soft eyes sparkled into laughter. "I know who you are," chuckled the gay voice on a high note of merriment. "You are Randal Courteney, the writer. It's not a bit of good trying to hide, because everybody knows."

He attempted a frown, but failed in its achievement. "And who are you?" he said, looking straight into the daring, trusting eyes. She was, not beautiful, but her eyes were wonderful; they held a mystery that beckoned and eluded in the same subtle moment.

"I?" she said. "I am her companion, her familiar spirit. Sometimes she calls me her angel."

The man moved as if something had stung him, but he checked himself with instinctive self-control. "And your name?" he said.

She turned out her hands with a little gesture that was utterly unstudied and free from self-consciousness. "My name is Rosemary," she said. "It means—remembrance."

"You are her adopted child?" Courteney was, looking at her curiously. Out of what part of Rosa Mundi's strange, fretted existence had the desire for remembrance sprung to life? He had deemed her a woman of many episodes, each forgotten as its successor took its place. Yet it seemed this child held a corner in her memory that was to last.

She turned her face to the sun. "We have adopted each other," she said naively. "When Rosa Mundi is old, I shall take her place, so that she may still be remembered."

The words, "Heaven forbid!" were on Courteney's lips. He checked them sharply, but something of his original grimness returned as he said, "And now that you are on the other side of the breakwater, what are you going to do?"

She looked up at him speculatively, and in a moment tossed back the short golden curls that clustered at her neck. She was sublimely young. In the eyes of the man, newly awakened, she had the look of one who has seen life without comprehending it. "I always like to get the other side of things, don't you?" she said. "But I won't stay with you if you are bored. I am going right to the end of the rocks to see the tide come in."

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“And be washed away?” suggested Courteney.

“Oh no,” she assured him confidently. “That won’t happen. I’m not nearly so young as I look. I only dress like this when I want to enjoy myself. Rosa Mundi says”—her eyes were suddenly merry—“that I’m not respectable. Now, don’t you think that sounds rather funny?”

“From her—yes,” said Courteney.

“You don’t like her?” The shrewd curiosity of a child who desires understanding upon a forbidden subject was in the question.

The man evaded it. “I have never seen her except in the limelight.”

“And you didn’t like her—then?” Keen disappointment sounded in her voice.

His heart smote him. The child was young, though possibly not so young as she looked. She had her ideals, and they would be shattered soon enough without any help from him.

With a brief laugh he turned aside, dismissing the subject. “That form of entertainment doesn’t appeal to me much,” he said. “Now it’s your turn to tell me something. I have been wondering about the colour of that sea. Would you call it blue—or purple?”

She looked, and again the mystery was in her face. For a moment she did not speak. Then, “It is violet,” she said—“the colour of Rosa Mundi’s eyes.”

Ere the frown had died from his face she was gone, pattering lightly over the sand, flitting like a day-dream into the blinding sunshine that seemed to drop a veil behind her, leaving him to his thoughts.

* * * * *

Randal Courteney was an old and favoured guest at the Hurley Bay Hotel. From his own particular corner of the great dining-room he was accustomed to look out upon the world that came and went. Frequently when he was there the place was almost deserted, and always he had been treated as the visitor of most importance. But to-night, for the first time, he found himself supplanted. Someone of more importance was staying in the hotel, someone who had attracted crowds, whose popularity amounted almost to idolatry.

The hotel was full, but Courteney, despite his far-reaching fame, was almost entirely overlooked. News had spread that the wonderful Australian dancer was to perform at the Pier Pavilion at the end of the week, and the crowds had gathered to do her honour. They were going to strew the Pier with roses on the night of her appearance, and they



were watching even now for the first sign of her with all the eager curiosity that marks down any celebrity as fair prey. Courteney smiled grimly to himself. How often it had been his lot to evade the lion-hunters! It was an unspeakable relief to have the general attention thus diverted from himself. Doubtless Rosa Mundi would revel in it. It was her *role* in life, the touchstone of her profession. Adulation was the very air she breathed.

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He wondered a little to find her seeking privacy, even for a few days. Just a whim of hers, no doubt! Was she not ever a creature of whims? And it would not last. He remembered how once young Eric Baron had told him that she needed popularity as a flower needs the sun. His rose of the world had not been created to bloom unseen. The boy had been absurdly long-suffering, unbelievably blind. How bitter, how cruel, had been his disillusion, Courteney could only guess. Had she ever cared, ever regretted, he wondered? But no, he was sure she had not. She would care for nothing until the bloom faded. Then, indeed, possibly, remorse might come.

Someone passing his table paused and spoke—the managing director of the Hurley Bay Theatre and of a score of others, a man he knew slightly, older than himself. “The hive swarms in vain,” he said. “The queen refuses to emerge.”

Courteney’s expression was supremely cynical. “I was not aware that she was of such a retiring disposition,” he said.

The other man laughed. He was an American, Ellis Grant by name, a man of gross proportions, but keen-eyed, iron-jawed, and successful. “There is a rumour,” he said, “that she is about to be married. Possibly that might account for her shyness.”

His look was critical. Courteney threw back his head almost with defiance. “It doesn’t interest me,” he said curtly.

Ellis Grant laughed again and passed on. He valued his acquaintanceship with the writer. He would not jeopardize it with over-much familiarity. But he did not believe in the utter lack of interest that he professed. No living man who knew her could be wholly indifferent to the doings of Rosa Mundi. The fiery charm of her, her passionate vitality, made that impossible.

Courteney finished his dinner and went out. The night was almost as hot as the day had been. He turned his back on the Pier, that was lighted from end to end, and walked away down the long parade.

He was beginning to wish himself out of the place. He had an absurd feeling of being caught in some web of Fate that clung to him tenaciously, strive as he would. Grant’s laugh of careless incredulity pursued him. There had been triumph also in that laugh. No doubt the fellow anticipated a big haul on Rosa Mundi’s night.

And again there rose before him the memory of young Eric Baron’s ardent face. “I’d marry her to-morrow if she’d have me,” the boy had said to him once.

The boy had been a fool, but straight. The woman—well, the woman was not the marrying sort. He was certain of that. She was elusive as a flame. Impatiently yet

again he flung the thought of her from him. What did it matter to him? Why should he be haunted by her thus? He would not suffer it.

He tramped to the end of the parade and stood looking out over the dark sea. He was sorry for that adopted child of hers. That face of innocence rose before him clear against the gathering dark. Not much chance for the child, it seemed! Utterly unspoilt and unsophisticated at present, and the property of that *demi-mondaine*! He wondered if there could be any relationship between them. There was something in the child's eyes that in some strange fashion recalled the eyes of Rosa Mundi. So might she once have gazed in innocence upon a world unknown.

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Again, almost savagely, he strove to thrust away the thoughts that troubled him. The child was bound to be contaminated sooner or later; but what was that to him? It was out of his power to deliver her. He was no rescuer of damsels in distress.

So he put away from him the thought of Rosa Mundi and the thought of the child called Rosemary who had come to him out of the morning sunlight, and went back to his hotel doggedly determined that neither the one nor the other should disturb his peace of mind. He would take refuge in his work, and forget them.

But late that night he awoke from troubled sleep to hear Ellis Grant laugh again in careless triumph—the laugh of the man who knows that he has drawn a prize.

* * * * *

It was not a restful night for Randal Courteney, and in the early morning he was out again, striding over the sunlit sands towards his own particular bathing-cove beyond the breakwater.

The tide was coming in, and the dashing water filled all the world with its music. A brisk wind was blowing, and the waves were high.

It was the sort of sea that Courteney revelled in, and he trusted that, at that early hour, he would be free from all intrusion. So accustomed to privacy was he that he had come to regard the place almost as his own.

But as he topped the breakwater he came upon a sight that made him draw back in disgust. A white mackintosh lay under a handful of stones upon the shingly beach. He surveyed it suspiciously, with the air of a man who fears that he is about to walk into a trap.

Then, his eyes travelling seaward, he spied a red cap bobbing up and down in the spray of the dancing waves.

The impulse to turn and retrace his steps came to him, but some unknown force restrained him. He remembered suddenly the current that had more than once drawn him out of his course when bathing in those waters, and the owner of the red cap was alone. He stood, uncertain, on the top of the breakwater, and watched.

Two minutes later the very event he had pictured was taking place under his eyes, and he was racing over the soft sand below the shingle at the top of his speed. Two arms were beating wildly out in the shining sparkle of water, as though they strove against the invisible bars of a cage, and a voice—the high, frightened voice of a child—was calling for help.

He flung off his coat as he ran, and dashed without an instant's pause straight into the green foaming waves. The water swirled around him as he struck out; he clove his way through it, all his energies concentrated upon the bobbing red cap and struggling arms ahead of him. Lifted on the crest of a rushing wave, he saw her, helpless as an infant in the turmoil. Her terrified eyes were turned his way, wildly beseeching him. He fought with the water to reach her.

He realized as he drew nearer that she was not wholly inexperienced. She was working against the current to keep herself up, but no longer striving to escape it. He saw with relief that she had not lost her head.

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He had been prepared to approach her with caution, but she sent him a sudden, brave smile that reassured him.

"Be quick!" she gasped. "I'm nearly done."

The current caught him, but with a powerful stroke or two he righted his course and reached her. Her hand closed upon his shoulder.

"I'm all right now," she panted, and despite the distress of her breathing, he caught the note of confidence in her voice.

"We've got to get out of it," he made grim answer. "Get your hand in my belt; that'll help you best. Then, when you're ready, strike out with the other and make for the open sea! We shall get out of this infernal current that way."

She obeyed him implicitly, asking no question. Side by side they drew out of the current, the man pulling strongly, his companion seconding his efforts with a fitfulness that testified to her failing powers. They reached calmer water at length, and then curtly he ordered her to turn on her back and rest.

Again without a word she obeyed him, and he floated beside her, supporting her. The early sun smote down upon them with increasing strength. Her face was deathly pale against the red of her cap.

"We must get to shore," said Courteney, observing her.

"That dreadful current!" she gasped through quivering lips.

"No. We can avoid that. It will mean a scamper over the sands when we get there, but that will do you good. Stay as you are! I will tow you."

Had she been less obedient, he would have found his task infinitely harder. But she was absolutely submissive to his will. Ten minutes later he landed her close to his own bathing-cove, which he discovered with relief to be deserted.

She would have subsided in a heap upon the sand the moment she felt it warm and dry beneath her feet; but he held her up.

"No. A good run is what you need. Come! Your mackintosh is half-a-mile away."

She looked at him with dismay, but he remained inexorable. He had no desire to have her fainting on his hands. As if she had been a boy, he gripped her by the elbow.

Again she submitted stumblingly to his behest, but when they had covered half the distance Courteney had mercy.

“You’re fagged out,” he said. “Rest here while I go and fetch it!”

She sank down thankfully on the shingle, and he strode swiftly on.

When he returned she had hollowed a nest for herself, and was lying curled up in the sun. Her head was pillowed on her cap, and the soft golden curls waved tenderly above her white forehead. Once more she seemed to him a mere child, and he looked down upon her with compassion.

She sat up at his approach with a boyish, alert movement, and lifted her eyes to his. He likened them half-unconsciously to the purple-blue of hare-bells, in the ardent light of the early morning.

“You are kind!” she said gratefully.

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He placed the white mackintosh around her slim figure. "Take my advice," he said in his brief fashion, "and don't come bathing alone in this direction again!"

She made a small shy gesture of invitation. "Sit down a minute!" she said half-pleadingly. "I know you are very wet; but the sun is so warm, and they say sea-water never chills."

He hesitated momentarily; then, possibly because she had spoken with so childlike an appeal, he sat down in the shingle beside her.

She stretched out a slender hand to him, almost as though feeling her way. And when he took it she made a slight movement towards him, as of one about to make a confidence. "Now we can talk," she said.

He let her hand go again, and felt in the pocket of his coat, which he carried on his arm, for his pipe.

She drew a little nearer to him. "Mr. Courteney," she said, "doesn't 'Thank you' sound a silly thing to say?"

He drew back. "Don't! Please don't!" he said, and flushed uneasily as he opened his tobacco-pouch. "I would infinitely rather you said nothing at all to any one. Don't do it again, that's all."

"Mustn't I even tell Rosa Mundi?" she said.

His flush deepened as he remembered that she would probably know him by name. She must have known in those far-off Australian days that he was working with all his might to free young Baron from her toils.

He sat in silence till, "Will you tell me something?" whispered Rosemary, leaning nearer.

He stiffened involuntarily. "I don't know."

"Please try!" she urged softly. "I feel sure you can. Why—why don't you like Rosa Mundi?"

He looked at her, and his eyes were steely; but they softened by imperceptible degrees as they met the earnest sweetness of her answering look. "No, I can't tell you that," he said with decision.

But her look held him. "Is it because you don't think she is very good?"

"I can't tell you," he said again.

Still she looked at him, and again there seemed to be in her eyes that expression of a child who has seen life without understanding it. "Perhaps you think I am too young to know good from evil," she said after a moment. "I am not. I have told you I am older than I look, and in some things I am older even than my years. Then, too, I belong to Rosa Mundi. I told you, didn't I? I am her familiar spirit. She has even called me her angel, or her better self. I know a great many things about her, and some of them are very sad. May I tell you some of the things I know?"

He turned his eyes away from her abruptly, with the feeling that he was resisting some curious magnetism. What was there about this child that attracted him? He was not a lover of children. Moreover, she was verging upon womanhood approaching what he grimly termed "the dangerous age."

He filled his pipe deliberately while she waited for his answer, turning his gaze upon the dazzling line of the horizon.

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"You can do as you like," he said at last, and added formally, "May I smoke?"

She nodded. "Yes, I would like you to. It will keep you from being bored. I want to tell you about Rosa Mundi, because you do not judge her fairly. You only know her by repute, and I—I know her heart to heart."

Her voice deepened suddenly, and the man glanced downwards for an instant, but immediately looked away again. She should tell him what she would, but by no faintest sign should she imagine that she had succeeded in arousing his interest. The magnetism was drawing him. He was aware of the attraction, and with firmness he resisted it. Let her strive as she would, she would never persuade him to think kindly of Rosa Mundi.

"You think her—bad," said Rosemary, her voice pitched very low. "I know—oh, I know. Men—some men—are very hard on women like her, women who have had to hew their own way in the world, and meet temptation almost before"—her voice quivered a little—"they knew what temptation meant."

He looked down at her again suddenly and searchingly; but her clear eyes never flinched from his. They were pleading and a little troubled, but wholly unafraid.

"Perhaps you won't believe me," she said. "You'll think you know best. But Rosa Mundi wasn't bad always—not at the beginning. Her dancing began when she was young—oh, younger than I am. It was a dreadful uphill fight. She had a mother then—a mother she adored. Did you ever have a mother like that, I wonder? Perhaps it isn't the same with men, but there are some women who would gladly die for their mothers. And—and Rosa Mundi felt like that. A time came when her mother was dying of a slow disease, and she needed things—many things. Rosa Mundi wasn't a success then. She hadn't had her chance. But there was a man—a man with money and influence—who was willing to offer it to her—at—at—a price. She was dancing for chance coppers outside a San Francisco saloon when first he made his offer. She—refused."

Rosemary's soft eyes were suddenly lowered. She did not look like a child any longer, but a being sexless, yet very pitiful—an angel about to weep.

Courteney watched her, for he could not turn away.

Almost under her breath, she went on: "A few days later her mother began to suffer—oh, terribly. There was no money, no one to help. She went again and danced at the saloon entrance. He—the man—was there. She danced till she was tired out. And then—and then—she was hungry, too—she fainted." The low voice sank a little lower. "When she came to herself, she was in his keeping. He was very kind to her—too kind. Her strength was gone, and—and temptation is harder to resist when one is physically

weak too. When she went back to her mother she had accepted—his—offer. From that night her fortune was made.”

Two tears gathered on the dark lashes and hung there till she put up a quick hand and brushed them away.

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The man's face was curiously softened; he looked as if he desired to dry those tears himself.

Without looking up she continued. "The mother died—very, very soon. Life is like that. Often one pays—in vain. There is no bargaining with death. But at least she never knew. That was Rosa Mundi's only comfort. There was no turning back for her then. And she was so desolate, so lonely, nothing seemed to matter.

"She went from triumph to triumph. She carried all before her. He took her to New York, and she conquered there. They strewn her path with roses. They almost worshipped her. She tried to think she was happy, but she was not—even then. They came around her in crowds. They made love to her. She was young, and their homage was like a coloured ball to her. She tossed it to and fro, and played with it. But she made game of it all. They were nothing to her—nothing, till one day there came to her a boy—no, he was past his boyhood—a young man—rich, well-born, and honourable. And he—he loved her, and offered her—marriage. No one had ever offered her that before. Can you realize—but no, you are a man!—what it meant to her? It meant shelter and peace and freedom. It meant honour and kindness, and the chance to be good. Perhaps you think she would not care for that. But you do not know her. Rosa Mundi was meant to be good. She hungered for goodness. She was tired—so tired of the gaudy vanities of life, so—so—what is the word—so nauseated with the cheap and the bad. Are you sorry for her, I wonder? Can you picture her, longing—oh, longing—for what she calls respectability? And then—this chance, this offer of deliverance! It meant giving up her career, of course. It meant changing her whole life. It meant sacrifice—the sort of sacrifice that you ought to be able to understand—for she loved her dancing and her triumphs, just as you love your public—the people who read your books and love you for their sake. That is different, isn't it, from the people who follow you about and want to stare at you just because you are prosperous and popular? The people who really appreciate your art—those are the people you would not disappoint for all the world. They make up a vast friendship that is very precious, and it would be a sacrifice—a big—sacrifice—to give it up. That is the sort of sacrifice that marriage meant to Rosa Mundi. And though she wanted marriage—and she wanted to be good—she hesitated."

There was a little pause. Randal Courteney was no longer dissembling his interest. He had laid his pipe aside, and was watching with unvarying intentness the downcast childish face. He asked no questions. There was something in the low-spoken words that held him silent. Perhaps he feared to probe too deep.

In a few moments she went on, gathering up a little handful of the shining shingle, and slowly sifting it through her fingers as though in search of something precious.

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"I think if she had really loved the man, it wouldn't have mattered. Nothing counts like love, does it? But—you see—she didn't. She wanted to. She knew that he was clean and honourable, worthy of a good woman. He loved her, too, loved her so that he was willing to put away all her past. For she did not deceive him about that. He was willing to give her all—all she wanted. But she did not love him. She honoured him, and she felt for a time at least that love might come. He guessed that, and he did his best—all that he could think of—to get her to consent. In the end—in the end"—Rosemary paused, a tiny stone in her hand that shone like polished crystal—"she was very near to the verge of yielding, the young man had almost won, when—when something happened that altered—everything. The young man had a friend, a writer, a great man even then; he is greater now. The friend came, and he threw his whole weight into the scale against her. She felt him—the force of him—before she so much as saw him. She had broken with her lover some time before. She was free. And she determined to marry the young man who loved her—in spite of his friend. That very day it happened. The young man sent her a book written by his friend. She had begun to hate the writer, but out of curiosity she opened it and read. First a bit here, then a bit there, and at last she sat down and read it—all through."

The little shining crystal lay alone in the soft pink palm. Rosemary dwelt upon it, faintly smiling.

"She read far into the night," she said, speaking almost dreamily, as if recounting a vision conjured up in the glittering surface of the stone. "It was a free night for her. And she read on and on and on. The book gripped her; it fascinated her. It was—a great book. It was called—*Remembrance*." She drew a quick breath and went on somewhat hurriedly. "It moved her in a fashion that perhaps you would hardly realize. I have read it, and I—understand. The writing was wonderful. It brought home to her—vividly, oh, vividly—how the past may be atoned for, but never, never effaced. It hurt her—oh, it hurt her. But it did her good. It showed her how she was on the verge of taking a wrong turning, of perhaps—no, almost certainly—dragging down the man who loved her. She saw suddenly the wickedness of marrying him just to escape her own prison. She understood clearly that only love could have justified her—no other motive than that. She saw the evil of fastening her past to an honourable man whose good name and family demanded of him something better. She felt as if the writer had torn aside a veil and shown her her naked soul. And—and—though the book was a good book, and did not condemn sinners—she was shocked, she was horrified, at what it made her see."

Rosemary suddenly closed her hand upon the shining stone, and turned fully and resolutely to the man beside her.

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"That night changed Rosa Mundi," she said; "changed her completely. Before it was over she wrote to the young man who loved her and told him that she could not marry him. The letter did not go till the following evening. She kept it back for a few hours—in case she repented. But—though she suffered—she did not repent. In the evening she had an engagement to dance. The young man was there—in the front row. And he brought his friend. She danced. Her dancing was superb that night. She had a passionate desire to bewitch the man who had waked her soul—as she had bewitched so many others. She had never met a man she could not conquer. She was determined to conquer him. Was it wrong? Anyway, it was human. She danced till her very heart was on fire, danced till she trod the clouds. Her audience went mad with the delight of it. They raved as if they were intoxicated. All but one man! All but one man! And he—at the end—he looked her just once in the eyes, stonily, piercingly, and went away." She uttered a sharp, choking breath. "I have nearly done," she said. "Can you guess what happened then? Perhaps you know. The man who loved her received her letter when he got back that night. And—and—she had bewitched him, remember; he—shot himself. The friend—the writer—she never saw again. But—but—Rosa Mundi has never forgotten him. She carries him in her heart—the man who taught her the meaning of life."

She ceased to speak, and suddenly, like a boy, sprang to her feet, tossing away the stone that she had treasured in her hand.

But the man was almost as quick as she. He caught her by the shoulder as he rose. "Wait!" he said. "Wait!" His voice rang hard, but there was no hardness in his eyes. "Tell me—who you are!"

She lifted her eyes to his fearlessly, without shame. "What does it matter who I am?" she said. "What does it matter? I have told you I am Rosemary. That is her name for me, and it was your book called *Remembrance* that made her give it me."

He held her still, looking at her with a growing compassion in his eyes. "You are her child," he said.

She smiled. "Perhaps—spiritually. Yes, I think I am her child, such a child as she might have been if—Fate—had been kind to her—or if she had read your book before—and not after."

He let her go slowly, almost with reluctance. "I think I should like to meet your—Rosa Mundi," he said.

Her eyes suddenly shone. "Not really? You are in earnest? But—but—you would hurt her. You despise her."

"I am sorry for her," he said, and there was a hint of doggedness in his voice, as though he spoke against his better judgment.

The child's face had an eager look, but she seemed to be restraining herself. "I ought to tell you one thing about her first," she said. "Perhaps you will disapprove. I don't know. But it is because of you—and your revelation—that she is doing it. Rosa Mundi is going to be married. No, she is not giving up her career or anything—except her freedom. Her old lover has come back to her. She is going to marry him now. He wants her for his wife."

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"Ah!" It was the man who was eager now. He spoke impulsively. "She will be happy then? She loves him?"

Rosemary looked at him with her clear, unfaltering eyes. "Oh, no," she said. "He isn't that sort of man at all. Besides, there is only one man in the world that she could care for in that way. No, she doesn't love him. But she is doing the right thing, and she is going to be good. You will not despise her any more?"

There was such anxious appeal in her eyes that he could not meet it. He turned his own away.

There fell a silence between them, and through it the long, long roar of the sea rose up—a mighty symphony of broken chords.

The man moved at last, looked down at the slight boyish figure beside him, hesitated, finally spoke. "I still think that I should like to meet Rosa Mundi," he said.

Her eyes smiled again. "And you will not despise her now," she said, her tone no longer a question.

"I think," said Randal Courteney slowly, "that I shall never despise any one again."

"Life is so difficult," said Rosemary, with the air of one who knew.

* * * * *

They were strewing the Pier with roses for Rosa Mundi's night. There were garlands of roses, festoons of roses, bouquets of roses; roses overhead, roses under foot, everywhere roses.

Summer had returned triumphant to deck the favourite's path.

Randal Courteney marked it all gravely, without contempt. It was her hour.

No word from her had reached him, but that night he would meet her face to face. Through days and nights of troubled thought, the resolve had grown within him. To-night it should bear fruit. He would not rest again until he had seen her. For his peace of mind was gone. She was about to throw herself away upon a man she did not love, and he felt that it was laid upon him to stop the sacrifice. The burden of responsibility was his. He had striven against this conviction, but it would not be denied. From the days of young Eric Baron's tragedy onward, this woman had made him as it were the star of her destiny. To repudiate the fact was useless. She had, in her ungoverned, impulsive fashion, made him surety for her soul.

The thought tormented him, but it held a strange attraction for him also. If the story were true, and it was not in him to doubt it, it touched him in a way that was wholly unusual. Popularity, adulation, had been his portion for years. But this was different, this was personal—a matter in which reputation, fame, had no part. In a different sphere she also was a star, with a host of worshippers even greater than his own. The humility of her amazed him. She had, as it were, taken her fate between her hands and laid it as an offering at his feet.

And so, on Rosa Mundi's night, he went to the great Pavilion, mingling with the crowd, determined when her triumph was over, to seek her out. There would be a good many seekers, he doubted not; but he was convinced that she would not deny him an interview.

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He secured a seat in the third row, avoiding almost by instinct any more conspicuous position. He was early, and while he waited, the thought of young Eric Baron came to him—the boy's eager-face, the adoration of his eyes. He remembered how on that far-off night he had realized the hopelessness of combating his love, how he had shrugged his shoulders and relinquished the struggle. And the battle had been his even then—a bitter victory more disastrous than defeat.

He put the memory from him and thought of Rosemary—the child with the morning light in her eyes, the innocence of the morning in her soul. How tenderly she had spoken of Rosa Mundi! How sweetly she had pleaded her cause! With what amazing intuition had she understood! Something that was greater than pity welled up within him. Rosa Mundi's guardian angel had somehow reached his heart.

People were pouring into the place. He saw that it was going to be packed. And outside, lining the whole length of the Pier, they were waiting for her too, waiting to strew her path with, roses.

Ah! she was coming! Above the wash of the sea there rose a roar of voices. They were giving her the homage of a queen. He listened to the frantic cheering, and again it was Rosa Mundi, splendid and brilliant, who filled his thoughts as she filled the thoughts of all just then.

The cheering died down, and there came a great press of people into the back of the building. The lights were lowered, but he heard the movement, the buzz of a delighted crowd.

Suddenly the orchestra burst into loud music. They were playing "Queen of the Earth," he remembered later. The curtain went up. And in a blaze of light he saw Rosa Mundi.

Something within him sprang into quivering life. Something which till that moment he had never known awoke and gripped him with a force gigantic. She was robed in shimmering, transparent gold—a queen-woman, slight indeed, dainty, fairy-like—yet magnificent. Over her head, caught in a jewelled fillet, there hung a filmy veil of gold, half revealing, half concealing, the smiling face behind. Trailing wisps of golden gossamer hung from her beautiful arms. Her feet were bound with golden sandals. And on her breast were roses—golden roses.

She was exquisite as a dream. He gazed and gazed upon her as one entranced. The tumult of acclamation that greeted her swept by him unheeded. He was conscious only of a passionate desire to fling back the golden veil that covered her and see the laughing face behind. Its elusiveness mocked him. She was like a sunbeam standing there, a flitting, quivering shaft of light, too spiritual to be grasped fully, almost too dazzling for the eye to follow.

The applause died down to a dead silence. Her audience watched her with bated breath. Her dance was a thing indescribable. Courteney could think of nothing but the flashing of morning sunlight upon running water to the silver strains of a flute that was surely piped by Pan. He could not follow the sparkling wonder of her. He felt dazed and strangely exhilarated, almost on fire with this new, fierce attraction. It was as if the very soul were being drawn out of his body. She called to him, she lured him, she bewitched him.

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When he had seen her before, he had been utterly out of sympathy. He had scorned her charms, had felt an almost angry contempt for young Baron's raptures. To him she had been a snake-woman, possessed of a fascination which, to him, was monstrous and wholly incomprehensible. She had worn a strange striped dress of green—tight-fitting, hideous he had deemed it. Her face had been painted. He had been too near the stage, and she had revolted him. Her dance had certainly been wonderful, sinuous, gliding, suggestive—a perfectly conceived scheme of evil. And she had thought to entrap him with it! The very memory was repulsive even yet.

But this—ah! this was different. This thing of light and air, this dancing sunbeam, this creature of the morning, exquisite in every detail, perfectly poised, swifter than thought, yet arresting at every turn, vivid as a meteor, yet beyond all scrutiny, all ocular power of comprehension, she set every nerve in him a-quiver. She seized upon his fancy and flung it to and fro, catching a million colours in her radiant flights. She made the hot blood throb in his temples. She beat upon the door of his heart. She called back his vanished youth, the passion unassuaged of his manhood. She appealed to him directly and personally. She made him realize that he was the one man who had taught—and could teach—her the meaning of life.

Then it was over. Like a glittering crystal shattered to fragments, his dream of ecstasy collapsed. The noise around him was as the roar of thundering breakers. But he sat mute in the midst of it, as one stunned.

Someone leaned over from behind and spoke to him. He was aware of a hand upon his shoulder.

"What do you think of her?" said Ellis Grant in his ear. "Superb, isn't she? Come and see her before she appears again!"

As if compelled by some power outside himself, Courteney rose. He edged his way to the end of the row and joined the great man there. The whole house was a seething turmoil of sound.

Grant was chuckling to himself as one well pleased. In Courteney's eyes he looked stouter, more prosperous, more keenly business-like, than when he had spoken with him a few nights previously. He took Courteney by the arm and led him through a door at the side.

"Let 'em yell 'emselves hoarse for a bit!" he said. "Do 'em good. Guess my 'rose of the world' isn't going to be too cheap a commodity.... Which reminds me, sir. You've cost me a thousand English pounds by coming here to-night."

"Indeed?" Courteney spoke stiffly. He felt stiff, physically stiff, as one forcibly awakened from a deep slumber.

The man beside him was still chuckling. “Yes. The little witch! Said she’d manage it somehow when I told her you weren’t taking any. We had a thousand on it, and the little devil has won, outwitted us both. How in thunder did she do it? Laid a trap for you; what?”

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Courteney did not answer. The stiffness was spreading. He felt as one turned to stone. Mechanically he yielded to the hand upon his arm, not speaking, scarcely thinking.

And then—almost before he knew it—he was in her presence, face to face with the golden vision that had caught and—for a space at least—had held his heart.

He bowed, still silent, still strangely bound and fettered by the compelling force.

A hand that was lithe and slender and oddly boyish came out to him. A voice that had in it sweet, lilting notes, like the voice of a laughing child, spoke his name.

“Mr. Courteney! How kind!” it said.

As from a distance he heard Grant speak. “Mr. Courteney, allow me to introduce you—my wife!”

There was a dainty movement like the flash of shimmering wings. He looked up. She had thrown back her veil.

He gazed upon her. “Rosemary!”

She looked back at him above the roses with eyes that were deeply purple—as the depths of the sea. “Yes, I am Rosemary—to my friends,” she said.

Ellis Grant was laughing still, in his massive, contented way. “But to her lover,” he said, “she is—and always has been—Rosa Mundi.”

Then speech came back to Courteney, and strength returned. He held himself in firm restraint. He had been stricken, but he did not flinch.

“Your husband?” he said.

She indicated Grant with a careless hand. “Since yesterday,” she said.

He bowed to her again, severely formal. “May I wish you joy?” he said.

There was an instant’s pause, and in that instant something happened. She had not moved. Her eyes still met his own, but it was as if a veil had dropped between them suddenly. He saw the purple depths no more.

“Thank you,” said Rosa Mundi, with her little girlish laugh.

* * * * *



As he strode down the Pier a few minutes later, he likened the scent of the crushed roses that strewed the way to the fumes of sacrifice—sacrifice offered at the feet of a goddess who cared for nothing sacred. Not till long after did he remember the tears that he had seen her shed.

A Debt of Honour

I

HOPE AND THE MAGICIAN

They lived in the rotten white bungalow at the end of the valley—Hope and the Magician. It stood in a neglected compound that had once been a paradise, when a certain young officer belonging to the regiment of Sikhs then stationed in Ghantala had taken it and made of it a dainty home for his English bride. Those were the days before the flood, and no one had lived there since. The native men in the valley still remembered with horror that awful night when the monsoon had burst in floods and water-spouts upon the mountains, and the bride, too terrified to remain in the bungalow, had set out in the worst fury of the storm to find her husband, who was on duty up at the cantonments. She had been drowned close to the bungalow in a ranging brown torrent which swept over what a few hours earlier had been a mere bed of glittering sand. And from that time the bungalow had been deserted, avoided of all men, a haunted place, the abode of evil spirits.

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Yet it still stood in its desolation, rotting year by year. No native would approach the place. No Englishman desired it. For it was well away from the cantonments, nearer than any other European dwelling to the native village, and undeniably in the hottest corner of all the Ghantala Valley.

Perhaps its general air of desolation had also influenced the minds of possible tenants, for Ghantala was a cheerful station, and its inhabitants preferred cheerful dwelling-places. Whatever the cause, it had stood empty and forsaken for more than a dozen years.

And then had come Hope and the Magician.

Hope was a dark-haired, bright-eyed English girl, who loved riding as she loved nothing else on earth. Her twin-brother, Ronald Carteret, was the youngest subaltern in his battalion, and for his sake, she had persuaded the Magician that the Ghantala Valley was an ideal spot to live in.

The Magician was their uncle and sole relative, an old man, wizened and dried up like a monkey, to whom India was a land of perpetual delight and novelty of which he could never tire. He was engaged upon a book of Indian mythology, and he was often away from home for the purpose of research. But his absence made very little difference to Hope. Her brother lived in the bungalow with her, and the people in the station were very kind to her.

The natives, though still wary, had lost their abhorrence of the place. They believed that the Magician, as they called him, had woven a spell to keep the evil spirits at a distance. It was known that he was in constant communication with native priests. Moreover, the miss-*sahib* who dwelt at the bungalow remained unharmed, so it seemed there was nought to fear.

Hope, after a very few months, cut off her hair and wore it short and curly. This also seemed to discourage the evil ones. So at length it appeared that the curse had been removed, or at least placed in abeyance.

As for Hope, she liked the place. Her nerves were generally good, and the joy of being near the brother she idolized outweighed every other consideration. The colonel's wife, Mrs. Latimer, was very kind to her from the outset, and she enjoyed all the Ghantala gaieties under her protection and patronage.

Not till Mrs. Latimer was taken ill and had to leave hurriedly for the Hills did it dawn upon Hope, after nearly eight happy months, that her position was one of considerable isolation, and that this might, under certain circumstances, become a matter for regret.

II

THE VISITOR

It was on a Sunday evening of breathless heat that this conviction first took firm hold of Hope. Her uncle was away upon one of his frequent journeys of research. Her brother was up at the cantonments, and she was quite alone save for her *ayah*, and the *punkah-coolie* dozing on the veranda.

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She had not expected any visitors. Visitors seldom came to the bungalow, for the simple reason that she was seldom at home to receive them, and the Magician never considered himself at liberty for social obligations. So it was with some surprise that she heard footsteps that were not her brother's upon the baked earth of the compound; and when her *ayah* came to her with the news that Hyde *Sahib* was without, she was even conscious of a sensation of dismay.

For Hyde *Sahib* was a man she detested, without knowing why. He was a civil servant, an engineer, and he had been in Ghantala longer than any one else of the European population. Very reluctantly she gave the order to admit him, hoping that Ronnie would soon return and take him off her hands. For Ronnie professed to like the man.

He greeted her with a cool self-assurance that admitted not the smallest doubt of his welcome.

"I was passing, and thought I would drop in," he told her, retaining her hand till she abruptly removed it. "I guessed you would be all forlorn. The Magician is away, I hear?"

Hope steadily returned the gaze of his pale eyes, as she replied, with dignity:

"Yes; my uncle is from home. But I am not at all lonely. I am expecting my brother every minute."

He smiled at her in a way that made her stiffen instinctively. She had never been so completely alone with him before.

"Ah, well," he said, "perhaps you will allow me to amuse you till he returns. I rather want to see him."

He took her permission for granted, and sat down in a bamboo chair on the veranda, leaning back, and staring up at her with easy insolence.

"I can scarcely believe that you are not lonely here," he remarked. "A figure of speech, I suppose?"

Hope felt the colour rising in her cheeks under his direct and unpleasant scrutiny.

"I have never felt lonely till to-day," she returned, with spirit.

He laughed incredulously. "No?" he said.

"No," said Hope with emphasis. "I often think that there are worse things in the world than solitude."

Something in her tone—its instinctive enmity, its absolute honesty—attracted his attention. He sat up and regarded her very closely.

She was still on her feet—a slender, upright figure in white. She was grasping the back of a chair rather tightly, but she did not shrink from his look, though there was that within her which revolted fiercely as she met it. But he prolonged the silent combat with brutal intention, till at last, in spite of herself, her eyes sank, and she made a slight, unconscious gesture of protest. Then, deliberately and insultingly, he laughed.

“Come now, Miss Carteret,” he said, “I’m sure you can’t mean to be unfriendly with me. I believe this place gets on your nerves. You’re not looking well, you know.”

“No?” she responded, with frozen dignity.

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"Not so well as I should like to see you," said Hyde, still smiling his objectionable smile. "I believe you're moped. Isn't that it? I know the symptoms, and I know an excellent remedy, too. Wouldn't you like to try it?"

Hope looked at him uncertainly. She was quivering all over with nervous apprehension. His manner frightened her. She was not sure that the man was absolutely sober. But it would be absurd, ridiculous, she told her thumping heart, to take offence, when it might very well be that the insult existed in her imagination alone. So, with a desperate courage, she stood her ground.

"I really don't know what you mean," she said coldly. "But it doesn't matter; tell me about your racer instead!"

"Not a bit of it," returned Hyde. "It's one thing at a time with me always. Besides, why should I bore you to that extent? Why, I'm boring you already. Isn't that so?"

He set his hands on the arms of his chair preparatory to rising, as he spoke; and Hope took a quick step away from him. There was a look in his eyes that was horrible to her.

"No," she said, rather breathlessly. "No; I'm not at all bored. Please don't get up; I'll go and order some refreshment."

"Nonsense!" he said sharply. "I don't want it. I won't have any! I mean"—his manner softening abruptly—"not unless you will join me; which, I fear, is too much to expect. Now don't go away! Come and sit here!" drawing close to his own the chair on which she had been leaning. "I want to tell you something. Don't look so scared! It's something you'll like; it is, really. And you're bound to hear it sooner or later, so it may as well be now. Why not?"

But Hope's nerves were stretched to snapping point, and she shrank visibly. After all, she was very young, and there was that about this man that terrified her.

"No," she said hurriedly. "No; I would rather not. There is nothing you could tell me that I should like to hear. I—I am going to the gate to look for Ronnie."

It was childish, it was pitiable; and had the man been other than a coward it must have moved him to compassion. As it was he sprang up suddenly, as though to detain her, and Hope's last shred of self-control deserted her.

She uttered a smothered cry and fled.

III

THE FRIEND IN NEED



The road that led to the cantonments was ill-made and stony, but she dashed along it like a mad creature, unconscious of everything save the one absorbing desire to escape. Ronnie was not in sight, but she scarcely thought of him. The light was failing fast, and she knew that it would soon be quite dark, save for a white streak of moon overhead. It was still frightfully hot. The atmosphere oppressed her like a leaden weight. It seemed to keep her back, and she battled with it as with something tangible. Her feet were clad in thin slippers, and at any other time she would have known that the rough stones cut and hurt her. But in the terror of the moment she felt no pain. She only had the sense to run straight on, with gasping breath and failing limbs, till at last, quite suddenly, her strength gave out and she sank, an exhausted, sobbing heap, upon the roadway.

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There came the tread of a horse's hoofs, and she started and made a convulsive effort to crawl to one side. She was nearer fainting than she had ever been in her life.

Then the hoof-beats stopped, and she uttered a gasping cry, all her nameless terror for the moment renewed.

A man jumped to the ground and, with a word to his animal, stooped over her. She shrank from him in unreasoning panic.

"Who is it? Who is it?" she sobbed. He answered her instantly, rather curtly.

"I—Baring. What's the matter? Something gone wrong?"

She felt strong hands lifting her, and she yielded herself to them, her panic quenched.

"Oh, Major Baring!" she said faintly. "I didn't know you!"

Major Baring made no response. He held her on her feet facing him, for she seemed unable to stand, and waited for her to recover herself. She trembled violently between his hands, but she made a resolute effort after self-control.

"I—I didn't know you," she faltered again.

"What's the matter?" asked Major Baring.

But she could not tell him. Already the suspicion that she had behaved unreasonably was beginning to take possession of her. Yet—yet—Hyde must have seen she was alarmed. He might have reassured her. She recalled the look in his eyes, and shuddered. She was sure he had been drinking. She had heard someone say that he did drink.

"I—I have had a fright," she said at last. "It was very foolish of me, of course. Very likely it was a false alarm. Anyhow, I am better now. Thank you."

He let her go, but she was still so shaken that she tottered and clutched his arm.

"Really I am all right," she assured him tremulously. "It is only—only—"

He put his arm around her without comment; and again she yielded as a child might have yielded to the comfort of his support.

After some seconds he spoke, and she fancied his voice sounded rather grim.

"I am going your way," he said. "I will walk back with you."

Hope was crying to herself in the darkness, but she hoped he did not notice.

"I think I shall go and meet Ronnie," she said. "I don't want to go back. It—it's so lonely."

"I will come in with you," he returned.

"Oh, no!" she said quickly. "No! I mean—I mean—I don't want you to trouble any more about me. Indeed, I shall be all right."

He received the assurance in silence; and she began to wonder dolefully if she had offended him. Then, with abrupt kindness, he set her mind at rest.

"Dry your eyes," he said, "and leave off crying, like a good child! Ronnie's at the club, and won't be home at present. I didn't know you were all alone, or I would have brought him along with me. That's better. Now, shall we make a move?"

He slung his horse's bridle on his arm and, still supporting her with the other, began to walk down the stony road. Hope made no further protest. She had always considered Ronnie's major a rather formidable person. She knew that Ronnie stood in awe of him, though she had always found him kind.

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They had not gone five yards when he stopped.

"You are limping. What is it?"

She murmured something about the stones.

"You had better ride," he decided briefly. "Rupert will carry you like a lamb. Ready? How's that?"

He lifted her up into the saddle as if she had been a child, and stooped to arrange her foot in the strap of the stirrup.

"Good heavens!" she heard him murmur, as he touched her shoe. "No wonder the stones seemed hard! Quite comfortable?" he asked her, as he straightened himself.

"Quite," she answered meekly.

And he marched on, leading the horse with care.

At the gate of the shadowy little compound that surrounded the bungalow she had quitted so precipitately he paused.

"I will leave the animal here," he said, holding up his hands to her.

She slipped into them submissively.

The cry of a jackal somewhere beyond the native village made her start and tremble. Her nerves were still on edge.

Major Baring slipped the bridle over the gate-post and took her hand in his. The grip of his fingers was very strong and reassuring.

"Come," he said kindly, "let us go and look for this bogey of yours!"

But at this point Hope realized fully that she had made herself ridiculous, and that for the sake of her future self-respect she must by some means restrain him from putting his purpose into execution. She stood still and faced him.

"Major Baring," she said, her voice quivering in spite of her utmost effort, "I want you—please—not to come any farther. I know I have been very foolish. I am sure of it now. And—please—do you mind going away, and not thinking any more about it?"

"Yes, I do," said Major Baring.

He spoke with unmistakable decision, and the girl's heart sank.

“Listen!” he said quietly. “Like you, I think you have probably been unnecessarily alarmed. But, even so, I am coming with you to satisfy myself. Or—if you prefer—I will go alone, and you can wait for me here.”

“Oh, no!” said Hope quickly. “If—if you must go, I’ll come, too. But first, will you promise—whatever happens—not to—to laugh at me?”

Baring made an abrupt movement that she was at a loss to interpret. It was too dark for her to see his face with any distinctness.

“Very well,” he said. “Yes; I promise that.”

Hope was still almost crying. She felt horribly ashamed. With her hand in his, she went beside him up the short drive to the bungalow. And, as she went, she vehemently wished that the earth would open and swallow her up.

IV

HER NATURAL PROTECTOR

They ascended to the veranda still hand-in-hand. It was deserted.

Baring led her straight along it till he came to the two chairs outside the drawing-room window. They were empty. A servant had just lighted a lamp in the room behind them.

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"Go in!" said Baring. "I will come back to you."

She obeyed him. She felt incapable of resistance just then. He passed on quietly, and she stood inside the room, waiting and listening with hushed breath and hands tightly clenched.

The seconds crawled by, and again there came to her straining ears the cry of a jackal from far away. Then at last she caught the sound of Baring's voice, curt and peremptory, and her heart stood still. But he was only speaking to the *punkah-coolie* round the corner, for almost instantly the great fan above her head began to move.

A few seconds more, and he reappeared at the window alone. Hope drew a great breath of relief and awoke to the fact that she was trembling violently.

She looked at him as he came quietly in. His lean, bronzed face, with the purple scar of a sword-cut down one cheek, told her nothing. Only she fancied that his mouth, under its narrow, black line of moustache, looked stern.

He went straight up to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Tell me what frightened you!" he said, looking down at her with keen blue eyes that shone piercingly in his dark face.

She shook her head instantly, unable to meet his look.

"Please," she said beseechingly, "please don't ask me! I would so much rather not."

"I have promised not to laugh at you," he reminded her gravely.

"I know," she said. "I know. But really, really, I can't. It was so silly of me to be frightened. I am not generally silly like that. But—somehow—to-day—"

Her voice failed her. He took his hand from her shoulder; and she knew suddenly that, had he chosen, he could have compelled.

"Don't be distressed!" he said. "Whatever it was, it's gone. Sit down, won't you?"

Hope dropped rather limply into a chair. The security of Baring's protecting presence was infinitely comforting, but her fright and subsequent exertion had made her feel very weak. Baring went to the window and stood there for some seconds, with his back to her. She noted his height and breadth of shoulder with a faint sense of pleasure. She had always admired this man. Secretly—his habitual kindness to her notwithstanding—she was also a little afraid of him, but her fear did not trouble her just then.

He turned quietly at length and seated himself near the window.

“How long does your uncle expect to be away?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“I never know; he may come back to-morrow, or perhaps not for days.”

Baring’s black brows drew together.

“Where is he?” he asked. She shook her head again.

He said nothing; but his silence was so condemnatory that she felt herself called upon to defend the absent one.

“You see, he came here in the first place because I begged so very hard. And he has to travel because of his book. I always knew that, so I really can’t complain. Besides, I’m not generally lonely, and hardly ever nervous. And I have Ronnie.”

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"Ronnie!" said Baring; and for the first time he looked contemptuous.

Hope sighed.

"It's quite my own fault," she said humbly. "If I hadn't—"

"Pardon me! It is not your fault," he interrupted grimly. "It is iniquitous that a girl like you should be left in such a place as this entirely without protection. Have you a revolver?"

Hope looked startled.

"Oh, no!" she said. "If I had, I should never dare to use it, even if I knew how."

Baring looked at her, still frowning.

"I think you are braver than that," he said.

Hope flushed vividly, and rose.

"No," she said, a note of defiance in her voice. "I'm a miserable coward, Major Baring. But no one knows it but you and, perhaps, one other. So I hope you won't give me away."

Baring did not smile.

"Who else knows it?" he asked.

Hope met his eyes steadily. She was evidently resolved to be weak no longer.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" she said.

He did not answer her; and again she had a feeling that he was offended.

There was a considerable pause before he spoke again. He seemed to be revolving something in his mind. Then at last, abruptly, he began to talk upon ordinary topics, and at once she felt more at her ease with him. They sat by the window after that for the best part of an hour; till, in fact, the return of her brother put an end to their *tete-a-tete*.

By those who were least intimate with the Carteret twins it was often said that in feature they were exactly alike. Those who knew them better saw no more than a very strong resemblance in form and colouring, but it went no farther. In expression they differed utterly. The boy's face lacked the level-browed honesty that was so conspicuous in the girl's. His mouth was irresolute. His eyes were uncertain. Yet he was a good-looking boy, notwithstanding these defects. He had a pleasant laugh and winning manner, and was essentially kind-hearted, if swift to take offence.

He came in through the window, walking rather heavily, and halted just inside the room, blinking, as if the light dazzled him. Baring gave him a single glance that comprehended him from head to foot, and rose from his chair.

Again it seemed to Hope that she saw contempt upon his face; and a rush of indignation checked the quick words of welcome upon her lips.

Her brother spoke first, and his words sounded rather slurred, as if he had been running.

“Hullo!” he said. “Here you are! Don’t get up! I expected to find you!”

He addressed Baring, who replied instantly, and with extreme emphasis:

“That I am sure you did not.”

Ronnie started, and put his hand to his eyes as if confused.

“Beg pardon,” he said, a moment later, in an odd tone of shame. “I thought it was Hyde. The light put me off. It—it’s Major Baring, isn’t it?”

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"Yes; Baring." Baring repeated his own name deliberately; and, as by a single flash of revelation Hope understood the meaning of his contempt.

She stood as if turned to stone. She had often seen Ronnie curiously excited, even incoherently so, before that night, but she had never seen him like this. She had never imagined before for a single instant what now she abruptly knew without the shadow of a doubt.

A feeling that was like physical sickness came over her. She looked from Ronnie to Ronnie's major with a sort of piteous appeal. Baring turned gravely towards her.

"You will let me have a word alone with your brother?" he said quietly. "I was waiting to see him, as you know."

She felt that he had given her a definite command, and she obeyed it mutely, almost mechanically. He opened the door for her, and she went out in utter silence, sick at heart.

V

MORE THAN A FRIEND

Two days later Hope received an invitation from Mrs. Latimer to join her at the Hill Station for a few weeks.

She hesitated, for her brother's sake, to accept it, but he, urged thereto by some very plain speaking from his major, persuaded her so strongly that she finally yielded.

Though she would not have owned it, Hope was, in fact, in sore need of this change. The heat had told upon her nerves and spirits. She had had no fever, but she was far from well, as her friend, Mrs. Latimer, realized as soon as she saw her.

She at once prescribed complete rest, and the week that followed was to Hope the laziest and the most peaceful that she had ever known. She was always happy in Mrs. Latimer's society, and she had no desire just then for gaiety. The absolute freedom from care acted upon her like a tonic, and she very quickly began to recover her usual buoyant health.

The colonel's wife watched her unobserved. She had by her a letter, written in the plain language of a man who knew no other, and she often referred to this letter when she was alone; for there seemed to be something between the lines, notwithstanding its plainness.

As a result of this suspicion, when Hope rode back in Mrs. Latimer's *rickshaw* from an early morning service at the little English church on the hill, on the second Sunday after her arrival, a big figure, clad in white linen, rose from a *charpoy* in Mrs. Latimer's veranda, and stepped down bareheaded to receive her.

Hope's face, as she recognized the visitor, flushed so vividly that she was aware of it, and almost feared to meet his eyes. But he spoke at once, and thereby set her at her ease.

"That's much better," he said approvingly, as if he had only parted from her the day before. "I was afraid you were going on the sick-list, but I see you have thought better of it. Very wise of you."

She met his smile with a feeling of glad relief.

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"How is Ronnie?" she said.

He laughed a little at the hasty question.

"Ronnie is quite well, and sends his love. He is going to have a five days' leave next week to come and see you. It would have been this week, but for me."

Hope looked up at him enquiringly.

"You see," he quietly explained, "I was coming myself, and—it will seem odd to you, of course—I didn't want Ronnie."

Hope was silent. There was something in his manner that baffled her.

"Selfish of me, wasn't it?" he said.

"I don't know," said Hope.

"It was, I assure you," he returned; "sheer selfishness on my part. Are we going to breakfast on the veranda? You will have to do the honours, I know. Mrs. Latimer is still in bed."

Hope sat down thoughtfully. She had never seen Major Baring in this light-hearted mood. She would have enjoyed it, but for the thought of Ronnie.

"Wasn't he disappointed?" she asked presently.

"Horribly," said Baring. "He turned quite green when he heard. I don't think I had better tell you what he said."

He was watching her quietly across the table, and she knew it. After a moment she raised her eyes.

"Yes; tell me what he said, Major Baring!" she said.

"Not yet," said Baring. "I am waiting to hear you tell me that you are even more bitterly disappointed than he was."

"I don't see how I can tell you that," said Hope, turning her attention to the coffee-urn.

"No? Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be very friendly," she answered gravely.

"Do you know, I almost dared to fancy it was because it wouldn't be true?" said Baring.



She glanced up at that, and their eyes met. Though he was smiling a little, there was no mistaking the message his held for her. She coloured again very deeply, and bent her head to hide it.

He did not keep her waiting. Very quietly, very resolutely, he leaned towards her across the table, and spoke.

"I will tell you now what your brother said to me, Hope," he said, his voice half-quizzical, half-tender. "He's an impertinent young rascal, but I bore with him for your sake, dear. He said: 'Go in and win, old fellow, and I'll give you my blessing!' Generous of him, wasn't it? But the question is, have I won?"

Yet she could not speak. Only as he stretched out his hands to her, she laid her own within them without an instant's hesitation, and suffered them to remain in his close grasp. When he spoke to her again, his voice was sunk very low.

"How did I come to propose in this idiotic fashion across the breakfast-table?" he said. "Never mind, it's done now—or nearly done. You mustn't tremble, dear. I have been rather sudden, I know. I should have waited longer; but, under the circumstances, it seemed better to speak at once. But there is nothing to frighten you. Just look me in the face and tell me, may I be more than a friend to you? Will you have me for a husband?" Hope raised her eyes obediently, with a sudden sense of confidence unutterable. They were full of the quick tears of joy.

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"Of course!" she said instantly. "Of course!" She blushed again afterwards, when she recalled her prompt, and even rapturous, answer to his question. But, at the time, it was the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world. It was not in her at that moment to have answered him otherwise. And Baring knew it, understanding so perfectly that no other word was necessary on either side. He only bent his head, and held her two hands very closely to his lips before he gently let them go. It was his sole reply to her glad response. Yet she felt as if there was something solemn in his action; almost as if thereby he registered a vow.

VI

HER ENEMY

Notwithstanding her determination to return to Ghantala after the breaking of the monsoon. Hope stayed on at the Hill Station with Mrs. Latimer till the rains were nearly over. She had wished to return, but her hostess, her *fiance*, and her brother were all united in the resolve to keep her where she was. So insistent were they that they prevailed at length. It had been a particularly bad season at Ghantala, and sickness was rife there.

Baring even went so far as positively to forbid her to return till this should have abated.

"You will have to obey me when we are married, you know," he grimly told her. "So you may as well begin at once."

And Hope obeyed him. There was something about this man that compelled her obedience. Her secret fear of him had not wholly disappeared. There were times when the thought that she might one day incur his displeasure made her uneasy. His strength awed even while it thrilled her. Behind his utmost tenderness she felt his mastery.

And so she yielded, and remained at the Hill Station till Mrs. Latimer herself returned to Ghantala in October. She and Ronnie had not been together for nearly six weeks, and the separation seemed to her like as many months. He was at the station to meet them, and the moment she saw him she was conscious of a shock. She had never before seen him look so hollow-eyed and thin.

He greeted her, however, with a gaiety that, in some degree, reassured her. He seemed delighted to have her with him again, was full of the news and gossip of the station, and chattered like a schoolboy throughout the drive to their bungalow.

Her uncle came out of his room to welcome her, and then burrowed back again, and remained invisible for the rest of the evening. But Hope did not want him. She wanted no one but Ronnie just then.

The night was chilly, and they had a fire. Hope lay on a sofa before it, and Ronnie sat and smoked. Both were luxuriously comfortable till a hand rapped smartly upon the window and made them jump.

Ronnie exclaimed with a violence that astonished Hope, and started to his feet. She also sprang up eagerly, almost expecting to see her *fiance*. But her expectations were quickly dashed.

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"It's that fellow Hyde!" Ronnie said, looking at her rather doubtfully. "You don't mind?"

Her face fell, but he did not wait for her reply. He stepped across to the window, and admitted the visitor.

Hyde sauntered in with a casual air.

He came across to her, smiling in the way she loathed, and almost before she realized it he had her hand in a tight, impressive grip, and his pale eyes were gazing full into hers.

"You look as fresh as an English rose," was his deliberate greeting.

Hope freed her hand with a slight, involuntary gesture of disgust. Till the moment of seeing him again she had almost forgotten how utterly objectionable he was.

"I am quite well," she said coldly. "I think I shall go to bed, Ronnie. I'm tired."

Ronnie was pouring some whisky into a glass. She noticed that his hand was very shaky.

"All right," he said, not looking at her.

"You're not going to desert us already?" said Hyde; still, as she felt, mocking her with his smile. "It will be dark, indeed, when Hope is withdrawn."

He went to the door, but paused with his hand upon it. She looked at him with the wild shrinking of a trapped creature in her eyes.

"Never mind," he laughed softly; "I am very tenacious. Even now—you will scarcely believe it—I still have—Hope!"

He opened the door with the words, and, as she passed through in unbroken silence, her face as white as marble, there was something in his words, something of self-assured power, almost of menace, that struck upon her like a breath of evil. She would have stayed and defied him had she dared. But somehow, inexplicably, she was afraid.

VII

THE SCRAPE

Very late that night there came a low knock at Hope's door. She was lying awake, and she instantly started up on her elbow.

"Who is it?" she called.

The door opened softly, and Ronnie answered her.

"I thought you would like to say good-night, Hope," he said.

"Oh, come in, dear!" Hope sat up eagerly. She had not expected this attention from Ronnie. "I'm wide awake. I'm so glad you came!"

He slipped into the room, and, reaching her, bent to kiss her; then, as she clung closely to him, he sat down on the edge of her bed.

"I'm sorry Hyde annoyed you," he said.

She leaned her head against him, and was silent.

"It'll be a good thing for you when you're married," Ronnie went on presently. "Baring will take better care of you than I do."

Something in his tone went straight to her heart. Her clinging arms tightened, but still she was silent. For what he said was unanswerable.

When he spoke again, she felt it was with an effort.

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"Baring came round to-night to see you. I went out and spoke to him. I told him you had gone to bed, and so he didn't come in. I was glad he didn't. Hyde was there, and they don't hit it particularly well. In fact—" he hesitated. "I would rather he didn't know Hyde was here. Baring's a good chap—the best in the world. He's done no end for me; more than I can ever tell you. But he's awfully hard in some ways. I can't tell him everything. He doesn't always understand."

Again there sounded in his voice that faint, wistful note that so smote upon Hope's heart. She drew nearer to him, her cheek against his shoulder.

"Oh, Ronnie," she said, and her voice quivered passionately, "never think that of me, dear! Never think that I can't understand!"

He kissed her forehead.

"Bless you, old girl!" he whispered huskily.

"My marriage will make no difference—no difference," she insisted. "You and I will still be to each other what we have always been. There will be the same trust between us, the same confidence. Rather than lose that, I will never marry at all!"

She spoke with vehemence, but Ronnie was not carried away by it.

"Baring will have the right to know all your secrets," he said gloomily.

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Hope impulsively. "He would never expect that. He knows that we are twins, and there is no tie in the world that is quite like that."

Ronnie was silent, but she felt that it was not the silence of acquiescence. She took him by the shoulders and made him face her.

"Ronnie," she said very earnestly, "if you will only tell me things, and let me help you where I can, I swear to you—I swear to you most solemnly—that I will never betray your confidence to Monty, or to any one else: I know that he would never ask it of me; but even if he did—even if he did—I would not do it." She spoke so steadfastly, so loyally, that he was strongly moved. He thrust his arm boyishly round her.

"All right, dear old girl, I trust you," he said. "I'll tell you all about it. As I see you have guessed, there is a bit of a scrape; but it will be all right in two or three weeks. I've been a fool, and got into debt again. Baring helped me out once. That's partly why I'm so particularly anxious that he shouldn't get wind of it this time. Fact is, I'm very much in Hyde's power for the time being. But, as I say, it will be all right before long. I've promised to ride his Waler for the Ghantala Valley Cup next month. It's a pretty safe thing, and if I pull it off, as I intend to do, everything will be cleared, and I shall be out of his hands. It's a sort of debt of honour, you see. I can't get out of it, but I shall be jolly

glad when it's over. We'll chuck him then, if he isn't civil. But till then I'm more or less helpless. So you'll do your best to tolerate him for my sake, won't you?"

A great sigh rose from Hope's heart, but she stifled it. Hyde's attitude of insolent power was explained to her, and she would have given all she had at that moment to have been free to seek Baring's advice.

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"I'll try, dear," she said. "But I think the less I see of him the better it will be. Are you quite sure of winning the Cup?"

"Oh, quite," said Ronnie, with confidence. "Quite. Do you remember the races we used to have when we were kids? We rode barebacked in those days. You could stick on anything. Remember?"

Yes, Hope remembered; and a sudden, almost fierce regret surged up within her.

"Oh, Ronnie," she said, "I wish we were kids still!"

He laughed at her softly, and rose.

"I know better," he said; "and so does Baring. Good-night, old girl! Sleep well!"

And with that he left her. But Hope scarcely slept till break of day.

VIII

BEFORE THE RACE

Hope had arranged to go to the races with Mrs. Latimer after previously lunching with her.

When the day arrived she spent the morning working on the veranda in the sunshine. It was a perfect day of Indian winter, and under its influence she gradually forgot her anxieties, and fell to dreaming while she worked.

Down below the compound she heard the stream running swiftly between its banks, with a bubbling murmur like half-suppressed laughter. It was fuller than she had ever known it. The rains had swelled the river higher up the valley, and they had opened the sluice-gates to relieve the pressure upon the dam that had been built there after the disastrous flood that had drowned the English girl years before.

Hope loved to hear that soft chuckling between the reeds. It made her think of an English springtime. The joy of spring was in her veins. She turned her face to the sunshine with a smile of purest happiness. Only two months more to the zenith of her happiness!

There came the sound of a step on the veranda—a stumbling, uncertain step. She turned swiftly in her chair, and sprang up. Ronnie had returned to prepare for the race, and she had not heard him. She had not seen him before that day, and she felt a momentary compunction as she moved to greet him. And then—her heart stood still.

He was standing a few paces away, supporting himself against a pillar of the veranda. His eyes were fixed and heavy, like the eyes of a man walking in his sleep. He stared at her dully, as if he were looking at a complete stranger.

Hope stopped short, gazing at him in speechless consternation.

After several moments he spoke thickly, scarcely intelligibly.

"I can't race to-day," he said. "Not well enough. Hyde must find a substitute."

He could hardly articulate the last word, but Hope caught his meaning. The whole miserable tragedy was written up before her in plain, unmistakable characters.

But almost as quickly as she perceived it came the thought that no one else must know. Something must be done, even though it was at the eleventh hour.

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Her first instinct was to send for Baring, but she thrust it from her. No! She must find another way. There must be a way out if she were only quick enough to see it—some way by which she could cover up his disgrace so that none should know of it. There was a way—surely there was a way! Ronnie's dull stare became intolerable. She went to him, bravely, steadfastly.

"Go and lie down!" she said. "I will see about it for you."

Something in her own words sent a sudden flash through her brain. She caught her breath, and her face turned very white. But her steadfastness did not forsake her. She took Ronnie by the arm and guided him to his room.

IX

THE RACE

"Such a pity. Hope can't come!"

Mrs. Latimer addressed Baring, who had just approached her across the racecourse. The sun was shining brilliantly, and the scene was very gay.

Baring, who had drawn near with a certain eagerness, seemed to stiffen at her words.

"Can't come!" he echoed. "Why not?"

Mrs. Latimer handed him a note.

"She sent this round half an hour ago."

Baring read the note with bent brows. It merely stated that the writer had been working all the morning and was a little tired. Would Mrs. Latimer kindly understand and excuse her?

He handed it back without comment.

"Where is young Carteret?" he asked. "Have you seen him yet?"

"No," she answered. "Somebody was saying he was late. Ah! There he is, surely—just going into the weighing-tent. What a superb horse that is of Mr. Hyde's! Do you think he will win the Cup?"

Baring thought it likely, but he said it with so preoccupied an air that Mrs. Latimer smiled, and considerately refrained from detaining him.

She watched him walk down towards the weighing-tent; but before he reached it, she saw the figure of young Carteret issue forth at the farther end, and start off at a run with his saddle on his shoulder towards the enclosure where the racers were waiting. He was late, and she thought he looked flurried.

A few minutes later Baring returned to her.

"The boy is behindhand, as usual," he remarked. "I didn't get near him. Time is just up. I hear the Rajah thinks very highly of Hyde's Waler."

Mrs. Latimer looked across at the Indian Prince who was presenting the Cup. He was seated in the midst of a glittering crowd of natives and British officers. She saw that he was closely scanning the restless line of horses at the starting-point.

Through her glasses she sought the big black Waler. He was foaming and stamping uneasily, and she saw that his rider's face was deadly pale.

"I don't believe Ronnie can be well," she said. "He looks so nervous."

Baring grunted in a dissatisfied note, but said nothing.

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Another two minutes, and the signal was given. There were ten horses in the race. It was a fair start, and the excitement in the watching crowd became at once intense.

Baring remained at Mrs. Latimer's side. She was on her feet, and scarcely breathing. The black horse stretched himself out like a greyhound, galloping splendidly over the shining green of the course. His rider, crouched low in the saddle, looked as if at any instant he might be hurled to the earth.

Baring watched him critically, his jaw set and grim. Obviously, the boy was not himself, and he fancied he knew the reason.

"If he pulls it off, it'll be the biggest fluke of his life," he muttered.

"Isn't it queer?" whispered Mrs. Latimer. "I never saw young Carteret ride like that before."

Baring was silent. He began to think he understood Hope's failure to put in an appearance.

Gradually the black Waler drew away from all but two others, who hotly contested the leadership. He was running superbly, though he apparently received but small encouragement from his rider.

As they drew round the curve at the further end of the course, he was galloping next to the rails. As they finally turned into the straight run home, he was leading.

But the horse next to him, urged by his rider, who was also his owner, made so strenuous an effort that it became obvious to all that he was gaining upon the Waler.

A great yell went up of "Carteret! Carteret! Wake up, Carteret! Don't give it away!" And the Waler's rider, as if startled by the cry, suddenly and convulsively slashed the animal's withers.

Through a great tumult of shouting the two horses dashed past the winning-post. It seemed a dead heat; but, immediately after, the news spread that Hyde's horse was the winner. The Waler had gained his victory by a neck.

Hyde was leading his horse round to the Rajah's stand. His jockey, looking white and exhausted, sat so loosely in the saddle that he seemed to sway with the animal's movements. He did not appear to hear the cheering around him.

Baring took up his stand near the weighing-tent, and, a few minutes later, Hyde and his jockey came up together. The boy's cap was dragged down over his eyes, and he looked neither to right nor left.

Hyde, perceiving Baring, pushed forward abruptly.

“I want a word with you,” he said. “I’ve been trying to catch you for some days past. But first, what did you think of the race?” He coolly fastened on to Baring’s elbow, and the latter had to pause. Hyde’s companion passed swiftly on; and Hyde, seeing the look on Baring’s face, began to laugh.

“It’s all right; you needn’t look so starched. The little beggar’s been starving himself for the occasion, and overdone it. He’ll pull round with a little feeding up. Tell me what you thought of the race! Splendid chap, that animal of mine, eh?”

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He kept Baring talking for several minutes; and, when they finally parted, his opportunity had gone.

Baring went into the weighing-tent, but Ronnie was nowhere to be seen. And he wondered rather grimly as he walked away if Hyde had detained him purposely to give the boy a chance to escape.

X

THE ENEMY'S TERMS

It was nearly dark that evening when Hope stood again on the veranda of the Magician's, bungalow, and listened to the water running through the reeds. She thought it sounded louder than in the morning— more insistent, less mirthful. She shivered a little as she stood there. She felt lonely; her uncle was away for a couple of days, and Ronnie was in his room. She was bracing herself to go and rouse him to dress for mess. Slowly, at last, she turned to go. But at the same instant a voice called to her from below, and she stopped short.

"Ah, don't run away!" it said. "I've come on purpose to see you—on a matter of importance."

Reluctantly Hope waited. She knew the voice well, and it made her quiver in every nerve with the instinct of flight. Yet she summoned all her resolution and stood still, while Hyde calmly mounted the veranda steps and approached her. He was in riding-dress, and he carried a crop, walking with all the swaggering insolence that she loathed.

"There's something I want to say to you," he said. "I can come in, I suppose? It won't take me long."

He took her permission for granted, and turned into the drawing-room. Hope followed him in silence. She could not pretend to this man that his presence was a pleasure to her. She hated him, and deep in her heart she feared him as she feared no one else in the world.

He looked at her with eyes of cynical criticism by the light of the shaded lamp. She felt that there was something worse than insolence about him that night—something of cruelty, of brutality even, from which she was powerless to escape.

"Come!" he said, as she did not speak. "Doesn't it occur to you that I have been a particularly good friend to you to-day?"

Hope faced him steadily. Twice before she had evaded this man, but she knew that to-night evasion was out of the question. She must confront him without panic, and alone.

“I think you must tell me what you mean,” she said, her voice very low.

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently, and then laughed at her—his abominable, mocking laugh.

“I have noticed before,” he said, “that when a woman finds herself in a tight corner, she invariably tries to divert attention by asking unnecessary questions. It’s a harmless little stratagem that may serve her turn. But in this case, let me assure you, it is sheer waste of time. I hold you—and your brother, also—in the hollow of my hand. And you know it.”

He spoke slowly, with a confidence from which there was no escape. His eyes still closely watched her face. And Hope felt again that wild terror, which only he had ever inspired in her, knocking at her heart.

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She did not ask him a second time what he meant. He had made her realize the utter futility of prevarication. Instead, she forced herself to meet his look boldly, and grapple with him with all her desperate courage.

"My brother owed you a debt of honour," she said; "and it has been paid. What more do you want?"

A glitter of admiration shone for a moment through his cynicism. This was better than meek surrender. A woman who fought was worth conquering.

"You are not going to acknowledge, then," he said, "that you—you personally—are in any way indebted to me?"

"Certainly not!" The girl's eyes did not flinch before his. Save that she was trembling, he would scarcely have detected her fear. "You have done nothing for me," she said. "You only served your own purpose."

"Oh, indeed!" said Hyde softly. "So that is how you look at it, is it?"

He moved, and went close to her. Still she did not shrink. She was fighting desperately—desperately—a losing battle.

"Well," he said, after a moment, in which she withstood him silently with all her strength, "in one sense that is true. I did serve my own purpose. But have you, I wonder, any idea what that purpose of mine was?"

He waited, but she did not answer him. She was nearly at the end of her strength. Hyde did not offer to touch her. He only smiled a little at the rising panic in her white face.

"Do you know what I am going to do now?" he said. "I am going to mess—it's a guest night—and they will drink my health as the winner of the Ghantala Cup. And then I shall propose someone else's health. Can you guess whose?"

She shrank then, shrank perceptibly, painfully, as the victim must shrink, despite all his resolution, from the hot iron of the torturer.

Hyde stood for a second longer, watching her. Then he turned. There was fiendish triumph in his eyes.

"Good-bye!" he said.

She caught her breath sharply, spasmodically, as one who suppresses a cry of pain. And then, before he reached the window, she spoke:

"Please wait!"

He turned instantly, and came back to her.

"Come!" he said. "You are going to be reasonable after all."

"What is it that you want?" Her desperation sounded in her voice. She looked at him with eyes of wild appeal. Her defiance was all gone. The smile went out of Hyde's face, and suddenly she saw the primitive savage in possession. She had seen it before, but till that moment she had never realized quite what it was.

"What do I want?" he said. "I want you, and you know it. That fellow Baring is not the man for you. You are going to give him up. Do you hear? Or else—if you prefer it—he will give you up. I don't care which it is, but one or the other it shall be. Now do we understand one another?"

Hope stared at him, speechless, horror-stricken, helpless!

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He came nearer to her, but she did not recoil, for as a serpent holds its prey, so he held her. She wanted to protest, to resist him fiercely, but she was mute. Even the power to flee was taken from her. She could only stand as if chained to the ground, stiff and paralyzed, awaiting his pleasure. No nightmare terror had ever so obsessed her. The agony of it was like a searing flame.

And Hyde, seeing her anguished helplessness, came nearer still with a sort of exultant deliberation, and put his arm about her as she stood.

"I thought I should win the trick," he said, with a laugh that seemed to turn her to ice. "Didn't I tell you weeks ago that I had—Hope?"

She did not attempt to answer or to resist. Her lips were quite bloodless. A surging darkness was about her, but yet she remained conscious—vividly horribly conscious—of the trap that had so suddenly closed upon her. Through it she saw his face close to her own, with that sneering, devilish smile about his mouth that she knew so well. And the eyes with their glittering savagery were mocking her—mocking her.

Another instant and his lips would have pressed her own. He held her fast, so fast that she felt almost suffocated. It was the most hideous moment of her life. And still she could neither move nor protest. It seemed as if, body and soul, she was his prisoner.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, he paused. His arms slackened and fell abruptly from her; so abruptly that she tottered, feeling vaguely for support. She saw his face change as he turned sharply away. And instinctively, notwithstanding the darkness that blinded her, she knew the cause. She put her hand over her eyes and strove to recover herself.

XI

WITHOUT DEFENCE

When Hope looked up, the silence had become unbearable. She saw Baring standing quite motionless near the window by which he had entered. He was not looking at her, and she felt suddenly, crushingly, that she had become less than nothing in his sight, not so much as a thing, to be ignored.

Hyde, quite calm and self-possessed, still stood close to her. But he had turned his back upon her to face the intruder. And she felt herself to be curiously apart from them both, almost like a spectator at a play.

It was Hyde who at last broke the silence when it had begun to torture her nerves beyond endurance.

“Perhaps this *rencontre* is not as unfortunate as it looks at first sight,” he remarked complacently. “It will save me the trouble of seeking an interview with you to explain what you are now in a position to see for yourself. I believe a second choice is considered a woman’s privilege. Miss Carteret, as you observe, has just availed herself of this. And I am afraid that in consequence you will have to abdicate in my favour.”

Baring heard him out in complete silence. As Hyde ended, he moved quietly forward into the room. Hope felt him drawing nearer, but she could not face him. His very quietness was terrible to her, and she was desperately conscious that she had no weapon of defence.

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She had not thought that he would so much as notice her, but she was wrong. He passed by Hyde without a glance, and reached her.

"What am I to understand?" he said.

She started violently at the sound of his voice. She knew that Hyde had turned towards her again, but she looked at neither of them. She was trembling so that she could scarcely stand. Her very lips felt cold, and she could not utter a word.

After a brief pause Baring spoke again: "Can't you answer me?"

There was no anger in his voice, but there was also no kindness. She knew that he was watching her with a piercing scrutiny, and she dared not raise her eyes. She shook her head at last, as he waited for her reply.

"Are you willing for me to take an explanation from Mr. Hyde?" he asked; and his tone rang suddenly hard. "Has he the right to explain?"

"Of course I have the right," said Hyde easily.

"Tell him so, Hope!"

Baring bent towards the girl.

"If he has the right," he said, his voice quiet but very insistent, "look me in the face—and tell me so!"

She made a convulsive effort and looked up at him.

"Yes," she said in a whisper. "He has the right."

Baring straightened himself abruptly, almost as if he had received a blow in the face.

He stood for a second silent. Then:

"Where is your brother?" he asked.

Hope hesitated, and at once Hyde answered for her.

"He isn't back yet. He stopped at the club."

"That," said Baring sternly, "is a lie."

He laid his hand suddenly upon Hope's shoulder.

"Surely you can tell me the truth at least!" he said.

Something in his tone pierced the wild panic at her heart. She looked up at him again, meeting the mastery of his eyes.

“He is in his room,” she said. “Mr. Hyde didn’t know.”

Hyde laughed, and at the sound the hand on Hope’s shoulder closed like a vice, till she bit her lip with the effort to endure the pain. Baring saw it, and instantly set her free.

“Go to your brother,” he said, “and ask him to come and speak to me!”

The authority in his voice was not to be gainsaid. She threw an imploring look at Hyde, and went. She fled like a wild creature along the veranda to her brother’s room, and tapped feverishly, frantically at the window. Then she paused listening intently for a reply. But she could hear nothing save the loud beating of her heart. It drummed in her ears like the hoofs of a galloping horse. Desperately she knocked again.

“Let me in!” she gasped. “Let me in!”

There came a blundering movement, and the door opened.

“Hullo!” said Ronnie, in a voice of sleepy irritation. “What’s up?”

She stumbled into the dark room, breathless and sobbing.

“Oh, Ronnie!” she cried. “Oh, Ronnie; you must help me now!”

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He fastened the door behind her, and as she sank down half-fainting in a chair, she heard him groping for matches on the dressing-table.

He struck one, and lighted a lamp. She saw that his hand was very shaky, but that he managed to control it. His face was pale, and there were deep shadows under his heavy eyes, but he was himself again, and a thrill of thankfulness ran through her. There was still a chance, still a chance!

XII

THE PENALTY

Five minutes later, or it might have been less, the brother and sister stepped out on to the veranda to go to the drawing-room. They had to turn a corner of the bungalow to reach it, and the moment they did so Hope stopped dead. A man's voice, shouting curses, came from the open window; and, with it, the sound of struggling and the sound of blows—blows delivered with the precision and regularity of a machine—frightful, swinging blows that sounded like revolver shots.

"What is it?" gasped Hope in terror. "What is it?" But she knew very well what it was; and Ronnie knew, too.

"You stay here," he said. "I'll go and stop it."

"No, no!" she gasped back. "I am coming with you; I must." She slipped her cold hand into his, and they ran together towards the commotion.

Reaching the drawing-room window, Ronnie stopped, and put the trembling girl behind him. But he himself did not enter. He only stood still, with a cowed look on his face, and waited. In the middle of the room, Baring, his face set and terrible, stood gripping Hyde by the torn collar of his coat and thrashing him, deliberately, mercilessly, with his own riding-whip. How long the punishment had gone on the two at the window could only guess. But it was evident that Hyde was nearing exhaustion. His face was purple in patches, and the curses he tried to utter came maimed and broken and incoherent from his shaking lips. He had almost ceased to struggle in the unwavering grip that held him; he only moved convulsively at each succeeding blow.

"Oh, stop him!" implored Hope, behind her brother. "Stop him!" Then, as he did not move, she pushed wildly past him into the room.

Baring saw her, and instantly, almost as if he had been awaiting her, stayed his hand. He did not speak. He simply took Hyde by the shoulders and half-carried, half-propelled him to the window, through which he thrust him.



He returned empty-handed and closed the window. Ronnie had entered, and was standing by his sister, who had dropped upon her knees by the sofa and hidden her face in the cushions, sobbing with a passionate abandonment that testified to nerves that had given way utterly at last beneath a strain too severe to be borne. Baring just glanced at her, then turned his attention to her brother.

"I have been doing your work for you," he remarked grimly. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" He put his hand upon Ronnie, and twisted him round to face the light, looking at him piercingly. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" he repeated.

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Ronnie met his eyes irresolutely for a moment, then looked away towards Hope. She had become very still, but her face remained hidden. There was something tense about her attitude. After a moment Ronnie spoke, his voice very low.

"I suppose you had a reason for what you have just been doing?"

"Yes," Baring said sternly, "I had a reason. Do you mean me to understand that you didn't know that fellow to be a blackguard?"

Ronnie made no answer. He stood like a beaten dog.

"If you didn't know it," Baring continued, "I am sorry for your intelligence. If you did, you deserve the same treatment as he has just received."

Hope stirred at the words, stirred and moaned, as if she were in pain; and again momentarily Baring glanced at her. But his face showed no softening.

"I mean what I say," he said, turning inexorably to Ronnie. "I told you long ago that that man was not fit to associate with your sister. You must have known it for yourself; yet you continued to bring him to the house. What I have just done was in her defence. Mark that, for—as you know—I am not in the habit of acting hastily. But there are some offences that only a horsewhip can punish." He set the boy free with a contemptuous gesture, and crossed the room to Hope. "Now I have something to say to you," he said.

She started and quivered, but she did not raise her head. Very quietly he stooped and lifted her up. He saw that she was too upset for the moment to control herself, and he put her into a chair and waited beside her. After several seconds she slipped a trembling hand into his, and spoke.

"Monty," she said, "I have something to say to you first."

Her action surprised him. It touched him also, but he did not show it.

"I am listening," he said gravely.

She looked up at him and uttered a sharp sigh. Then, with an effort, she rose and faced him.

"You are very angry with me," she said. "You are going to—to—give me up."

His face hardened. He looked back at her with a sternness that sent the blood to her heart. He said nothing whatever. She went on with difficulty.

"But before you do," she said, "I want to tell you that—that—ever since you asked me to marry you I have loved you—with my whole heart; and I have never—in thought or deed

—been other than true to my love. I can't tell you any more than that. It is no good to question me. I may have done things of which you would strongly disapprove, which you would even condemn, but my heart has always been true to you—always."

She stopped. Her lips were quivering painfully. She saw that her words had not moved him to confidence in her, and it seemed as if the whole world had suddenly turned dark and empty and cold—a place to wander in, but never to rest.

A long silence followed that supreme effort of hers. Baring's eyes—blue, merciless as steel—were fixed upon her in a gaze that pierced and hurt her. Yet he forced her to endure it. He held her in front of him ruthlessly, almost cruelly.

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“So I am not to question you?” he said at last. “You object to that?”

She winced at his tone.

“Don’t!” she said under her breath. “Don’t hurt me more—more than you need!”

He was silent again, grimly, interminably silent, it seemed to her. And all the while she felt him doing battle with her, beating down her resistance, mastering her, compelling her.

“Hope!” he said at length.

She looked up at him. Her knees were shaking under her. Her heart was beginning to whisper that her strength was nearly spent; that she would not be able to resist much longer.

“Tell me,” he said very quietly, “this one thing only! What is the hold that Hyde has over you?”

She shook her head.

“That is the one thing—”

“It is the one thing that I must know,” he said sternly.

She was white to the lips.

“I can’t answer you,” she said.

“You must answer me!” He turned her quivering face up to his own. “Do you hear me, Hope?” he said. “I insist upon your answering me.”

He still spoke quietly, but she was suddenly aware that he was putting forth his whole strength. It came upon her like a physical, crushing weight. It overwhelmed her. She hid her face with an anguished cry. He had conquered her.

In another moment she would have yielded. Her opposition was dead. But abruptly, unexpectedly, there came an interruption. Ronnie, very pale, and looking desperate, came between them.

“Look here, sir,” he said, “you—you are going too far. I can’t have my sister coerced in this fashion. If she prefers to keep this matter to herself, she must do so. You can’t force her to speak.”



Baring released Hope and turned upon him almost violently, but, seeing the unusual, if precarious, air of resolution with which Ronnie confronted him, he checked himself. He walked to the end of the room and back before he spoke. His features were set like a mask when he returned.

"You may be right," he said, "though I think it would have been better for everyone if you had not interfered. Hope, I am going. If you cannot bring yourself to tell me the whole truth without reservation, there can be nothing further between us. I fear that, after all, I spoke too soon. I can enter upon no compact that is not based upon absolute confidence."

He spoke coldly, decidedly, without a trace of feeling; and, having spoken, he went deliberately to the window. There he stood for a few seconds with his back turned upon the room; then, as the silence remained unbroken, he quietly lifted the catch and let himself out.

In the room he left not a word was spoken for many tragic minutes.

XIII

THE CURSE OF THE VALLEY

Hope had some difficulty in persuading Ronnie to attend mess that night, though, as a matter of fact, she was longing for solitude.

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He went at last, and she was glad, for a great restlessness possessed her to which it was a relief to give way. She wandered about the veranda in the dark after his departure, trying to realize fully what had happened. It had all come upon her so suddenly. She had been forced to act throughout without a moment's pause for thought. Now that it was all over she wanted to collect herself and face the worst.

Her engagement was at an end. It was mainly that fact that she wished to grasp. But somehow she found it very difficult. She had grown into the habit of regarding herself as belonging exclusively and for all time to Montagu Baring.

"He has given me up! He has given me up!" she whispered to herself, as she paced to and fro along the crazy veranda. She recalled the look his face had worn, the sternness, the pitilessness of his eyes. She had always felt at the back of her heart that he had it in him to be hard, merciless. But she had not really thought that she would ever shrink beneath the weight of his anger. She had trusted blindly to his love to spare her. She had imagined herself to be so dear to him that she must be exempt. Others—it did not surprise her that others feared him. But she—his promised wife—what could she have to fear?

She paused at the end of the veranda, looking up. The night was full of stars, and it was very cold. At the bottom of the compound she heard the water running swiftly. It did not chuckle any more. It had become a miniature roar. It almost seemed to threaten her.

She remembered how she had listened to it in the morning, sitting in the sunshine, dreaming; and her heart suddenly contracted with a pain intolerable. Those golden dreams were over for ever. He had given her up.

Again her restlessness urged her. Cold as it was, she could not bring herself to go indoors. She descended into the compound, passed swiftly through it, and began to climb the rough ground of the hill that rose behind it above the native village.

The Magician's bungalow looked very ghostly in the starlight. Presently she paused, and stood motionless, gazing down at it. She remembered how, when she and her uncle had first come to it, the native servants had told them of the curse that had been laid upon it; of the evil spirits that had dwelt there; of voices that had cried in the night! Was it true, she wondered vaguely? Was it possible for a place to be cursed?

A faint breeze ran down the valley, stirring the trees to a furtive whispering. Again, subconsciously, she was aware of the cold, and moved to return. At the same moment there came a sound like the report of a cannon half a mile away, followed by a long roar that was unlike anything she had ever heard—a sound so appalling, so overwhelming, that for an instant, seized with a nameless terror, she stood as one turned to stone.



And then—before the impulse of flight to the bungalow had reached her brain—the whole terrible disaster burst upon her. Like a monster of destruction, that which had been a gurgling stream rose above its banks in a mighty, brown flood, surged like an intrushing sea over the moonlit compound, and swept down the valley, turning it into a whirling turmoil of water.

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XIV

HOW THE TALE WAS TOLD

Ronnie Carteret was the subject of a good deal of chaff that night at mess. The Rajah was being entertained, and he was the only man who paid the young officer any compliments on the matter of his achievement on the racecourse. Everyone else openly declared that the horse, and not its rider, was the one to be congratulated.

"Never saw anything so ludicrous in my life," one critic said. "He looked like a rag doll in the saddle. How he managed to stick on passes me. Is it the latest from America, Ronnie? Leaves something to be desired, old chap! I should stick to the old style, if I were you."

Ronnie had no answer for the comments and advice showered upon him from all sides. He received them all in silence, sullenly ignoring derisive questions.

Hyde was not present, to the surprise of every one. All knew that he had been invited, and there was some speculation upon his non-appearance.

Baring was there, quiet and self-contained as usual. No one ever chaffed Baring. It was generally recognized that he did not provide good sport. When the toasts were over he left the table.

It was soon after his departure that a sound like a distant explosion was heard by those in the messroom, causing some discussion there.

"It's only some fool letting off fireworks," someone said; and as this seemed a reasonable explanation, no one troubled to enquire further. And so fully half an hour passed before the truth was known.

It was Baring who came in with the news, and none who saw it ever forgot his face as he threw open the messroom door. It was like the face of a man suddenly stricken with a mortal hurt.

"Heavens, man! What's the matter?" the colonel exclaimed, at sight of him. "You look as if—as if—"

Baring glanced round till his eyes fell upon Ronnie, and, when he spoke, he seemed to be addressing him alone.

"The dam has burst," he said, his words curt, distinct, unfaltering. "The whole of the lower valley is flooded. The Magician's bungalow has been swept away!"

“What?” gasped Ronnie. “What?”

He sprang to his feet, the awful look in Baring’s eyes reflected in his own, and made a dash for the doorway in which Baring stood. He stumbled as he reached, it and the latter threw out a supporting arm.

“It’s no use your going,” he said, his voice hard and mechanical. “There’s nothing to be done. I’ve been as near as it is possible to get. It’s nothing but a raging torrent half a mile across.”

He moved straight forward to a chair, and thrust the boy down into it. There was a terrible stiffness—almost a fixity—about him. He did not seem conscious of the men that crowded round him. It was not his habitual reserve that kept him from collapse at that moment; it was rather a stunned sense of expediency.



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"There's nothing to be done," he repeated.

He looked down at Ronnie, who was clutching at the table with both hands, and making ineffectual efforts to speak.

"Give him some brandy, one of you!" he said.

Someone held a glass against the boy's chattering teeth. The colonel poured some spirit into another and gave it to Baring. He took it with a hand that seemed steady, but the next instant it slipped through his fingers and smashed on the floor. He turned sharply, not heeding it. Most of the men in the room were on their way out to view the catastrophe for themselves. He made as if to follow them; then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he paused.

Ronnie, deathly pale, and shaking all over, was fighting his way back to self-control. Baring moved back to him with less of stiffness and more of his usual strength of purpose.

"Do you care to come with me?" he said.

Ronnie looked up at him. Then, though he still shivered violently, he got up without speaking; and, in silence, they went away together.

XV

THE NIGHT OF DESPAIR

Not till more than two hours later did Ronnie break his silence. He would have tramped the hills all night above the flooded valley, but Baring would not suffer it. He dragged him almost forcibly away from the scene of desolation, where the water still flowed strongly, carrying trees and all manner of wreckage on its course. And, though he was almost beside himself, the boy yielded at last. For Baring compelled obedience that night. He took Ronnie back to his own quarters, but on the threshold Ronnie drew back.

"I can't come in with you," he said.

Baring's hand was on his shoulder.

"You must," he answered quietly.

"I can't," Ronnie persisted, with an effort. "I can't! I'm a cur; I'm worse. You wouldn't ask me if you knew."

Baring paused, then, with a strange, unwonted gentleness, he took the boy's arm and led him in. "Never mind!" he said.

Ronnie went with him, but in Baring's room he faced him with the courage of despair.

"You'll have to know it," he said jerkily. "It was my doing that you—and she—parted as you did. She was going to tell you the truth. I prevented her—for my own sake—not hers. I—I came between you."

Baring's hand fell, but neither his face nor his tone varied as he made steady reply.

"I guessed it might be that—afterwards. I was on my way to tell her so when the dam went."

"That isn't all," Ronnie went on feverishly. "I'm worse than that, worse even than she knew. I engaged to ride Hyde's horse to—to discharge a debt I owed him. I told her it was a debt of honour. It wasn't. It was to cover theft. I swindled him once, and he found out. I hated riding his horse, but it would have meant open disgrace if I hadn't."

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She knew it was urgent. And then at the last moment I was thirsty; I overdid it. No; confound it, I'll tell you the truth! I went home drunk, too drunk to sit a horse. And so she—she sent me to bed, and went in my place. That's the thing she wouldn't tell you, the thing Hyde knew. She always hated the man—always. She only endured him for my sake." He broke off. Baring was looking at him as if he thought that he were raving. After a moment Ronnie realized this. "It's the truth," he said. "I've told you the truth. I never won the cup. I didn't know anything more about it till it was over and she told me. I don't wonder you find it hard to believe. But I swear it's the truth. Now let me go—and shoot myself!"

He flung round distractedly, but Baring stopped him. There was no longer any hardness about him, only compassionate kindness, as he made him sit down, and gravely shut the door. When he spoke, it was not to utter a word of reproach or blame.

"No, don't go, boy!" he said, in a tone that Ronnie never forgot. "We'll face this thing together. May God help us both!"

And Ronnie, yielding once more, leaned his head in his hands, and burst into anguished tears.

XVI

THE COMING OF HOPE

How they got through the dragging hours of that awful night neither of them afterwards quite knew. They spoke very little, and slept not at all. When morning came at last they were still sitting in silence as if they watched the dead, linked together as brothers by a bond that was sacred.

It was soon after sunrise that a message came for Ronnie from the colonel's bungalow next door to the effect that the commanding-officer wished to see him. He looked at Baring as he received it.

"I wish you'd come with me," he said.

Baring rose at once. He knew that the boy was depending very largely upon his support just then. The sunshine seemed to mock them as they went. It was a day of glorious Indian winter, than which there is nothing more exquisite on earth, save one of English spring. The colonel met them on his own veranda. He noted Ronnie's haggard face with a quick glance of pity.

"I sent for you, my lad," he said, "because I have just heard a piece of news that I thought I ought to pass on at once."

"News, sir?" Ronnie echoed the word sharply.

"Yes; news of your sister." The colonel gave him a keen look, then went on in a tone of reassuring kindness that both his listeners found maddeningly deliberate. "She was not, it seems, in the bungalow at the time the dam burst. She was out on the hillside, and so—My dear fellow, for Heaven's sake pull yourself together! Things are better than you think. She—" He did not finish, for Ronnie suddenly sprang past him with a loud cry. A girl's figure had appeared in the doorway of the colonel's drawing-room. Ronnie plunged in, and it was seen no more.

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The colonel turned to Baring for sympathy, and found that the latter had abruptly, almost violently, turned his back. It surprised him considerably, for he had often declared his conviction that under no circumstances would this officer of his lose his iron composure. Baring's behaviour of the night before had seemed to corroborate this; in fact, he had even privately thought him somewhat cold-blooded.

But his present conduct seemed to indicate that even Baring was human, notwithstanding his strength; and in his heart the colonel liked him for it. After a moment he began to speak, considerately ignoring the other's attitude.

"She was providentially on the further hill when it happened, and she had great difficulty in getting round to us; lost her way several times, poor girl, and only panic-stricken natives to direct her. It's been a shocking disaster—the native village entirely swept away, though not many European lives lost, I am glad to say. But Hyde is among the missing. You knew Hyde?"

"I knew him—well." Baring's words seemed to come with an effort.

"Ah, well, poor fellow; he probably didn't know much about it. Terrible, a thing of this sort. It's impossible yet to estimate the damage, but the whole of the lower valley is devastated. The Magician's bungalow has entirely disappeared, I hear. A good thing the old man was away from home."

At this point, to Colonel Latimer's relief, Baring turned. He was paler than usual, but there was no other trace of emotion about him.

"If you will allow me," he said, "I should like to go and speak to her, too."

"Certainly," the colonel said heartily. "Certainly. Go at once! No doubt she is expecting you. Tell the youngster I want him out here!"

And Baring went.

* * * * *

If Hope did expect him, she certainly did not anticipate the manner of his coming. The man who entered the colonel's drawing-room was not the man who had striven with a mastery that was almost brutal to bring her into subjection only the day before. She could not have told wherein the difference lay, but she was keenly aware of its existence. And because of her knowledge she felt no misgiving, no shadow of fear. She did not so much as wait for him to come to her. Simply moved by the woman's instinct that cannot err, she went straight to him, and so into his arms, clinging to him with a little sobbing laugh, and not speaking at all, because there were no words that could express what she yet found it so sublimely easy to tell him. Baring did not speak either, but he had a different reason for his silence. He only held her closely to him, till

presently, raising her face to his, she understood. And she laughed again, laughed through tears.

“Weren’t you rather quick to give up—hope?” she whispered.

He did not answer her, but she found nothing discouraging in his silence. Rather, it seemed to inspire her. She slipped her arms round his neck. Her tears were nearly gone.

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“Hope doesn’t die so easily,” she said softly. “And I’ll tell you another thing that is ever so much harder to kill, that can never die at all, in fact; or, perhaps I needn’t. Perhaps you can guess what it is?”

And again he did not answer her. He only bent, holding her fast pressed against his heart, and kissed her fiercely, passionately, even violently, upon the lips.

“My Hope!” he said. “My Hope!”

The Deliverer[1]

I

A PROMISE OF MARRIAGE

The band was playing very softly, very dreamily; it might have been a lullaby. The girl who stood on the balcony of the great London house, with the moonlight pouring full upon her, stooped, and nervously, fumblingly, picked up a spray of syringa that had fallen from among the flowers on her breast.

The man beside her, dark-faced and grave, put out a perfectly steady hand.

“May I have it?” he said.

She looked up at him with the start of a trapped animal. Her face was very pale. It was in striking contrast to the absolute composure of his. Very slowly and reluctantly she put the flower into his outstretched hand.

He took it, but he took her fingers also and kept them in his own.

“When will you marry me, Nina?” he asked.

She started again and made a frightened effort to free her hand.

He smiled faintly and frustrated it.

“When will you marry me?” he repeated.

She threw back her head with a gesture of defiance; but the courage in her eyes was that of desperation.

“If I marry you,” she said, “it will be purely and only for your money.”

He nodded. Not a muscle of his face moved.



"Of course," he said. "I know that."

"And you want me under those conditions?"

There was a quiver in the words that might have been either of scorn or incredulity.

"I want you under any conditions," he responded quietly. "Marry my money by all means if it attracts you! But you must take me with it."

The girl shrank.

"I can't!" she whispered suddenly.

He released her hand calmly, imperturbably.

"I will ask you again to-morrow," he said.

"No!" she said sharply.

He looked at her questioningly.

"No!" she repeated, with a piteous ring of uncertainty in her voice. "Mr. Wingarde, I say No!"

"But you don't mean it," he said, with steady conviction.

"I do mean it!" she gasped. "I tell you I do!"

She dropped suddenly into a low chair and covered her face with a moan.

The man did not move. He stared absently down into the empty street as if waiting for something. There was no hint of impatience about his strong figure. Simply, with absolute confidence, he waited.

Five minutes passed and he did not alter his position. The soft strains in the room behind them had swelled into music that was passionately exultant. It seemed to fill and overflow the silence between them. Then came a triumphant crash and it ended. From within sounded the gay buzz of laughing voices.

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Slowly Wingarde turned and looked at the bent, hopeless figure of the girl in the chair. He still held indifferently between his fingers the spray of white blossom for which he had made request.

He did not speak. Yet, as if in obedience to an unuttered command, the girl lifted her head and looked up at him. Her eyes were full of misery and indecision. They wavered beneath his steady gaze. Slowly, still moving as if under compulsion, she rose and stood before him, white and slim as a flower. She was quivering from head to foot.

The man still waited. But after a moment he put out his hand silently.

She did not touch it, choosing rather to lean upon the balustrade of the balcony for support. Then at last she spoke, in a whisper that seemed to choke her.

"I will marry you," she said—"for your money."

"I thought you would," Wingarde said very quietly.

He stood looking down at her bent head and white shoulders. There were sparkles of light in her hair that shone as precious metal shines in ore. Her hands were both fast gripped upon the ironwork on which she leant.

He took a step forward and was close beside her, but he did not again offer her his hand.

"Will you answer my original question?" he said. "I asked—when?"

In the moonlight he could see her shivering, shivering violently. She shook her head; but he persisted.

His manner was supremely calm and unhurried.

"This week?" he said.

She shook her head again with more decision.

"Oh, no—no!" she said.

"Next?" he suggested.

"No!" she said again.

He was looking at her full and deliberately, but she would not look at him. She was quaking in every limb. There was a pause. Then Wingarde spoke again.

"Why not next week?" he asked. "Have you any particular reason?"

She glanced at him.

"It would be—so soon," she faltered.

"What difference does that make?" A very strange smile touched his grim lips. "Having made up your mind to do something disagreeable, do you find shirking till the last moment makes it any easier—any more palatable? Surely the sooner it's over—"

"It never will be over," she broke in passionately. "It is for all my life! Ah, what am I saying? Mr. Wingarde"—she turned towards him, her face quivering painfully—"be patient with me! I have given my promise."

The smile on his face deepened into something that closely resembled a sneer.

"How long do you want me to wait?" he said. "Fifty years?"

She drew back sharply. But almost instantly he went on speaking.

"I will yield a point," he said, "if it means so much to you. But, you know, the wedding-day will dawn eventually, however remote we make it. Will you say next month?"

The girl's eyes wore a hunted look, but she kept them raised with desperate resolution. She did not answer him, however. After a moment he repeated his question. His face had become stern. The lines about his mouth were grimly resolute.

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"Will you say next month, Nina?" he said. "It shall be the last day of it if you wish. But —next month."

His tone was inexorable. He meant to win this point, and she knew it.

Her breath came quickly, unevenly; but in face of his mastery she made a great effort to control her agitation.

"Very well," she said, and she spoke more steadily than she had spoken at all during the interview. "I will marry you next month."

"Will you fix the day?" he asked.

She uttered a sudden, breathless laugh—the reckless laugh of the loser.

"Surely that cannot matter!" she said. "The first day or the last—as you say, what difference does it make?"

"You leave the choice to me?" he asked, without the smallest change of countenance.

"Certainly!" she said coldly.

"Then I choose the first," he rejoined.

And at the words she gave a great start as if already she repented the moment of recklessness.

The notes of a piano struck suddenly through the almost tragic silence that covered up the protest she had not dared to utter. A few quiet chords; and then a woman's voice began to sing. Slowly, with deep, hidden pathos, the words floated out into the night; and, involuntarily almost, the man and the girl stood still to listen:

Shadows and mist and night,
Darkness around the way,
Here a cloud and there a star,
Afterwards, Day!

Sorrow and grief and tears,
Eyes vainly raised above,
Here a thorn and there a rose;
Afterwards, Love!

The voice was glorious, the rendering sublime. The spell of the singer was felt in the utter silence that followed.

Wingarde's eyes never left his companion's face. But the girl had turned from him. She was listening, rapt and eager. She had forgotten his very presence at her side. As the last passionate note thrilled into silence she drew a long breath. Her eyes were full of tears.

Suddenly she came to earth—to the consciousness of his watching eyes—and her expression froze into contemptuous indifference. She turned her head and faced him, scorning the tears she could not hide.

In her look were bitter dislike, fierce resistance, outraged pride.

"Some people," she said, with a little, icy smile, "would prefer to say 'Afterwards, Death!' I am one of them."

Wingarde looked back at her with complete composure. He also seemed faintly contemptuous.

"You probably know as much of the one as of the other," he coolly responded.

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 1: I desire to acknowledge my indebtedness to the Author—I regret to say unknown to me—of the little poem which I have quoted in this story.]

II

A RING OF VALUE

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“So Nina has made up her mind to retrieve the family fortunes,” yawned Leo, the second son of the house. “Uncommonly generous of her. My only regret is that it didn’t occur to her that it would be a useful thing to do some time back. Is the young man coming to discuss settlements to-night?”

“What a beast you are!” growled Burton, the eldest son.

“We’re all beasts, if it comes to that,” returned Leo complacently. “May as well say it as think it. She has simply sold herself to the highest bidder to get the poor old pater out of Queer Street. And we shall, I hope, get our share of the spoil. I understand that Wingarde is lavish with his worldly goods. He certainly ought to be. He’s a millionaire of the first water. A thousand or so distributed among his wife’s relations would mean no more to him than the throwing of the crusts to the sparrows.” He stopped to laugh lazily. “And the wife’s relations would flock in swarms to the feast,” he added in a cynical drawl.

Burton growled again unintelligibly. He strongly resented the sacrifice, though he could not deny that there was dire need for it.

The family fortunes were at a very low ebb. His father’s lands were mortgaged already beyond their worth, and he and his brother had been trained for nothing but a life of easy independence.

There were five more sons of the family, all at various stages of education—two at college, three at Eton. It behooved the only girl of the family to put her shoulder to the wheel if the machine were to be kept going on its uphill course. Lord Marchmont had speculated desperately and with disastrous results during the past five years. His wife was hopelessly extravagant. And, of late, visions of the bankruptcy court had nearly distracted the former.

It had filtered round among his daughter’s admirers that money, not rank, would win the prize. But somehow no one had expected Hereford Wingarde, the financial giant, to step coolly forward and secure it for himself. He had been regarded as out of the running. Women did not like him. He was scarcely ever seen in Society. And it was freely rumoured that he hated women.

Nina Marchmont, moreover, had always treated him with marked coldness, as if to demonstrate the fact that his wealth held no attractions for her. On the rare occasions that they met she was always ready to turn aside with half-contemptuous dislike on her proud face, and amuse herself with the tamest of her worshippers rather than hold any intercourse with the fabulous monster of the money-markets.

Certainly there was a surprise in store for the world in which she moved. It was also certain that she meant to carry it through with rigid self-control.

Meeting her two brothers at lunch, she received the half-shamed congratulations of one and the sarcastic comments of the other without the smallest hint of discomfiture. She had come straight from an interview with her father whom she idolized, and his gruff: "Well, my dear, well; delighted that you have fallen in love with the right man," and the unmistakable air of relief that had accompanied the words, had warmed her heart.

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She had been very anxious about her father of late. The occasional heart attacks to which he was subject had become much more frequent, and she knew that his many embarrassments and perplexities were weighing down his health. Well, that anxiety was at least lightened. She would be able to help in smoothing away his difficulties. Surely the man of millions would place her in a position to do so! He had almost undertaken to do so.

The glad thought nerved her to face the future she had chosen. She was even very faintly conscious of a mitigation of her antipathy for the man who had made himself her master. Besides, even though married to him, she surely need not see much of him. She knew that he spent the whole of his day in the City. She would still be free to spend hers as she listed.

And so, when she saw him that evening, when his momentous interview with her father was over, she was moved to graciousness for the first time. A passing glimpse of her father's face assured her that all had gone well, aye, more than well.

As for Wingarde, he waived the money question altogether when he found himself alone with his *fiancee*.

"Your father will tell you what provision I am prepared to make for you," he coldly said. "He is fully satisfied—on your behalf."

She felt the sting of the last words, and flushed furiously. But she found no word of indignation to utter, though in a moment her graciousness was a thing of the past.

"I have not deceived you," she said, speaking with an effort.

He gave her a keen look.

"I don't think you could," he rejoined quietly. "And I certainly shouldn't advise you to try."

And then to her utter surprise and consternation he took her shoulders between his hands.

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

There was not a shade of emotion to be detected in either face or voice as he made the request. Yet Nina drew back from him with a shudder that she scarcely attempted to disguise.

"No!" she said vehemently.

He set her free instantly, and she thought he smiled. But the look in his eyes frightened her. She felt the mastery that would not compel.



“One more thing,” he said, calmly passing on. “It is usual for a girl in your position to wear an engagement ring. I should like you to wear this in my honour.”

He held out to her on the palm of his hand a little, old-fashioned ring set with rubies and pearls. Nina glanced at him in momentary surprise. It was not in the least what she would have expected as the rich man’s first gift. Involuntarily she hesitated. She felt that he had offered her something more than mere precious stones set in gold.

He waited for her to take the ring in absolute silence.

“Mr. Wingarde,” she said nervously, “I—I am afraid it is something you value.”

“It is,” he said. “It belonged to my mother. In fact, it was her engagement ring. But why should you be afraid?”

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For the first time there was a note of softness in his voice.

Nina's face was burning.

"I would rather have something you do not care about," she said in a low tone.

Instantly his face grew hard.

"Give me your hand!" he said shortly. "The left, please!"

She gave it, the flush dying swiftly from her cheeks. She could not control its trembling as he deliberately fitted the ring on to the third finger.

"Understand," he said, "that I wish this ring and no other to be the token of your engagement to me. If you object to it, I am sorry. But, after all, it will only be in keeping with the rest. I must go now as I have an appointment to keep. Your father has asked me to lunch on Sunday and I have accepted. I hope you will pay me the compliment of being at home."

III

THE HONEYMOON

The first of June fell on a Saturday that year, and a good many people remained in town for it in order to be present at the wedding of Lord Marchmont's only daughter to Hereford Wingarde, the millionaire.

Comments upon Nina's choice had even yet scarcely died out, and Archie Neville, her faithful friend and admirer, was still wondering why he and his very comfortable income had been passed over for this infernal bounder whom no one knew. He had proposed to Nina twice, and on each occasion her refusal had seemed to him to be tinged with regret. To use his own expression, he was "awfully cut up" by the direction affairs had taken. But, philosophically determined to make the best of it, he attended the wedding with a smiling face, and even had the audacity to kiss the bride—a privilege that had not been his since childhood.

Hereford Wingarde, standing by his wife's side, the recipient of congratulations from crowds of people who seemed to be her intimate friends, but whom he had never seen before, noted that salute of Archie Neville's with a very slight lift of his black brows. He noted also that Nina returned it, and that her hand lingered in that of the young man longer than in those of any of her other friends. It was a small circumstance, but it stuck in his memory.

A house had been lent them for the honeymoon by one of Nina's wealthy friends in the Lake District. They arrived there hard upon midnight, having dined on board the train.

A light meal awaited them, to which they immediately sat down.

"You are tired," Wingarde said, as the lamplight fell upon his bride's flushed face and bright eyes.

His own eyes were critical. She laughed and turned aside from them.

"I am not at all tired," she said. "I am only sorry the journey is over. I miss the noise."

He made no further comment. He had a disconcerting habit of dropping into sudden silences. It took possession of him now, and they finished their refreshment with scarcely a word.

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Then Nina rose, holding her head very high. He embarrassed her, and she strongly resented being embarrassed.

Wingarde at once rose also. He looked more massive than usual, almost as if braced for a particular effort.

"Going already?" he said. "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Nina.

She glanced at him with momentary indecision. Then she held out her hand.

He took it and kept it.

"I think you will have to kiss me on our wedding night," he said.

She turned very white. The hunted look had returned to her eyes. She answered him with the rapidity of desperation.

"You can do as you like with me now," she said. "I am not able to prevent you."

"You mean you would rather not?" he said, without the smallest hint of anger or disappointment in his tone.

She started a little at the question. There was no escaping the searching of his eyes.

"Of course I would rather not," she said.

He released her quivering hand and walked quietly to the door.

"Good-night, Nina!" he said, as he opened it.

She stood for a moment before she realized that he had yielded to her wish. Then, as he waited, she made a sudden impulsive movement towards him.

Her fingers rested for an instant on his arm.

"Good-night—Hereford!" she said.

He looked down at her hand, not offering to touch it. His lips relaxed cynically.

"Don't overwhelm me!" he said.

And in a flash she had passed him with blazing eyes and a heart that was full of fierce anger. So this was his reception of her first overture! Her cheeks burnt as she vowed to herself that she would attempt no more.

She did not see her husband again that night.

When they met in the morning, he seemed to have forgotten that they had parted in a somewhat strained atmosphere. The only peculiarity about his greeting was that it did not seem to occur to him to shake hands.

"There is plenty to do if you're feeling energetic," he said. 'Driving, riding, mountaineering, boating; which shall it be?"

"Have you no preference?" she asked, as she faced him over the coffee-urn.

He smiled slightly.

"Yes, I have," he said. "But let me hear yours first!"

"Driving," she said at once. "And now yours?"

"Mine was none of these things," he answered. "I wonder what sort of conveyance they can provide us with? Also what manner of horse? Are you going to drive or am I? Mind, you are to state your preference."

"Very well," she answered. "Then I'll drive, please, I know this country a little. I stayed near here three years ago with the Nevilles. Archie and I used to fish."

"Did you ever catch anything?" Wingarde asked, with his quiet eyes on her face.

"Of course we did," she answered. "Salmon trout—beauties. Oh, and other things. I forget what they were called. We had great fun, I remember."

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Her face flushed at the remembrance. Archie had been very romantic in those days, quite foolishly so. But somehow she had enjoyed it.

Wingarde said no more. He rose directly the meal was over. It was a perfect summer morning. The view from the windows was exquisite. Beyond the green stretches of the park rose peak after peak of sunlit mountains. There were a few cloud-shadows floating here and there. In one place, gleaming like a thread of silver, he could see a waterfall tumbling down a barren hillside.

Suddenly, through the summer silence, an octave of bells pealed joyously.

Nina started

“Why, it’s Sunday!” she exclaimed. “I had quite forgotten. We ought to go to church.”

Wingarde turned round.

“What an inspiration!” he said dryly.

His tone offended her. She drew herself up.

“Are you coming?” she asked coldly.

He looked at her with the same cynical smile with which he had received her overture the night before.

“No,” he said. “I won’t bore you with my company this morning.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“As you please,” she said, turning to the door.

He made no rejoinder. And as she passed out, she realized that he believed she had suggested going to church in order to escape an hour of his hated society. It was but a slight injustice and certainly not wholly unprovoked by her. But, curiously, she resented it very strongly. She almost felt as if he had insulted her.

She found him smoking in the garden when she returned from her solitary expedition, and she hoped savagely that he had found his own society as distasteful as she did; though on second thoughts this seemed scarcely possible.

She decided regretfully, yet with an inner sense of expediency, that she would spend the afternoon in his company. But her husband had other plans.

“You have had a hot walk,” he said. “You had better rest this afternoon. I am going to do a little mountaineering; but I mean to be back by tea-time. Perhaps when it is cool you will come for a stroll, unless you have arranged to attend the evening service also.”

He glanced at her and saw the indignant colour rise in her face. But she was too proud to protest.

“As you wish,” she said coldly.

Conversation during lunch was distinctly laboured. Wingarde’s silences were many and oppressive. It was an unspeakable relief to the girl when at length he took himself off. She told herself with a wry smile that he was getting on her nerves. She did not yet own that he frightened her.

The afternoon’s rest did her good; and when he returned she was ready for him.

He looked at her, as she sat in the garden before the tea-table in her muslin dress and big straw hat, with a shade of approval in his eyes.

He threw himself down into a chair beside her without speaking.

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"Have you been far?" she asked.

"To the top of the hill," he answered. "I had a splendid view of the sea."

"It must have been perfect," she said.

"You have been there?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "long ago; with Archie."

Wingarde turned his head and looked at her attentively. She tried to appear unconscious of his scrutiny, and failed signally. Before she could control it, the blood had rushed to her face.

"And you found it worth doing?" he asked.

The question seemed to call for no reply, and she made none.

But yet again she felt as if he had insulted her.

She was still burning with silent resentment when they started on their walk. He strolled beside her, cool and unperturbed. If he guessed her mood, he made no sign.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked presently.

"It is the road to the wishing-gate," she replied icily. "There is a good view of the lake farther on."

He made no further enquiry, and they walked on in dead silence through exquisite scenery.

They reached the wishing-gate, and the girl stopped almost involuntarily.

"Is this the fateful spot?" said Wingarde, coming suddenly out of his reverie. "What is the usual thing to do? Cut our names on the gate-post? Rather a low-down game, I always think."

She uttered a sudden, breathless laugh. "My name is here already," she said, pointing with a finger that shook slightly at some minute characters cut into the second bar of the gate.

He bent and looked at the inscription—two names cut with infinite care, two minute hearts intertwined beneath.

Nina watched him with a scornful little smile on her lips.

“Artistic, isn’t it?” she said.

He straightened himself abruptly, and their eyes met. There was a curious glint in his that she had never seen before. She put her hand sharply to her throat. Quite suddenly she knew that she was afraid of this monster to whom she had given herself—horribly, unreasonably afraid.

But he did not speak, and her scare began to subside.

“Now I’m going to wish,” she said mounting the lowest bar of the gate.

He spoke then, abruptly, cynically.

“Really,” he said, “what can you have to wish for now?”

She looked back at him defiantly. Her eyes were on a level with his. Because he had frightened her, she went the more recklessly. It would never answer to let him suspect this power of his.

“Something that I’m afraid you will never give me,” she said, a bitter ring in her voice.

“What?” he asked sharply.

“Among other things, happiness,” she said. “You can never give me that.”

She saw him bite his lip, but he controlled himself to speak quietly.

“Surely you make a mistake,” he said, “to wish for something which, since you are my wife, can never be yours!”

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She laughed, still standing on the gate, and telling herself that she felt no fear.

"Very well," she said, "I will wish for a Deliverer first."

"For what?"

His naked fist banged down upon the gate-post, and she saw the blood start instantly and begin to flow. She knew in that moment that she had gone too far.

Her fear returned in an overwhelming flood. She stumbled off the gate and faced him, white to the lips.

A terrible pause followed, in which she knew herself to be fighting him with every inch of her strength. Then suddenly, without apparent reason, she gave in.

"I was joking," she said, in a low voice. "I spoke in jest."

He made her a curt bow, his face inflexibly stern.

"It is good of you to explain," he said. "With my limited knowledge of your character and motives, I am apt to make mistakes."

He turned from her abruptly with the words, and, shaking the blood from his hand, bound the wound with his handkerchief.

"Shall we go on?" he said then.

And Nina accompanied him, ashamed and afraid. She felt as if at the last moment she had asked for quarter; and, contemptuously, because she was a woman, he had given it.

IV

A GREIVIOUS WOUND

After that moment of madness by the wishing-gate Nina's wanton desire to provoke to wrath the monster to whom she was chained died a sudden and unnatural death. She was scrupulously careful of his feelings from that day forward, and he treated her with a freezing courtesy, a cynical consideration, that seemed to form a barrier behind which the actual man concealed himself and watched.

That he did watch her was a fact of which she was miserably conscious. She knew with the certain knowledge of intuition that he studied her continually. She was perpetually under the microscope of his criticism, and there were times when she told herself she

could not bear it. He was too much for her; too pitiless a tyrant, too stern a master. Her life was becoming insupportable.

A fortnight of their honeymoon had passed away, when one morning Wingarde looked up with a frown from a letter.

"I have had a summons to town," he said abruptly.

Nina's heart leapt at the words, and her relief showed itself for one unmanageable second in her face.

He saw it, and she knew he saw it.

"I shall be sorry," he said, with cutting sarcasm, "to curtail your enjoyment here, but the necessity for my presence is imperative. I should like to catch the two-thirty this afternoon if you can be ready by then."

Nina's face was burning. She held herself very erect.

"I can be ready before then if you wish," she said stiffly.

He rose from the breakfast-table with a curt laugh. As he passed her he flicked her cheek with the envelope he held in his hand.

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"You are a dutiful wife, my dear," he said.

She winced sharply, and bent her head over her own letters.

"I do my best," she said, after a moment.

"I am sure of it," he responded dryly.

He paused at the door as if he expected her to say more. More came, somewhat breathlessly, and not upon the same subject.

Nina glanced up with sudden resolution.

"Hereford," she said, "can you let me have some money?"

She spoke with the rapidity of nervousness. She saw his hand leave the door. His face remained quite unmoved.

"For yourself?" he asked.

Considering the amount of the settlement he had made upon her, the question was absurd. Nina smiled faintly.

"No," she said, "not for myself."

He took a cheque-book from his pocket and walked to a writing-table.

"How much do you want?" he asked.

She hesitated, and he looked round at her.

"I—I only want to borrow it," she said haltingly. "It is rather a big sum."

"How much?" he repeated.

"Five thousand pounds," she answered, in a low voice.

He continued to look at her for several seconds. Finally he turned and shut up his cheque-book with a snap.

"The money will be placed to your credit to-morrow," he said. "But though a financier, I am not a money-lender. Please understand that! And let your family understand it, too."

And, rising, he walked straight from the room.

No further reference was made to the matter on either side. Nina's pride or her courage shrank from any expression of gratitude.

In the afternoon with intense thankfulness she travelled southward. Never were London smoke and dust more welcome.

They went straight to Wingarde's great house in Crofton Square. Dinner was served immediately upon their arrival.

"I must ask you to excuse me," Wingarde said, directly dessert was placed upon the table. "I have to go out—on business. In case I don't see you again, good-night!"

He was on his feet as he spoke. In her surprise Nina started up also.

"At this hour!" she exclaimed. "Why, it is nearly eleven!"

"At this hour," he grimly responded, "you will be able to dispense with my society no doubt."

His tone silenced her. Yet, as he turned to go, she looked after him with mute questioning in her eyes. She had a feeling that he was keeping something from her, and—perhaps it was merely the natural result of womanly curiosity baffled—she was vaguely hurt that he did not see fit to tell her whither his business was taking him.

A few words would have sufficed; but he had not chosen to utter them, and her pride was sufficient to suppress any display of interest in his affairs. She would not court the snub that she felt convinced he would not hesitate to administer.

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So he left her without explanation, and Nina went drearily to bed. On the following morning, however, the sun shone upon her, and she went downstairs in better spirits.

The first person she encountered was her husband. He was sauntering about the morning-room in his overcoat, a cup of strong tea in his hand.

He greeted her perfunctorily, as his fashion was.

“Oh, good-morning!” he said. “I have only just got back. I was detained unavoidably. I am going upstairs for an hour’s rest, and then I shall be off to the City. I don’t know if you would care to drive in with me. I shall use the car, but it will then be at your service for the rest of the day.”

“Have you been working all night?” Nina asked incredulously.

He nodded.

“It was unavoidable,” he said again, with a touch of impatience. “You had better have a second brew of tea, this is too strong for you.”

He set down his cup and rang the bell.

Nina stood and looked at him. He certainly did not look like a man who had been up all night. Alert, active, tough as wire, he walked back to the table and gathered together his letters. A faint feeling of admiration stirred in her heart. His strength appealed to her for the first time.

“I should like to drive into the City with you,” she said, after a pause.

He gave her a sharp glance.

“I thought you would be wanting to go to the bank,” he remarked coolly.

She flushed and turned her back upon him. It was an unprovoked assault, and she resented it fiercely.

When they met again an hour later she was on the defensive, ready to resist his keenest thrust, and, seeing it, he laughed cynically.

“Armed to the teeth?” he asked, with a careless glance at her slim figure and delicate face.

She did not answer him by so much as a look. He handed her into the car and took his seat beside her.



"Can you manage to dine out with some of your people to-night?" he asked. "I am afraid I shall not be home till late."

"You seem to have a great deal on your hands," she remarked coldly.

"Yes," said Wingarde.

It was quite obvious that he had no intention of taking her into his confidence, and Nina was stubbornly determined to betray no interest. Then and there she resolved that since he chose to give himself up entirely to the amassing of wealth, not hesitating to slight his wife in the process, she also would live her separate life wholly independent of his movements.

She pretended to herself that she would make the most of it. But deep in her heart she hated him for thus setting her aside. His action pierced straight through her pride to something that sheltered behind it, and inflicted a grievous wound.

V

A STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY

"Jove! Here's a crush!" laughed Archie Neville. "Delighted to meet you again, Mrs. Wingarde! How did you find the Lakes?"

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His good-looking, boyish face was full of pleasure. He had not expected to meet her. Nina's welcoming smile was radiant.

"Oh, here you are, Archie!" she exclaimed, as they shook hands. "Someone said you were out of town, but I couldn't believe anything so tragic."

"Quite right," said Archie. "Never believe the worst till there is positively no alternative. I'm not out of town, and I'm not going to be. It's awfully nice to see you again, you know! I thought the sun had set for the rest of the season."

Nina uttered a gay little laugh.

"Oh, dear, no! We certainly intended to stay longer, but Hereford was summoned back on business, and I really wasn't sorry on the whole. I did rather regret missing all the fun."

Archie laughed.

"Hereford must be doing dark deeds then," he said, "of which he keeps the rest of the world in complete ignorance. The markets are dead flat just now—nothing doing whatever. It's enough to make you tear your hair."

"Really!" said Nina. "He gave me to understand that it was something urgent."

And then she became suddenly silent, meeting Archie's eyes, and aware of the surprise he was too much of a gentleman to express. With a cold feeling of dissatisfaction she turned from the subject.

"It's very nice to be back again among my friends," she said. "Can't you come and dine to-morrow and go to the theatre afterwards?"

Archie considered a moment, and she knew that when he answered he was cancelling other engagements.

"Thanks, I shall be delighted!" he said, "if I shan't be *de trop*."

There was a touch of mockery in Nina's smile.

"We shall probably be alone," she said. "My husband's business keeps him late in the City. We have been home a week, and he has only managed to dine with me once."

"Isn't he here to-night?" asked Archie.

She shook her head.

"What an infernal shame!" he exclaimed impulsively. "Oh, I beg your pardon! That was a slip."

But Nina laid her hand on his sleeve.

"You needn't apologize," she said, in a low voice. "One can't have everything. If you marry—an outsider—for his money, you have to pay the penalty."

Archie looked at her with further indiscretion upon the tip of his tongue. But he thought twice and kept it back.

"I say, you know," he said awkwardly, "I—I'm sorry."

"Thank you," she said gently. "Well, you will come to-morrow?"

"Of course," he said. "What theatre shall we go to? I'll bring the tickets with me."

The conversation drifted away into indifferent topics and presently they parted. Nina was almost gay of heart as she drove homeward that night. She had begun to feel her loneliness very keenly, and Archie's society promised to be of value.

Her husband was waiting for her when she returned. As she entered her own sitting-room, he started up abruptly from an arm-chair as if her entrance had suddenly roused him from sleep. She was considerably surprised to see him there, for he had never before intruded without her permission.

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He glanced at the clock, but made no comment upon the lateness of the hour.

"I hope you have enjoyed yourself," he said somewhat formally.

The words were as unexpected as was his presence there. Nina stood for a moment, waiting for something further.

Then, as he did not speak, she shrugged her shoulders and threw back her cloak.

"It was a tremendous crush," she said indifferently. "No, I didn't enjoy it particularly. But it was something to do."

"I am sorry you are feeling bored," he said gravely.

Nina sat down in silence. She did not in the least understand what had brought him there.

"It is getting rather late," she remarked, after a pause. "I am just going to have a cup of tea and then go to bed."

A little tea-tray stood on the table at her elbow. A brass kettle was fizzing cheerily above a spirit stove.

"Do you want a cup?" she asked, with a careless glance upwards.

He had remained standing, looking down at her with an expression that puzzled her slightly. His eyes were heavy, as if they wanted sleep.

"Thank you," he said.

Nina threw off her wraps and sat up to brew the tea. The light from a rose-shaded lamp poured full upon her. She looked superb and she knew it. The knowledge deprived her for once of that secret sense of fear that so brooded at the back of her intercourse with this man. He stood in total silence behind her. She began to wonder what was coming.

Having made tea, she leant back again with her hands behind her head.

"I suppose we must give it two minutes to draw," she remarked, with a smothered yawn. "Isn't it frightfully hot to-night? I believe there is thunder about."

He made no response, and she turned her eyes slowly upon him. She knew he was watching her, but a curious sense of independence possessed her that night. He did not disconcert her.

Their eyes met. Hers were faintly insolent. His were inscrutable.

At last he spoke.

"I am sorry you have not enjoyed yourself," he said, speaking rather stiffly. "Will you—by way of a change—come out with me to-morrow night? I think I may anyhow promise you"—he paused slightly—"that you shall not be bored."

There was a short silence. Nina turned and moved the cups on the little tray. She did not, however, seem embarrassed.

"I happen to be engaged to-morrow evening," she said coldly at length.

"Is it important?" he asked. "Can't you cancel the engagement?"

She uttered a little, flippant laugh. She had not hoped for such an opportunity as this.

"I'm afraid I really can't," she said. "You should have asked me earlier."

"What are you going to do?"

There was a new note in his voice—a hint of mastery. She resented it instantly.

"That is my affair," she said calmly, beginning to pour out the tea.

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He looked at her as if he scarcely believed his ears. He was silent for some seconds, and very quietly she turned to him and handed him a cup.

He took it from her and instantly set it aside.

“Be good enough to answer my question!” he said.

She heard the gathering sternness in his tone, and, tea-cup in hand, she laughed. A curious recklessness possessed her that night. She felt as if she had the strength to fling off the bands of tyranny. But her heart had begun to beat very fast. She realized that this was no mere skirmish.

“Why should I answer you?” she asked, helping herself to some more cream with a hand that was slightly unsteady in spite of her effort to control it. “I do not see the necessity.”

“I think you do,” he rejoined.

Nina said no more. She swallowed her tea, nibbled at a wafer with a species of deliberate trifling calculated to proclaim aloud her utter fearlessness, and at length rose to go.

In that moment her husband stepped forward and took her by the shoulders.

“Before you leave this room, please,” he said quietly.

She drew back from him in a blaze of indignant rebellion.

“I will not!” she said. “Let me go instantly!”

His hold tightened. His face was more grim than she had ever seen it. His eyes seemed to beat hers down. Yet when he spoke he did not raise his voice.

“I have borne a good deal from you, Nina,” he said. “But there is a limit to every man’s endurance.”

“You married me against my will,” she panted. “Do you think I have not had anything to endure, too?”

“That accusation is false,” he said. “You married me of your own accord. Without my money, you would have passed me by with scorn. You know it.”

She began to tremble violently.

“Do you deny that?” he insisted pitilessly.



"At least you pressed me hard," she said.

"I did," he replied. "I saw you meant to sell yourself. And I did not mean you to go to any scoundrel."

"So you bought me for yourself?" she said, with a wild laugh.

"I did." Wingarde's voice trembled a little. "I paid your price," he said, "and I have taken very little for it. You have offered me still less. Now, Nina, understand! This is not going on for ever. I simply will not bear it. You are my wife, sworn to obey me—and obey me you shall."

He held her fast in front of him. She could feel the nervous strength of his hands. It thrilled her through and through. She felt like a trapped animal in his grasp. Her resistance began to waver.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I am going to conquer you," he said grimly.

"You won't do it by violence," she returned quickly.

Her words seemed to pierce through a weak place in the iron armour in which he had clad himself. Abruptly he set her free.

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The suddenness of his action so surprised her that she tottered a little. He made a swift move towards her; but in a second she had recovered herself, and he drew back. She saw that his face was very pale.

“Are you quite sure of that?” he asked.

She did not answer him. Shaking from head to foot, she stood facing him. But words would not come.

After a desperate moment the tension was relaxed. He turned on his heel.

“Well, I have warned you,” he said, and strode heavily away.

The moment she ceased to hear his footsteps, Nina sank down into a chair and burst into tears.

VI

AN OFFER OF HELP

On the following morning Nina did not descend the stairs till she had heard the car leave the house. The strain of the previous night's interview had told upon her. She felt that she had not the resolution to face such another.

The heat was intense. She remembered with regret that she had promised to attend a charitable bazaar in the City that afternoon. Somehow she could summon no relish either for that or the prospect of the theatre with Archie at night. She wondered whither her husband had proposed to take her, half wishing she had yielded a point to go.

She went to the bazaar, fully prepared to be bored. The first person she saw, however, was Archie, and at once the atmosphere seemed to lighten.

He attached himself to her without a moment's delay.

“I say,” he said, “send your car back! I'll take you home. I've got my hansom here. It's much more exciting than a motor. We'll go and have tea somewhere presently.”

Nina hesitated for barely a second, then did as he required.

Archie's eyes were frankly tender. But, after all, why not? They had known each other all their lives. She laughed at the momentary scruple as they strolled through the bazaar together.

Archie bought her an immense fan—"to keep off the flies," as he elegantly expressed it; and she made a few purchases herself as in duty bound, and conversed with several acquaintances.

Then, her companion becoming importunate for departure, she declined tea in the hall and went away with him.

Archie was enjoying himself hugely.

"Now, where would you like to go for tea?" he asked as they drove away.

"I don't care in the least," she said, "only I'm nearly dead. Let it be somewhere close at hand."

Archie promptly decided in favour of a tea-shop in St. Paul's Churchyard.

"I suppose you have read the morning papers?" he said, as they sat down. "I thought your husband had something up his sleeve."

"What do you mean?" queried Nina quickly. "No, I know nothing."

Archie laughed.

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"Don't you really? Well, he has made a few thousands sit up, I can tell you. You've heard of the Crawley gold fields? Heaven knows where they are, but that doesn't matter—somewhere in Australia of course. No one knew anything about them till recently. Well, they were boomed tremendously a little while ago. Your husband was the prime mover. He went in for them largely. Everyone went for them. They held for a bit, then your husband began to sell as fast as he could. And then, of course, the shares went down to zero. People waited a bit, then sold—for what they could get. No one knew who did the buying till yesterday. My dear Nina, your husband has bought the lot. He has got the whole concern into his hands for next to nothing. The gold fields have turned up trumps. They stand three times as high as they ever did before. He was behind the scenes. He merely sold to create a slump. If he chose to sell again he could command almost any price he cared to ask. Well, one man's loss is another man's gain. But he's as rich as Croesus. They say there are a good many who would like to be at his throat."

Nina listened with disgust undisguised on her face.

"How I loathe money!" she said abruptly.

"Oh, I say!" protested Archie. "You're not such an extremist as that. Think of the host of good things that can't be done without it."

"What good things does he do?" she demanded contemptuously. "He simply lives to heap up wealth."

"You can't say for certain that he doesn't do a few decent things when no one's looking," suggested Archie, who liked to be fair, even to those for whom he felt no liking. "People—rich men like that—do, you know. Why, only last night I heard of a man—he's a West End physician—who runs a sort of private hospital somewhere in the back slums, and actually goes and practises there when his consulting hours are over. Pure philanthropy that, you know. And no one but the slummers any the wiser. They say he's simply adored among them. They go to him in all their troubles, physical or otherwise. That's only an instance. I don't say your husband does that sort of thing. But he may."

Nina uttered her bitter little laugh.

"You always were romantic, Archie," she said. "But I'm afraid I'm past the romantic age. Anyhow I'm an unbeliever."

Archie gave her a keen look.

"I say—" he said, and stopped.

"Well?" Nina looked back at him questioningly.

"I beg your pardon," he said, colouring boyishly. "You won't like what I was going to say. I think I won't say it."

"You needn't consider my feelings," she returned, "I assure you I am not used to it."

"Oh, well," he said. "I was going to say that you talk as if he were a beast to you. Is he?"

Nina raised her dark eyebrows and did not instantly reply. Archie looked away from her. He felt uncomfortably that he had gone too far.

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Then slowly she made answer:

"No, he is not. I think he has begun to realize that the battle is not always to the strong."

Struck by something in her tone, Archie glanced at her again.

"Jove!" he suddenly said. "How you hate him!"

The words were out almost before he knew it. Nina's face changed instantly. But Archie's contrition was as swift.

"Oh, I say, forgive me!" he broke in, with a persuasive hand on her arm. "Do, if you can! I know it was unpardonable of me. I'm so awfully sorry. You see, I—"

She interrupted hastily.

"It doesn't matter—it doesn't matter. I understand. It was quite an excusable mistake. Please don't look so distressed! It hasn't hurt me much. I think it would have hurt me more if it had been literally true."

The sentences ran out rapidly. She was as agitated as he. They had the little recess to themselves, and their voices scarcely rose above a whisper.

"Then it wasn't true?" Archie said, with a look of relief.

Nina drew back. She was not prepared to go as far as that. All her life she had sought to be honest in her dealings.

"It hasn't come actually to that yet," she said under her breath. "But it may—it may."

Somehow it relieved the burden that pressed upon her to be able to speak thus openly to her life-long comrade. But Archie looked grieved, almost shocked.

"What will you do if it does?" he asked.

"I shall leave him," she said, her face growing hard. "I think he understands that."

There was a heavy silence between them. Then impulsively, with pure generosity, Archie spoke.

"Nina," he said, "if you should need—help—of any sort, you know—will you count on me?"

Nina hesitated for a moment.

"Please!" said Archie gently.

She bent her head.

“Thank you,” she said. “I will.”

VII

THE DELIVERER

Half-an-hour later they went out again into the blazing sunshine.

“What do you think of my hack?” Archie asked, as they drove away westwards. “I got him at Tattersall’s the other day. I haven’t driven him before to-day. He’s a bit jumpy. But I like an animal that can jump, don’t you know.”

“I know you do,” laughed Nina. “I believe that is purely why you haven’t started a motor yet. They can do everything that is vicious and extraordinary except jump. But do you really like a horse to shy at everything he passes? Look at him now! He doesn’t like that hand-cart with red paint.”

“He’s an artist,” grinned Archie. “It offends his eye; and no wonder. Don’t be alarmed, though! He won’t do anything outrageous. My man knows how to manage him.”

Nina leant back. She was not, as a rule, nervous, but, as Archie’s new purchase was forced protesting past the object of his fright, she was conscious of a very decided feeling of uneasiness. The animal looked to her vicious as well as alarmed.

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They got safely past the hand-cart, and a brief interval of tranquillity followed as they trotted briskly down Ludgate Hill.

“He won’t have time to look at anything now,” said Archie cheerfully.

The words had scarcely left his lips when the tire of a stationary car they were passing exploded with a report like a rifle shot. In a second Archie’s animal leapt into the air, struck the ground with all four hoofs together—and bolted.

“My man’s got him,” said Archie. “Sit still! Nothing’s going to happen.”

He put his arm in front of Nina and gripped the farther side of the hansom.

But Nina had not the smallest intention of losing her head. During the first few moments her sensations were more of breathless interest than fear. Certainly she was very far from panic.

She saw the roadway before them clear as if by magic before their galloping advance. She heard shouts, warning cries, yells of excitement. She also heard, very close to her, Archie’s voice, swearing so evenly and deliberately that she was possessed by an insane desire to laugh at him. Above everything else, she heard the furious, frantic rhythm of the flying hoofs before them. And yet somehow inexplicably she did not at first feel afraid.

They tore with a speed that seemed to increase momentarily straight down the thoroughfare that a few seconds before had seemed choked with traffic. They shaved by vans, omnibuses, hand-barrows. Houses and shops seemed to whirl past them, like a revolving nightmare—ever the same, yet somehow ever different. A train was thundering over the bridge as they galloped beneath it. The maddened horse heard and stretched himself to his utmost speed.

And then came tragedy—the tragedy that Nina always felt that she had known from the beginning of that wild gallop must come.

As they raced on to Ludgate Circus she had a momentary glimpse of a boy on a bicycle traversing the street before them at right angles. Archie ceased suddenly to swear. The reins that till then had been taut sagged down abruptly. He made a clutch at them and failed to catch them. They slipped away sideways and dragged on the ground.

There came a shock, a piercing cry. Nina started forward for the first time, but Archie flung his arms round her, holding her fast. Then they were free of the obstacle and dashing on again.

“Let me see!” she gasped. “Let me see!”

They bumped against a curb and nearly overturned. Then one of their wheels caught another vehicle. The hansom was whizzed half round, but the pitiless hoofs still tore on and almost miraculously the worst was still averted.

Archie's hold was close and nearly suffocated her; but over his shoulder Nina still managed to look ahead.

And thus looking she saw the most wonderful, and the most terrifying, episode of the whole adventure.

She saw a man in faultless City attire leap suddenly from the footway to the road in front of them. For a breathless instant she saw him poised to spring, and in her heart there ran a sudden, choking sense of anguished recognition. She shut her eyes and cowered in Archie's arms. Deliverance was coming. She felt it in every nerve. But how? And by whom?

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There came a jerk and a plunge, a furious, straining effort. The fierce galloping ceased, yet they made still for a few yards a halting, difficult progress.

Then they stopped altogether, and she felt the shock of hoofs upon the splashboard.

Another moment and that, too, ceased. They stood still, and Archie's arms relaxed.

Nina lifted her head and saw her husband hatless in the road, his face set and grim, his hands gripping the reins with a strength that evidently impressed upon the runaway the futility of opposition. In his eyes was a look that made her tremble.

VIII

AFTER THE ACCIDENT

"You had better go home in the car," Wingarde said. "It is waiting for me in Fenwick Street. Mr. Neville, perhaps you will be good enough to accompany my wife. Your animal is tame enough now. Your man will have no difficulty with it, if he is to be found."

"Ah! Exactly!" Archie said.

He looked round vaguely. Nina was leaning on his arm. His man was nowhere to be seen, having some minutes since abandoned a situation which he had discovered to be beyond his powers to deal with.

A crowd surrounded them, and a man at his elbow informed him that his driver had thrown down the reins and jumped off before they were clear of the railway bridge. Archie swallowed the comment upon this discreet behaviour, that rose to his lips.

A moment later Wingarde, who had seemed on the point of departure, pushed his way hastily-back to him.

"Never mind the hansom!" he said. "I believe your man has been hurt. I will see to it. Just take my wife out of this, will you? I want to see if that boy is alive or dead."

He had turned again with the words, forcing his way through the crowd. Nina pressed after him. She was as white as the dress she wore. There was no holding her back. Archie could only accompany her.

It was difficult to get through the gathering throng. When finally they succeeded in doing so, they found Wingarde stooping over the unconscious victim of the accident. He had satisfied himself that the boy lived, and was feeling rapidly for broken bones.

Becoming aware of Nina's presence, he looked up with a frown. Then, seeing her piteous face, he refrained from uttering the curt rebuke that had risen to his lips.

"I want you to go home," he said. "I will do all that is necessary here. Neville, take my wife home! The car is close at hand in Fenwick Street."

"He isn't dead?" faltered Nina shakily.

"No—certainly not." Wingarde's voice was confident.

He turned from her to speak to a policeman; and Nina yielded to Archie's hand on her arm. She was more upset than she had realized.

Neither of them spoke during the drive westwards. Archie scowled a good deal, but he gave no vent to his feelings.

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Arrived in Crofton Square, he would have taken his leave of her. But Nina would not hear of this.

"Please stay till Hereford comes!" she entreated. "You will want to know what he has done. Besides, I want you."

Archie yielded to pressure. No word was spoken by either in praise or admiration of the man who had risked his life to save theirs. Somehow it was a difficult subject between them.

Nearly two hours later Wingarde arrived on foot. He reported Archie's man only slightly the worse for his adventure.

"It ought to have killed him," he said briefly. "But men of that sort never are killed. I told him to drive back to stables. The horse was as quiet as a lamb."

"And the boy?" Nina asked eagerly.

"Oh, the boy!" Wingarde said. "His case is more serious. He was taken to the Wade Home. I went with him. I happen to know Wade."

"That's the West End physician," said Archie. "He calls himself Wade, I know, when he wants to be *incog*."

"That's the man," said Wingarde. "But I am not acquainted with him as the West End physician. He is purely a City acquaintance. Oh, are you going, Neville? We shall see you again, I suppose?"

It was not cordially spoken. Archie coloured and glanced at Nina.

"You are coming to dinner, aren't you?" she said at once. "Please do! We shall be alone. And you promised, didn't you?"

Archie hesitated for a moment. Wingarde was looking at him piercingly.

"I hope you won't allow my presence to interfere with any plans you may have made for to-night's amusement," he remarked. "I shall be obliged to go out myself after dinner."

Archie drew himself up. Wingarde's tone stung.

"You are very good," he said stiffly. "What do you say, Nina? Do you feel up to the theatre?"

Nina's colour also was very high. But her eyes looked softer than usual. She turned to her husband.

“Couldn’t you come, too, for once, Hereford?” she asked. “We were thinking of the theatre. It—it would be nice if you came too.”

The falter in the last sentence betrayed the fact that she was nervous.

Wingarde smiled faintly, contemptuously, as he made reply.

“Really, that’s very kind of you,” he said. “But I am compelled to plead a prior engagement. You will be home by midnight, I suppose?”

Archie made an abrupt movement. For a second he hovered on the verge of an indignant outburst. The man’s manner, rather than his words, was insufferable. But in that second he met Wingarde’s eyes, and something he saw there checked him. He pulled himself together and somewhat awkwardly took his leave.

Wingarde saw him off, with the scoffing smile upon his lips. When he returned to the drawing-room Nina was on her feet, waiting for him. She was still unusually pale, and her eyes were very bright. She wore a restless, startled look, as though her nerves were on the stretch.

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Wingarde glanced at her.

"You had better go and lie down till dinner," he said.

Nina looked back at him. Her lips quivered a little, but when she spoke her voice was absolutely steady. She held her head resolutely high.

"I think Archie must have forgotten to thank you," she said, "for what you did. But I have not. Will you accept my gratitude?"

There was proud humility in her voice. But Wingarde only shrugged his shoulders with a sneer.

"Your gratitude would have been more genuine if you had been saved a widow instead of a wife," he said brutally.

She recoiled from him. Her eyes flashed furious indignation. She felt as if he had struck her in the face. She spoke instantly and vehemently. Her voice shook.

"That is a poison of your own mixing," she said. "You know it!"

"What! It isn't true?" he asked.

He drew suddenly close to her. His eyes gleamed also with the gleam of a smouldering fire. She saw that he was moved. She believed him to be angry. Trembling, yet scornful, she held her peace.

He gripped her wrists suddenly, bending his dark face close to hers.

"If it isn't true—" he said, and stopped.

She drew back from him with a startled movement. For an instant her eyes challenged his. Then abruptly their fierce resistance failed. She turned her face aside and burst into tears.

In a moment she was free. Her husband stood regarding her with a very curious look in his eyes. He watched her as she moved slowly away from him, fighting fiercely, desperately, to regain her self-control. He saw her sit down, leaving almost the length of the room between them, and lean her head upon her hand.

Then the man's arrested brutality suddenly reasserted itself, and he strode to the door.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed as he went. "Don't I know that you pray for a deliverer every night of your life? And what deliverer would you have if not death—the surest of all—in your case positively the only one within the bounds of possibility?"

He was gone with the words, but she would not have attempted to answer them had he stayed. Her head was bowed almost to her knees, and she sat quite motionless, as if he had stabbed her to the heart.

Later she dined alone with Archie in her husband's unexplained absence, and later still, at the theatre, her face was as gay, her laugh as frequent, as any there.

IX

THE END OF A MYSTERY

On the following afternoon Nina went to the Wade Home to see the victim of the accident. She was received by the matron, a middle-aged, kindly woman, who was openly pleased with the concern her visitor exhibited.

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"Oh, he's better," she said, "much better. But I'm afraid I can't let you see him now, as he is asleep. Dr. Wade examined him himself yesterday. And he was here again this morning. His opinion is that the spine has been only bruised. While unconsciousness lasted, it was, of course, difficult to tell. But the patient became conscious this morning, and Dr. Wade said he was very well pleased with him on the whole. He thinks we shall not have him very long. He's a bright little chap and thoroughly likes his quarters. His father is a dock labourer. Everyone knows the Wade Home, and all the patients consider themselves very lucky to be here. You see, the doctor is such a favourite wherever he goes."

"I have never met Dr. Wade," Nina said. "I suppose he is a great man?"

The matron's jolly face glowed with enthusiasm.

"He is indeed," she said—"a splendid man. You probably know him by another name. They say he is a leading physician in the West End. But we City people know him and love him by his assumed name only. Why, only lately he cut short his holiday on purpose to be near one of his patients who was dying. If you could manage to come tomorrow afternoon after four o'clock, no doubt you would see him. It is visiting-day, and he is always here on Sunday afternoons between three and six in case the visitors like to see him. I should be delighted to give you some tea. And you could then see the little boy."

"Thank you," Nina said. "I will."

That evening she chanced to meet Archie Neville at a friend's dinner-table and imparted to him her purpose.

"Jove!" he said. "Good idea! I'll come with you, shall I?"

"Please not in the hansom!" she said.

"Not a bit of it," returned Archie. "But you needn't be nervous. I've sacked that man. No matter! We'll go in a wheelbarrow if you think that'll be safer."

Nina laughed and agreed to accept his escort. Archie's society was a very welcome distraction just then.

To her husband she made no mention of her intention. She had established the custom of going her own way at all times. It did not even cross her mind to introduce the subject. He was treating her with that sarcastic courtesy of his which was so infinitely hard to bear. It hurt her horribly, and because of the pain she avoided him as much as she dared.



She did not know how he spent his time on Sundays. Except for his presence at luncheon she found she was left as completely to her own devices as on other days.

She had agreed to drive Archie to the Wade Home in her husband's landaulette.

Wingarde left the house before three and she was alone when Archie arrived.

The latter looked at her critically.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing," she returned instantly. "Why?"

"You're looking off colour," he said.

Nina turned from him impatiently.

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"There is nothing the matter with me," she said. "Shall we start?"

Archie said no more. But he glanced at her curiously from time to time. He wondered privately if her husband's society were driving her to that extreme which she had told him she might reach eventually.

Visitors were being admitted to the Wade Home when they arrived. They were directed to the ward where lay the boy in whom they were interested. Nina presented him with flowers and a book, and sat for some time talking with him. The little fellow was hugely flattered by her attentions, though too embarrassed to express his pleasure in words. Archie amused himself by making pennies appear and disappear in the palms of his hands for the benefit of a sad-faced urchin in the next bed who had no visitors.

In the midst of this the matron bustled in to beg Nina and her companion to take a cup of tea in her room.

"Dr. Wade is here and sure to come in," she said. "I should like you to meet him."

Nina accordingly took leave of her *protege*, and, followed by Archie, repaired to the matron's room.

The windows were thrown wide open, for the afternoon was hot. They sat down, feeling that tea was a welcome sight.

"I have a separate brew for Dr. Wade," said the matron cheerily. "He likes it so very strong. He almost always takes a cup. There! I hear him coming now."

There sounded a step in the passage and a man's quiet laugh. Nina started slightly.

A moment later a voice in the doorway said:

"Ah! Here you are, Mrs. Ritchie! I have just been prescribing a piece of sugar for this patient of ours. Her mother is waiting to take her away."

Nina was on her feet in an instant. All the blood seemed to rush to her heart. Its throbs felt thick and heavy. On the threshold her husband stood, looking full at her. In his arms was a little child.

"Dr. Wade!" smiled the matron. "You do spoil your patients, sir. There! Let me take her! Please come in! Your tea is just ready. I was just talking about you to Mrs. Wingarde, who came to see the boy who was knocked down by a hansom last week. Madam, this is Dr. Wade."

She went forward to lift the child out of Wingarde's arms. There followed a silence, a brief, hard-strung silence. Nina stood quite still. Her hands were unconsciously clasped

together. She was white to the lips. But she kept her eyes raised to Wingarde's face. He seemed to be looking through her, and in his eyes was that look with which he had regarded her when he had saved her life and Archie's two days before.

He spoke almost before the matron had begun to notice anything unusual in the atmosphere.

"Ah!" he said, with a slight bow. "You know me under different circumstances—you and Mr. Neville. You did not expect to meet me here?"

Archie glanced at Nina and saw her agitation. He came coolly forward and placed himself in the breach.

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"We certainly didn't," he said. "It's good sometimes to know that people are not all they seem. I congratulate you, er—Dr. Wade."

Wingarde turned his attention to his wife's companion. His face was very dark.

"Take the child to her mother, please, Mrs. Ritchie!" he said curtly, over his shoulder.

The matron departed discreetly, but at the door the child in her arms began to cry.

Wingarde turned swiftly, took the little one's face between his hands, spoke a soft word, and kissed it.

Then, as the matron moved away, he walked back into the room, closing the door behind him. All the tenderness with which he had comforted the wailing baby had vanished from his face.

"Mr. Neville," he said shortly, "my wife will return in the car with me. I will relieve you of your attendance upon her."

Archie turned crimson, but he managed to control himself—more for the sake of the girl who stood in total silence by his side than from any idea of expediency.

"Certainly," he said, "if Mrs. Wingarde also prefers that arrangement."

Nina glanced at him. He saw that her lip was quivering painfully. She did not attempt to speak.

Archie turned to go. But almost instantly Wingarde's voice arrested him.

"I can give you a seat in the car if you wish," he said. He spoke with less sternness, but his face had not altered.

Archie stopped. Again for Nina's sake he choked back his wrath and accepted the churlishly proffered amendment.

Wingarde drank his tea, strolling about the room. He did not again address his wife directly.

As for Nina, though she answered Archie when he spoke to her, it was with very obvious effort. She glanced from time to time at her husband as if in some uncertainty. Finally, when they took leave of the matron and went down to the car she seemed to hail the move with relief.

Throughout the drive westwards scarcely a word was spoken. At the end of the journey Archie turned deliberately and addressed Wingarde. His face was white and dogged.



"I should like a word with you in private," he said.

Wingarde looked at him for a moment as if he meant to refuse. Then abruptly he gave way.

"I am at your service," he said formally.

And Archie marched into the house in Nina's wake.

In the hall Wingarde touched his shoulder.

"Come into the smoking-room!" he said quietly.

X

TAKEN TO TASK

"I want to know what you mean," said Archie.

He stood up very straight, with the summer sunlight full in his face, and confronted Nina's husband without a hint of dismay in his bearing.

Wingarde looked at him with a very faint smile on his grim lips.

"You wish to take me to task?" he asked.

"I do," said Archie decidedly.

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"For what in particular? The innocent deception practised upon an equally innocent public? Or for something more serious than that?"

There was an unmistakable ring of sternness behind Wingarde's deliberately scoffing tone.

Archie answered him instantly, with the quickness of a man who fights for his honour.

"For something more serious," he said. "It's nothing to me what fool trick you may choose to play for your own amusement. But I am not going to swallow an insult from you or any man. I want an explanation for that."

Wingarde stood with his back to the light and looked at him.

"In what way have I insulted you?" he said.

"You implied that I was not a suitable escort for your wife," Archie said, forcing himself to speak without vehemence.

Wingarde raised his eyebrows.

"I apologize if I was too emphatic," he said, after a moment. "But, considering the circumstances, I am forced to tell you that I do not consider you a suitable escort for my wife."

"What circumstances?" said Archie. He clenched his hands abruptly, and Wingarde saw it.

"Please understand," he said curtly, "that I will listen to you only so long as you keep your temper! I believe that you know what I mean—what circumstances I refer to. If you wish me to put them into plain language I will do so. But I don't think you will like it."

Archie pounced upon the words.

"You would probably put me to the trouble of calling you a liar if you did," he said, in a shaking voice. "I have no more intention than you have of mincing matters. As to listening to me, you shall do that in any case. I am going to tell you the truth, and I mean that you shall hear it."

He strode to the door as he spoke, and locked it, pocketing the key.

Wingarde did not stir to prevent him. He waited with a sneer on his lips while Archie returned and took up his stand facing him.

"You seem very sure of yourself," he said in a quiet tone.

"I am," Archie said doggedly. "Absolutely sure. You think I am in love with your wife, don't you?"

Wingarde frowned heavily.

"Are you going to throw dust in my eyes?" he asked contemptuously.

Archie locked his hands behind him.

"I am going to tell you the truth," he said again, and, though his voice still shook perceptibly there was dignity in his bearing. "Three years ago I was in love with her."

"Calf love?" suggested Wingarde carelessly.

"You may call it what you like," Archie rejoined. "That is to say, anything honourable. I was hard hit three years ago, and it lasted off and on till her marriage to you. But she never cared for me in the same way. That I know now. I proposed to her twice, and she refused me."

"You weren't made of money, you see," sneered Wingarde.

Archie's fingers gripped each other. He had never before longed so fiercely to hurl a blow in a man's face.

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"If I had been," he said, "I am not sure that I should have made the running with you in the field. That brings me to what I have to say to you. I wondered for a long time how she brought herself to marry you. When you came back from your honeymoon I began to understand. She married you for your money; but if you had chosen, she would have married you for love."

He blurted out the words hastily, as though he could not trust himself to pause lest he should not say them.

Wingarde stood up suddenly to his full height. For once he was taken totally by surprise and showed it. He did not speak, however, and Archie blundered on:

"I am not your friend. I don't say this in any way for your sake. But—I am her's—her friend, mind you. I don't say I haven't ever flirted with her. I have. But I have never said to her a single word that I should be ashamed to repeat to you—not one word. You've got to believe that whether you want to or not."

He paused momentarily. The frown had died away from Wingarde's face, but his eyes were stern. He waited silently for more. Archie proceeded with more steadiness, more self-assurance, less self-restraint.

"You've treated her abominably," he said, going straight to the point. "I don't care what you think of me for saying so. It's the truth. You've deceived her, neglected her, bullied her. Deny it if you can! Oh, no, this isn't what she has told me. It has been as plain as daylight. I couldn't have avoided knowing it. You made her your wife, Heaven knows why. You probably cared for her in your own brutal fashion. But you have never taken the trouble to make her care for you. You never go out with her. You never consider her in any way. You see her wretched, ill almost, under your eyes; and instead of putting it down to your own confounded churlishness, you turn round and insult me for behaving decently to her. There! I have done. You can kick me out of the house as soon as you like. But you won't find it so easy to forget what I've said. You know in your heart that it's the truth."

Archie ended his vigorous speech with the full expectation of being made to pay the penalty by means of a damaged skin.

Wingarde's face was uncompromising. It told nothing of his mood during the heavy silence that followed. It was, therefore, a considerable shock when he abruptly surrendered the citadel without striking a single blow.

"I am much obliged to you, Neville," he said very quietly. "And I beg to apologize for a most unworthy suspicion. Will you shake hands?"

Archie tumbled off his high horse with more speed than elegance. He thrust out his hand with an inarticulate murmur of assent. Perhaps after all the fellow had been no worse than an unmannerly bear. The next minute he was discussing politics with the monster he had dared to beard in his own den.

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When Nina saw her husband again he treated her with a courtesy so scrupulous that she felt the miserable scourge of her uncertainty at work again. She would have given much to have possessed the key to his real feelings. With regard to his establishment of the Wade Home, he gave her the briefest explanation. He had been originally intended for a doctor, he said, had passed his medical examinations, and been qualified to practise. Then, at the last minute, a chance opening had presented itself, and he had gone into finance instead.

"After that," he somewhat sarcastically said, "I gave myself up to the all absorbing business of money-making. And doctoring became merely my fad, my amusement, my recreation—whatever you please to call it."

"I wish you had told me," Nina said, in a low voice.

At which remark he merely shrugged his shoulders, making no rejoinder.

She felt hurt by his manner and said no more. Only later there came to her the memory of the man she feared, standing in the doorway of the matron's room with a little child in his arms. Somehow that picture was very vividly impressed upon her mind.

XI

MONEY'S NOT EVERYTHING

"What! You are coming too?"

Nina stopped short on her way to the car and gazed at her husband in amazement.

He had returned early from the City, and she now met him dressed to attend a garden-party whither she herself was going.

He bent his head in answer to her surprised question.

"I shall give myself the pleasure of accompanying you," he said, with much formality.

She coloured and bit her lip. Swift as evil came the thought that he resented her intimacy with Archie and was determined to frustrate any attempt on their part to secure a *tete-a-tete*.

"You take great care of me," she said, with a bitter little smile.

Wingarde made no response; his face was quite inscrutable.

They scarcely spoke during the drive, and she kept her face averted. Only when he held out his hand to assist her to alight she met his eye for an instant and wondered vaguely at the look he gave her.

The party was a large one; the lawns were crowded. Nina took the first opportunity that offered to slip away from him, for she felt hopelessly ill at ease in his company. The sensation of being watched that had oppressed her during her brief honeymoon had reawakened.

Archie presently joined her.

"Did I see the hero of the Crawley gold field just now?" he asked. "Or was it hallucination?"

Nina looked at him with a very bored expression.

"Oh, yes, my husband is here," she said. "I suppose you had better not stay with me or he will come up and be rude to you."

Archie chuckled.

"Not he! We understand one another," he said lightly. "But, I say, what an impostor the fellow is! Everyone knows about Dr. Wade, but no one connects him in the smallest degree with Hereford Wingarde. It shouldn't be allowed to go on. You ought to tell the town-crier."

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Nina tried to laugh, but it was a somewhat dismal effort.

"Come along!" said Archie cheerily. "There's my mother over there; she has been wondering where you were."

Nina went with him with a nervous wonder if Hereford were still watching her, but she saw nothing of him.

The afternoon wore away in music and gaiety. A great many of her acquaintances were present, and to Nina the time passed quickly.

She was sitting in a big marquee drinking the tea that Archie had brought her when she next saw her husband. By chance she discovered him talking with a man she did not know, not ten yards from her. The tent was fairly full, and the buzz of conversation was continuous.

Nina glanced at him from time to time with a curious sense of uneasiness, and an unaccountable desire to detach him from his acquaintance grew gradually upon her.

The latter was a heavy-browed man with queer, furtive eyes. As Nina stealthily watched them she saw that this man was restless and agitated. Her husband's face was turned from her, but his attitude was one of careless ease, into which his big limbs dropped when he was at leisure.

Later she never knew by what impulse she acted. It was as if a voice suddenly cried aloud in her heart that Wingarde was in deadly danger. She gave Archie her cup and rose.

"Just a moment!" she said hurriedly. "I see Hereford over there."

She moved swiftly in the direction of the two men. There was disaster in the air. She seemed to breathe it as she drew near. Her husband straightened himself before she reached him, and half turned with his contemptuous laugh. The next instant Nina saw his companion's hand whip something from behind him. She shrieked aloud and sprang forward like a terrified animal. The man's eyes maddened her more than the deadly little weapon that flashed into view in his right hand.

There followed prompt upon her cry the sharp explosion of a revolver-shot, and then the din of a panic-stricken crowd.

But Nina did not share the panic. She had flung herself in front of her husband, had flung her whole weight upon the upraised arm that had pointed the revolver and borne it downwards with all her strength. Those who saw her action compared it later with the furious attack of a tigress defending her young.

It was all over in a few brief seconds. Men crowded round and overpowered her adversary. Someone took the frenzied girl by the shoulders and forced her to relinquish her clutch.

She turned and looked straight into Wingarde's face, and at the sight her nerves gave way and she broke into hysterical sobbing, though she knew that he was safe.

He put his arm around her and led her from the stifling tent. People made way for them. Only their hostess and Archie Neville followed.

Outside on the lawn, away from the buzzing multitude, Nina began to recover herself. Archie brought a chair, and she dropped into it, but she held fast to Wingarde's arm, beseeching him over and over again not to leave her.

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Wingarde stooped over her, supporting her; but he found nothing to say to her. He briefly ordered Archie to fetch some water, and made request to his hostess, almost equally brief, that their car might be called in readiness for departure. But his manner was wholly free from agitation.

"My wife will recover better at home," he said, and the lady of the house went away with a good deal of tact to give the order herself.

Left alone with him, Nina still clung to her husband; but she grew rapidly calmer in his quiet hold. After a moment he spoke to her.

"I wonder how you knew," he said.

Nina leant her head against him like an exhausted child.

"I saw it coming," she said. "It was in his eyes—mad hatred. I knew he was going to—to kill you if he could."

She did not want to meet his eyes, but he gently compelled her.

"And so you saved my life," he said in a quiet tone.

"I had to," she said faintly.

Archie here reappeared with a glass of water.

"The fellow is in a fit," he reported. "They are taking him away. Jove, Wingarde! You ought to be a dead man. If Nina hadn't spoilt that shot—"

Nina was shuddering, and he broke off.

"You'd better give up cornering gold fields," he said lightly. "It seems he was nearly ruined over your last *coup*. You may do that sort of thing once too often, don't you know. I shouldn't chance another throw."

Nina stood up shakily and looked at her husband.

"If you only would give it up!" she said, with trembling vehemence. "I—I hate money!"

Wingarde made no response; but Archie instantly took her up.

"You only hate money for what it can't buy," he said. "You probably expect too much from it. Don't blame money for that."

Nina uttered a tremulous laugh that sounded strangely passionate.

“You’re quite right,” she said. “Money’s not everything. I have weighed it in the balance and found it wanting.”

“Yes,” Wingarde said in a peculiar tone. “And so have I.”

XII

AFTERWARDS—LOVE

An overwhelming shyness possessed Nina that night. She dined alone with her husband, and found his silences even more oppressive than usual. Yet, when she rose from the table, an urgent desire to keep him within call impelled her to pause.

“Shall you be late to-night?” she asked him, stopping nervously before him, as he stood by the open door.

“I am not going out to-night,” he responded gravely.”

“Oh!” Nina hesitated still. She was trembling slightly. “Then—I shall see you again?” she said.

He bent his head.

“I shall be with you in ten minutes,” he replied.

And she passed out quickly.

The night was still and hot. She went into her own little sitting-room and straight to the open window. Her heart was beating very fast as she stood and looked across the quiet square. The roar of London hummed busily from afar. She heard it as one hears the rushing of unseen water among the hills.

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There was no one moving in the square. The trees in the garden looked dim and dreamlike against a red-gold sky.

Suddenly in the next house, from a room with an open window, there rose the sound of a woman's voice, tender as the night. It reached the girl who stood waiting in the silence. The melody was familiar to her, and she leant forward breathlessly to catch the words:

Shadows and mist and night,
Darkness around the way;
Here a cloud and there a star;
Afterwards, Day!

There came a pause and the soft notes of a piano. Nina stood with clasped hands, waiting for the second verse. Her cheeks were wet.

It came, slow and exquisitely pure, as if an angel had drawn near to the turbulent earth with a message of healing:

Sorrow and grief and tears,
Eyes vainly raised above;
Here a thorn and there a rose;
Afterwards, Love!

Nina turned from the open window. She was groping, for her eyes were full of tears. From the doorway a man moved quietly to meet her.

"Hereford!" she said in a broken whisper, and went straight into his arms.

He held her fast, so fast that she felt his heart beating against her bowed head. But it was many seconds before he spoke.

"Do you remember the wishing-gate, Nina?" he said, speaking softly. "And how you asked for a Deliverer?"

She stretched up her arms to clasp his neck without lifting her head. She was crying and could not answer him.

He put his hand upon her hair and she felt it tremble.

"Has the Deliverer come to you, dear?" he asked her very tenderly.

He felt for her face in the darkness, and turned it slowly upwards. She did not resist him though she knew well what was coming. Rather she yielded to his touch with a sudden,

passionate willingness. And so their lips met in the first kiss that had ever passed between them.

Thus there came a Deliverer more potent than death into the heart of the girl who had married for money, and made its surrender sweet.

The Prey of the Dragon

I

“Ah! She’s off!”

A deafening blast came from the great steamship’s siren, and a long sigh went up from the crowd upon the quay. Someone raised a cheer that was quickly drowned in the noise of escaping steam. Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, the vessel began to move.

A black gap appeared, and widened between her and the wharf till it became a stretch of grey water veiled in the dank fog of a murky sea. The fog was everywhere, floating in wreaths upon the oily swell, blotting out all distant objects, making vague those that were near. Very soon the crowd on the shore was swallowed up and the great vessel was heading for the mouth, of the harbour and the wide loneliness beyond.

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Sybil Denham hid her face in her hands for a moment and shivered. There was something terrible to her in the thought of those thousands of miles to be traversed alone. It cowed her. It appalled her.

Yet when she looked up again her eyes were brave. She stood committed now to this great step, and she was resolved to take it with a high courage. Whatever lay before her, she must face it now without shrinking. Yet it was horribly lonely. She turned from the deck-rail with nervous haste.

The next instant she caught her foot against a coil of rope and fell headlong, with a violence that almost stunned her. A moment she lay, then, gasping, began to raise herself.

But as she struggled to her knees strong hands lifted her, and a man's voice said gruffly:

"Are you hurt?"

She found herself in the grasp of a powerful giant with the physique of a prize-fighter and a dark face with lowering brows that seemed to wear an habitual scowl.

She was too staggered to speak; the fall had unnerved her. She put her hand vaguely behind her, feeling for the rail, looking up at him with piteous, quivering lips.

"You should look where you are going," he said, with scant sympathy. "Perhaps you will another time."

She found the rail, leaned upon it, then turned her back upon him suddenly and burst into tears which she was too shaken to restrain. She thought he would go away, hoped that he would; but he remained, standing in stolid silence till she managed in a measure to regain her self-control.

"Where did you hurt yourself?" he asked then.

She struggled with herself, and answered him. "I—I am not hurt."

"Then what are you crying for?"

The words sounded more like a rude retort than a question.

She found them unanswerable, and suddenly, while she still stood battling with her tears, something in the utterance touched her sense of humour. She gulped down a sob, and gave a little strangled laugh.

"I don't quite know," she said, drying her eyes. "Thank you for picking me up."

"I should have tumbled over you if I hadn't," he responded.

Again her sense of humour quivered, finally dispelling all desire to cry. She turned a little.

"I'm glad you didn't!" she said with fervour.

"So am I."

The curt rejoinder cut clean through her depression. She broke into a gay, spontaneous laugh.

But the next instant she checked herself and apologized.

"Forgive me! I'm very rude."

"What's the joke?" he asked.

She answered him in a voice that still quivered a little with suppressed merriment.

"There isn't a joke. I—I often laugh at nothing. It's a silly habit of mine."

His moody silence seemed to endorse this remark. She became silent also, and after a moment made a shy movement to depart.

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He turned then and looked at her, looked full and straight into her small, sallow face, with its shadowy eyes and pointed features, as if he would register her likeness upon his memory.

She gave him a faint, friendly smile.

"I'm going below now," she said. "Good-bye!"

He raised his hat abruptly. His head was massive as a bull's.

"Mind how you go!" he said briefly.

And Sybil went, feeling like a child that has been rebuked.

II

"Do you always walk along with your eyes shut?" asked Brett Mercer.

Sybil gave a great start, and saw him lounging immediately in her path. The days that had elapsed since their first meeting had placed them upon a more or less intimate footing. He had assumed the right to speak to her from the outset—this giant who had picked her up like an infant and scolded her for crying.

It was a hot morning in the Indian Ocean. She had not slept during the night, and she was feeling weary and oppressed. But, with a woman's instinctive reserve, she forced a hasty smile. She would not have stopped to speak had he not risen and barred her progress.

"Sit here!" he said.

She looked up at him with refusal on her lips; but he forestalled her by laying an immense hand on her shoulder and pressing her down into the chair he had just vacated. This accomplished, he turned and hung over the rail in silence. It seemed to be the man's habit at all times to do rather than to speak.

Sybil sat passive, feeling rather helpless, dumbly watching the great lounging figure, and wondered how she should escape without hurting his feelings.

Suddenly, without turning his head, he spoke to her.

"I suppose if I ask what's the matter you'll tell me to go to the devil."

The remark, though characteristic, was totally unexpected. Sybil stared at him for a moment. Then, as once before, his rude address set her sense of humour a-quivering. Depressed, miserable though she was, she began to laugh.

He turned, and looked at her sideways.

“No doubt I am very funny,” he observed dryly.

She checked herself with an effort.

“Oh, I know I’m horrid to laugh. But it’s not that I am ungrateful. There is nothing really the matter. I—I’m feeling rather like a stray cat this morning, that’s all.”

The smile still lingered about her lips as she said it. Somehow, telling this taciturn individual of her trouble deprived it of much of its bitterness.

Mercer displayed no sympathy. He did not even continue to look at her. But she did not feel that his impassivity arose from lack of interest.

Suddenly:

“Is it true that you are going to be married as soon as you land?” he asked.

Sybil was sitting forward with her chin in her hands.

“Quite true,” she said; adding, half to herself, “so far as I know.”

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"What do you mean by that?" He turned squarely and looked down at her.

She hesitated a little, but eventually she told him.

"I thought there would have been a letter for me from Robin at Aden, but there wasn't. It has worried me rather."

"Robin?" he said interrogatively.

"Robin Wentworth, the man I am going to marry," she explained. "He has a farm at Bowker Creek, near Rollandstown. But he will meet me at the docks. He has promised to do that. Still, I thought I should have heard from him again."

"But you will hear at Colombo," said Mercer.

She raised her eyes— those soft, dark eyes that were her only beauty.

"I may," she said.

"And if you don't?"

She smiled faintly.

"I suppose I shall worry some more."

"Are you sure the fellow is worth it?" asked Mercer unexpectedly.

"We have been engaged for three years," she said, "though we have been separated."

He frowned.

"A man can alter a good deal in three years."

She did not attempt to dispute the point. It was one of the many doubts that tormented her in moments of depression.

"And what will you do if he doesn't turn up?" proceeded Mercer.

She gave a sharp shiver.

"Don't—don't frighten me!" she said.

Mercer was silent. He thrust one hand into his pocket, and absently jingled some coins. He began to whistle under his breath, and then, awaking to the fact, abruptly stopped himself.



"If I were in your place," he said at length, "I should get off at Colombo and sail home again on the next boat."

Sybil shook her head slowly but emphatically.

"I am quite sure you wouldn't. For one thing you would be too poor, and for another you would be too proud."

"Are you very poor?" he asked her point blank.

She nodded.

"And very proud."

"And your people?"

"Only my father is living, and I have quarrelled with him."

"Can't you make it up?"

"No," she said sharply and emphatically. "I could never return to my father. There is no room for me now that he has married again. I would sooner sell matches at a street corner than go back to what I have left."

"So that's it, is it?" said Mercer. He was looking at her very attentively with his brows drawn down. "You are not happy at home, so you are plunging into matrimony to get away from it all."

"We have been engaged for three years," she protested, flushing.

"You said that before," he remarked. "It seems to be your only argument, and a confoundedly shaky one at that."

She laughed rather unsteadily.

"You are not very encouraging."

"No," said Mercer.

He was still looking at her somewhat sternly. Involuntarily almost she avoided his eyes.

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"Perhaps," she said, with a touch of wistfulness, "when you see my *fiance* you will change your mind."

He turned from her with obvious impatience.

"Perhaps you will change yours," he said.

And with that surly rejoinder of his the conversation ended. The next moment he moved abruptly away, leaving her in possession.

III

It was early morning when they came at last into port. When Sybil appeared on deck she found it crowded with excited men, and the hubbub was deafening. A multitude of small boats buzzed to and fro on the tumbling waters below them, and she expected every instant to see one swamped as the great ship floated majestically through the throng.

She had anticipated a crowd of people on the wharf to witness their arrival, but the knot of men gathered there scarcely numbered a score. She scanned them eagerly, but it took only a very few seconds to convince her that Robin Wentworth was not among them. And there had been no letter from him at Colombo.

"They don't allow many people on the wharf," said Mercer's voice behind her. "There will be more on the other side of the Customs house."

She looked up at him, bravely smiling, though her heart was throbbing almost to suffocation and she could not speak a word.

He passed on into the crowd and she lost sight of him.

There followed a delay of nearly half-an-hour, during which she stood where she was in the glaring sunshine, dumbly watching. The town, with its many buildings, its roar of traffic; the harbour, with its ships and its hooting sirens; the hot sky, the water that shone like molten brass; all were stamped upon her aching brain with nightmare distinctness. She felt as one caught in some pitiless machine that would crush her to atoms before she could escape.

The gangways were fixed at last, and there was a general movement. She went with the crowd, Mercer's last words still running through her brain with a reiteration that made them almost meaningless. On the other side of the Customs house! Of course, of course she would find Robin there, waiting for her!

She said it to herself over and over as she stepped ashore, and she began to picture their meeting. And then, suddenly, an awful doubt assailed her. She could not recall his features. His image would not rise before her. The memory of his face had passed completely from her mind. It had never done so before, and she was scared. But she strove to reassure herself with the thought that she must surely recognize him the moment her eyes beheld him. It was but a passing weakness this, born of her agitation. Of course, she would know him, and he would know her, too, mightily though she felt she had changed during those three years that they had not met.

She moved on as one in a dream, still with that nightmare of oppression at her heart. The crowd of hurrying strangers bewildered her. Her loneliness appalled her. She had an insane longing to rush back to her cabin and hide herself. But she pressed on, on into the Customs house, following her little pile of luggage that looked so ludicrously insignificant among all the rest.

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The babel here was incessant. She felt as if her senses would leave her. Piteously, like a lost child, she searched every face within her scope of vision; but she searched in vain for the face of a friend.

Later, she found herself following an official out into an open space like a great courtyard, that was crammed with vehicles. He was wheeling her luggage on a trolley. Suddenly he faced round and asked her whither she wanted to go.

She looked at him helplessly. "I am expecting someone to meet me," she said.

He stared at her in some perplexity, and finally suggested that he should set down her luggage and leave her to wait where she was.

To this she agreed, and when he had gone she seated herself on her cabin trunk and faced the situation. She was utterly alone, with scarcely any money in her possession, and no knowledge whatever of the place in which she found herself. Robin would, of course, come sooner or later, but till he came she was helpless.

What should she do, she wondered desperately? What could she do? All about her, people were coming and going. She watched them dizzily. There was not one of them who seemed to be alone. The heat and glare was intense. The clatter of wheels sounded in her ears like the roar of great waters. She felt as if she were sinking down, down through endless turmoil into a void unspeakable.

How long she had sat there she could not have said. It seemed to her hours when someone came up to her with a firm and purposeful stride, and stooping, touched her shoulder. She looked up dazedly, and saw Brett Mercer.

He said something to her, but it was as if he spoke in an unknown language. She had not the faintest idea what he meant. His face swam before her eyes. She shook her head at him vaguely, with quivering lips.

He stooped lower. She felt his arm encircle her, felt him draw her to her feet. Again he seemed to be speaking, but his words eluded her. The roar of the great waters filled her brain. Like a lost child she turned and clung to the supporting arm.

IV

Later, it seemed to her that her senses must have deserted her for a time, for she never remembered what happened to her next. A multitude of impressions crowded upon her, but she knew nothing with distinctness till she woke to find herself lying in a room with green blinds half-drawn, with Mercer stooping over her, compelling her to drink a nauseating mixture in a wine-glass.

As soon as full consciousness returned to her she refused to take another drop.

“What is it? It—it’s horrible.”

“It’s the best stuff you ever tasted,” he told her bluntly. “You needn’t get up. You are all right as you are.”

But she sat up, nevertheless, and looked at him confusedly. “Where am I?” she said.

He seated himself on the corner of a table that creaked loudly beneath his weight. It seemed to her that he looked even more massive than usual—a bed-rock of strength. His eyes met hers with a certain mastery.

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"You are in a private room in a private hotel," he said. "I brought you here."

"In a hotel!" She stared at him for a moment, stricken silent by the information; then quickly she rose to her feet. "Oh, but I—I can't stay!" she said. "I have no money."

"I know," said Mercer. He remained seated on the table edge, his hands in his pockets, his eyes unwaveringly upon her. "That's where I come in," he told her, with a touch of aggressiveness, as though he sighted difficulties ahead. "I have money—plenty of it. And you are to make use of it."

She stood motionless, gazing at him. His eyes never left her. She could not quite fathom his look, but it was undoubtedly stern.

"Mr. Mercer," she said at last, rather piteously, "I—indeed I am grateful to you, much more than grateful. But—I can't!"

"Rubbish!" said Mercer curtly. "If you weren't a girl, I should tell you not to be a fool!"

She was clasping and unclasping her hands. It was to be a battle of wills. His rough speech revealed this to her. And she was ill-equipped for the conflict. His dominant personality seemed to deprive her of even the desire to fight. She remembered, with a sudden, burning flush, that she had clung to him only a little while before in her extremity of loneliness. Doubtless he remembered it too.

Yet she braced herself for the struggle. He could not, after all, compel her to accept his generosity.

"I am sorry," she said; "I am very sorry. But, you know, there is another way in which you can help me."

"What is that?" said Mercer.

"If you could tell me of some respectable lodging," she said. "I have enough for one night if the charges are moderate. And even after that—if Robin doesn't come—I have one or two little things I might sell. He is sure to come soon."

"And if he doesn't?" said Mercer.

Her fingers gripped each other.

"I am sure he will," she said.

"And if he doesn't?" said Mercer again.

His persistence became suddenly intolerable. She turned on him with something like anger—the anger of desperation.

“Why will you persist in trying to frighten me? I know he will come. I know he will!”

“You don’t know,” said Mercer. “I am not frightening you. You were afraid before you ever spoke to me.”

He spoke harshly, without pity, and still his eyes dwelt resolutely upon her. He seemed to be watching her narrowly.

She did not attempt to deny his last words. She passed them by.

“I shall write to Bowker Creek. He may have mistaken the date.”

“He may,” said Mercer, in a tone she did not understand. “But, in the meantime, why should you turn your back upon the only friend you have at hand? It seems to me that you are making a fuss over nothing. You have been brought up to it, I daresay; but it isn’t the fashion here. We are taught to take things as they come, and make the best of ’em. That’s what you have got to do. It’ll come easier after a bit.”

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"It will never come easily to me to—to live on charity," she protested, rather incoherently.

"But you can pay me back," said Brett Mercer.

She shook her head.

"Not if—if Robin——"

"I tell you, you can!" he insisted stubbornly.

"How?" She turned suddenly and faced him. There was a hint of defiance, or, rather, daring, in her manner. She met his look with unswerving resolution. "If there is a good chance of my being able to do that," she said, "even if—even if Robin fails me, I will accept your help."

"You will be able to do it," said Mercer.

"How?" she asked again.

"I will tell you," he said, "when you are quite sure that Robin has failed you."

"Tell me now!" she pleaded. "If it is some work that you can find for me to do—and I will do anything in the world that I can—it would be such a help to me to know of it. Won't you tell me what you mean? Please do!"

"No," said Mercer. "It is only a chance, and you may refuse it. I can't say. You may feel it too much for you to attempt. If you do, you will have to endure the obligation. But you shall have the chance of paying me back if you really want it."

"And you won't tell me what it is?" she said.

"No." He got to his feet, and stood looking down at her. "I can't tell you now. I am not in a position to do so. I am going away for a few days. You will wait here till I come back?"

"Unless Robin comes," she said. "And then, of course, I would leave you a message."

He nodded.

"Otherwise you will stay here?"

"If you are sure you wish it," she said.

"I do. And I am going to leave you this." He laid a packet upon the table. "It is better for you to be independent, for the sake of appearances." His iron mouth twitched a little.

"Now, good-bye! You won't be more miserable than you can help?"

She smiled up at him bravely.

“No; I won’t be miserable. How long shall you be gone?”

“Possibly a week, possibly a little more.”

“But you will come back?” she said quickly, almost beseechingly.

“I shall certainly come back,” he said.

With the words his great hand closed firmly upon hers, and she had a curious, vagrant feeling of insecurity that she could not attempt to analyse. Then abruptly he let her go. An instant his eyes still held her, and then, before she could begin to thank him, he turned to the door and was gone.

V

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For ten days, that seemed to her like as many years, Sybil Denham waited in the shelter into which she had been so relentlessly thrust for an answer to her letter to Bowker Creek, and during the whole of that time she lived apart, exchanging scarcely a word with any one. Every day, generally twice a day, she went down to the wharf; but, she could not bring herself to linger. The loneliness that perpetually dogged her footsteps was almost poignant there, and sometimes she came away with panic at her heart. Suppose Mercer also should forsake her! She had not the faintest idea what she would do if he did. And yet, whenever she contemplated his return, she was afraid. There was something about the man that she had never fathomed—something ungovernable, something brutal—from which instinctively she shrank.

On the evening of the tenth day she received her answer—a letter from Rollandstown by post. The handwriting she knew so well sprawled over the envelope which her trembling fingers could scarcely open. Relief was her first sensation, and after it came a nameless anxiety. Why had he written? How was it—how was it that he had not come to her?

Trembling all over, she unfolded the letter, and read:

“Dear Sybil,—I am infernally sorry to have brought you out for nothing, for I find that I cannot marry you after all. Things have gone wrong with me of late, and it would be downright folly for me to think of matrimony under existing circumstances. I am leaving this place almost at once, so there is no chance of hearing from you again. I hope you will get on all right. Anyhow, you are well rid of me.—Yours,

“ROBIN.”

Beneath the signature, scribbled very faintly, were the words, “I’m sorry, old girl; I’m sorry.”

She read the letter once, and once only; but every word stamped itself indelibly upon her memory, every word bit its way into her consciousness as though it had been scored upon her quivering flesh. Robin had failed her. That ghastly presentiment of hers had come true. She was alone—alone, and sinking in that awful whirlpool of desolation into which for so long she had felt herself being drawn. The great waters swirled around her, rising higher, ever higher. And she was alone.

Hours passed. She sat in a sort of trance of horror, Robin’s letter spread out beneath her nerveless fingers. She did not ask herself what she should do. The blow had stunned all her faculties. She could only sit there face to face with despair, staring blind-eyed before her, motionless, cold as marble to the very heart of her. She fancied—she even numbly hoped—that she was going to die.

She never heard repeated knocking at her door, or remembered that it was locked, till a man's shoulder burst it open. Then, indeed, she turned stiffly and looked at the intruder.

"You!" she said.

She had forgotten Brett Mercer.

He came forward quickly, stooped and looked at her; then went down on his knee and thrust his arm about her.

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She sat upright in his hold, not yielding an inch, not looking at him. Her eyes were glassy.

For a little he held her; then gently but insistently he drew her to him, pillowed her head against him, and began to rub her icy cheek.

"I've left you alone too long," he said.

She suffered him dumbly, scarcely knowing what she did. But presently the blood that seemed to have frozen in her veins began to circulate again, and the stiffness passed from her limbs. She stirred in his hold like a frightened bird.

"I'm sorry!" she faltered.

He let her draw away from him, but he kept his arm about her. She looked at him, and found him intently watching her. Her eyes fell, and rested upon the letter which lay crumpled under her hands.

"A dreadful thing has happened to me," she said. "Robin has written to say—to say—that he cannot marry me!"

"What is there dreadful in that?" said Mercer.

She did not look up, though his words startled her a little.

"It—has made me feel like—like a stray cat again," she said, with the ghost of a smile about her lips. "Of course, I know I'm foolish. There must be plenty of ways in which a woman can earn her living here. You yourself were thinking of something that I might do, weren't you?"

"I was," said Mercer. He laid his great hand upon hers, paused a moment, then deliberately drew her letter from beneath them and crushed it into a ball. "But I want you to tell me something before we go into that. The truth, mind! It must be the truth!"

"Yes?" she questioned, with her head bent.

"You must look at me," he said, "or I shan't believe you."

There was something Napoleonic about his words which placed them wholly beyond the sphere of offensiveness. Slowly she turned her head and looked him in the eyes.

He took his arm abruptly away from her.

"Heavens!" he said. "How miserable you look! Are you very miserable?"



"I'm not very happy," she said.

"But you always smile," he said, "even when you're crying. Ah, that's better! I scarcely knew you before. Now, tell me! Were you in love with the fellow?"

She shrank a little at the direct question. He put his hand on her shoulder. His touch was imperious.

"Just a straight answer!" he said. "Were you?"

She hesitated, longing yet fearing to lower her eyes.

"I—I don't quite know," she said at length. "I used to think so."

"You haven't thought so of late?" His eyes searched hers unsparingly, with stern insistence.

"I haven't been sure," she admitted.

He released her and rose.

"You won't regret him for long," he said. "In fact, you'll live to be glad that you didn't have him!"

She did not contradict him. He was too positive for that. She watched him cross the room with a certain arrogance, and close the half-open door. As he returned she stood up.

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"Can we get to business now?" she said.

"Business?" said Mercer.

With a steadiness that she found somewhat difficult of accomplishment she made reply:

"You thought you could find me employment—some means by which I could pay you back."

"You still want to pay me back?" he said.

She glanced up half nervously.

"I know that I can never repay your kindness to me," she said. "So far as that goes, I am in your debt for always. But—the money part I must and will, somehow, return."

"Being the most important part?" he suggested, halting in front of her.

"I didn't mean to imply that," she answered. "I think you know which I put first. But I can only do what I can, and money is repayable."

"So is kindness," said Mercer.

Again shyly she glanced at him.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand."

He sat down once more upon the table edge to bring his eyes on a level with hers.

"There's nothing to be scared about," he said.

She smiled a little.

"Oh, no; I am not scared. I believe you think me even more foolish than I actually am."

"No, I don't," said Mercer. "If I did, I shouldn't say what I am going to say. As it is, you are not to answer till you have counted up to fifty. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes," she said, beginning to feel more curious than afraid.

"Here goes then," said Brett Mercer. "I want a wife, and I want you. Will you marry me? Now, shut your eyes and count!"

But Sybil disobeyed him. She opened her eyes wide, and stared at him in breathless amazement.

Mercer stared back with absolute composure.

"I'm in dead earnest," he told her. "Never made a joke in my life. Of course, you'll refuse me. I know that. But I shan't give you up if you do. If you don't marry me, you won't marry any one else, for I'll lick any other man off the ground. I come first with you now, and I mean to stay first."

He stopped, for amazement had given place to something else on her face. She looked at him queerly, as if irresolute for a few seconds; but she no longer shrank from meeting his eyes. And then quite suddenly she broke into her funny little laugh.

"Amusing, is it?" he said.

She turned sharply away, with one hand pressed to her mouth, obviously struggling with herself.

At last:

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to laugh really—really. Only you—you're such a monster, and I'm such a shrimp! Please don't be vexed with me!"

She put out her hand to him, without turning.

He did not take it at once. When he did, he drew her round to face him. There was an odd restraint about the action, determined though it was.

"Well?" he said gruffly. "Which is it to be? Am I to go to the devil, or stay with you?"

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She looked down at the great hand that held her. She was still half laughing, though her lips quivered.

"I couldn't possibly marry you yet," she said.

"No. To-morrow!" said Mercer.

She shook her head.

"Not even then."

"Listen!" he said. "If you won't marry me at once you will have to come with me without. For I am going up-country to see my farms, and I don't mean to leave you here."

"Can't I wait till you come back?" she said.

"What for?"

He leaned forward a little, trying to peer under her drooping lids. She was trembling slightly.

"I think you forget," she said, "that—that we hardly know each other."

"How are we to get any nearer if I'm up-country and you're here?" he said.

She looked at him unwillingly.

"You may change your mind when you have had time to think it over," she said, colouring deeply.

"I'll take the risk," said Mercer. "Besides"—she saw his grim smile for an instant—"I've been thinking of nothing else since I met you."

She started a little.

"I—I had no idea."

"No," he said; "I saw that. You needn't be afraid of me on that account. It ought to have the opposite effect."

"I am not afraid of you," she said, with a certain dignity. "But I, too, should have time for consideration."

"A woman doesn't need it," he asserted. "She can make up her mind at a moment's notice."



"And is often sorry for ever afterwards," she said smiling faintly.

He thrust out his jaw, as if challenging her.

"You think I shall make you sorry?"

"No," she answered. "But I want to be quite sure."

"Which is another reason for marrying me to-morrow," he said. "I'm not going to let you wait. It's only a whim. You weren't created to live alone, and there is no reason why you should. I am here, and you will have to take me."

"Whether I want to or not?" she said.

"Don't you want to?" he questioned.

She was silent.

He lifted the hand he held and looked at it. He spanned her wrist with his finger and thumb.

"That's reason enough for me," he abruptly said. "You are nothing but skin and bone. You've been starving yourself."

"I haven't," she protested. "I haven't, indeed."

"I don't believe you," he retorted rudely. "You weren't such a skeleton as this when I saw you last. Come, what's the good of fighting? You'll have to give in."

She smiled again faintly at the rough persuasion in his voice, but still she hesitated.

"I shan't eat you, you know," he proceeded, pressing his advantage. "I shan't do anything you won't like."

She glanced at him quickly.

"You mean that?"

His eyes looked straight back at her.

"Yes, I mean it."

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"Can I trust you?" she said, almost in a whisper.

He rose to his full height, and stood before her. And in that moment an odd little thrill went through her. He was magnificent—the finest man she had ever seen. She caught her breath a little, feeling awed before the immensity of his strength. But, very curiously, she no longer felt afraid.

"You must ask yourself that question," he said bluntly. "You have my word."

And with a gasp she let herself go at last.

"I will take you on trust," she said.

VI

When Sybil at length travelled up-country with her husband the shearing season had already commenced. They went by easy stages, for the heat was great, and she was far from strong. She knew that Mercer was anxious to reach his property, and she would have journeyed more rapidly if he would have permitted it, but upon this point he was firm. At every turn he considered her, and she marvelled at the intuition with which he divined her unspoken wishes. Curt and rough though he was, his care surrounded her in a magic circle within which she dwelt at ease. With all his imperiousness she did not find him domineering, and this fact was a constant marvel to her, for she knew the mastery of his will. By some mysterious power he curbed himself, and day by day her confidence in him grew.

They accomplished the greater part of the journey by rail, and then when the railway ended came the long, long ride. They travelled for five days, spending each night at an inn at some township upon the road. Through dense stretches of forest, through great tracts of waste country, and again through miles of parched pasture-land they rode, and during the whole of that journey Mercer's care never relaxed. She never found him communicative. He would ride for hours without uttering a word, but yet she was subtly conscious of his close attention. She knew that she was never out of his thoughts.

At the inns at which they rested he always saw himself to her comfort, and the best room was always placed at her disposal. One thing impressed her at every halt. The innkeepers one and all stood in awe of him. Not one of them welcomed him, but not one of them failed to attend with alacrity to his wants. It puzzled her, for she herself had never found him really formidable.

On the last morning of their ride, when they set forth, she surprised a look of deep compassion in the eyes of the innkeeper's wife as she said good-bye, and it gave her something of a shock. Why was the woman sorry for her? Had she heard her story by

any strange chance? Or was it for some other reason? It left an unpleasant impression upon her. She wished she had not seen it.

They rode that day almost exclusively through Mercer's property, which extended for many miles. He was the owner of several farms, two of which they passed without drawing rein. He was taking her to what he called the Home Farm, his native place, which he still made his headquarters, and from which he overlooked the whole of his great property.

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The brief twilight had turned to darkness before they reached it. During the last half hour Mercer rode with his hand upon Sybil's bridle, and she was glad to have it there. She was not accustomed to riding in the dark. Moreover, she was very tired, and when at last they turned in through an open gateway to one side of which a solitary lantern had been fixed, she breathed a deep sigh of thankfulness.

She saw the outline of the house but vaguely, but in two windows lights were burning, and as they clattered up a door was thrown open, and a man stood silhouetted for a moment on the threshold.

"Hullo, Curtis! Here we are!" was Mercer's greeting. "Later than I intended, but it's a far cry from Wallaroo, and we had to take it easy."

"The best way," the other said.

He went forward and quietly helped Sybil to dismount. He did not speak to her as he did so, and she wondered a little at the reserve of his manner. But the next moment she forgot him at the sight of a hideous young negro who had suddenly appeared at the horses' heads.

"It's only Beelzebub," said the man at her side, in a tired voice, as if it were an effort to speak at all.

She realized that the explanation was intended to be reassuring, and laughed rather tremulously. Finding Mercer at her side she slipped her hand into his.

He gave it a terrific squeeze. "Come inside!" he said. "You are tired."

They went in, Curtis following.

In a room with a sanded floor that looked pleasantly homely to her English eyes a meal was spread. The place and everything it contained shone in the lamplight. She looked around her with a smile of pleasure, notwithstanding her weariness. And then her eyes fell upon Curtis, and found his fixed upon her.

He averted them instantly, but she had read their expression at a glance—surprise and compassion—and her heart gave a curious little throb of dismay.

She turned nevertheless without a pause to Mercer.

"Won't you introduce me to your friend?" she said.

"What?" said Mercer. "Oh, that's Curtis, my foreman. Curtis, this is my wife."

Curtis bowed stiffly, but Sybil held out her hand.

“How nice everything looks!” she said. “I am sure we have you to thank for it.”

“Beelzebub and me,” he said; and again she was struck by the utter lack of animation in his voice.

He was a man of about forty, lean and brown, with an unmistakable air of breeding about him that put her at her ease at once. His quiet manner was a supreme contrast to Mercer’s roughness. She was quite sure that he was not colonial born.

He sat at table with them, and waited also, but he did not utter a word except now and again in answer to some brief query from Mercer. When the meal was over he cleared the table and disappeared.

She looked at Mercer in some surprise as the door closed upon him.

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"He's a useful chap," Mercer said. "I'm sorry there isn't a woman in the house, but you'll find Beelzebub better than a dozen. And this fellow is always at hand for anything you may want in the evening."

"He is a gentleman," she said almost involuntarily.

Mercer looked at her.

"Do you object to having a gentleman to wait on you?" he asked curtly.

She did not quite understand his tone, but she was very far just then from understanding the man himself. His question demanded no answer, and she gave none.

After a moment she got up, and, conscious of an oppression in the atmosphere, took off her hat and pushed back the hair from her face. She knew that Mercer was watching her, felt his eyes upon her, and wished intensely that he would speak, but he did not utter a word. There seemed to her to be something stubborn in his silence, and it affected her strangely.

For a while she stood also silent, then suddenly with a little smile she looked across at him.

"Aren't you going to show me everything?" she said.

"Not to-night," he said. "I will show you your bedroom if you are too tired to stay up any longer."

She considered the matter for a few seconds, then quietly crossed the room to his side. She laid a hand that trembled slightly on his shoulder.

"You have been very good to me," she said.

He stiffened at her touch.

"You had better go to bed," he said gruffly, and made as if he would rise.

But she checked him with a dignity all her own.

"Wait, please; I want to speak to you."

"Not to thank me, I hope," he said.

"No, not to thank you." She paused an instant, and seemed to hesitate. "I—I really want to ask you something," she said at length.

He reached up and removed her hand from his shoulder.

“Well?” he questioned.

“Don’t hold me at arms’ length!” she pleaded gently. “It makes things so difficult.”

“What is it you want to know?” he asked without relaxing.

She stood silent for a few seconds as if summoning all her courage. Then at length, her voice very low, she spoke.

“When you said that you wanted me for your wife, did you mean that you—loved me?”

He made an abrupt movement, and his fingers closed tightly upon her wrist. For a moment or more he sat in tense silence, then he got to his feet.

“Why do you want to know?” he demanded harshly.

She stood before him with bent head.

“Because,” she said, and there was a piteous quiver in her voice, “I am lonely, and I have a very empty heart. And—and—if you love me it will not frighten me to know it. It will only—make me—glad.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. “Do you know what you are saying?” he questioned.

“Yes,” she said under her breath.

“Are you sure?” he persisted.

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She raised her head impulsively, and, with a gesture most winning, most confident, she stretched up her arms to him.

“Yes,” she said. “I mean it! I mean it! I want—to be loved!”

His arms were close about her as she ended, and she uttered the last words chokingly with her face against his breast. The effort had cost her all her strength, and she clung to him panting, almost fainting, while panic—wild, unreasoning panic—swept over her. What was this man to whom she had thus impulsively given herself—this man whom all men feared?

Nevertheless, she grew calmer at last, awaking to the fact that though his hold was tense and passionate, he still retained his self-control. She commanded herself, and turned her face upwards.

“Then you do love me?” she said tremulously.

His eyes shone into hers, red as the inner, intolerable glow of a furnace. He did not attempt to make reply in words. He seemed at that moment incapable of speech. He only bent and kissed her fiercely, burningly, even brutally, upon the lips. And so she had her answer.

VII

It was a curious establishment over which Sybil found herself called upon to preside. The native, Beelzebub, was her only domestic, and, as Mercer had predicted, she found him very willing if not always efficient. One thing she speedily discovered regarding him. He went in deadly fear of his master, and invariably crept about like a whipped cur in his presence.

“Why is it?” she said to Curtis once.

But Curtis only shrugged his shoulders in reply.

He was a continual puzzle to her, this man. There was no servility about him, but she had a feeling that he, too, was in some fashion under Mercer’s heel. He made himself exceedingly useful to her in his silent, unobtrusive way; but he seldom spoke on his own initiative, and it was some time before she felt herself to be on terms of intimacy with him. He was an excellent cook; and he and Beelzebub between them made her duties remarkably light. In fact, she spent most of her time riding with her husband, who was fully occupied just then in overlooking the shearers’ work. She also was keenly interested, but he never suffered her to go among the men. Once, when she had grown tired of waiting for him, and followed him into one of the sheds, he was actually angry

with her—a new experience, which, if it did not seriously scare her, made her nervous in his presence for some time afterwards.

She had come to regard him as a man whose will was bound to be respected, a man who possessed the power of impressing his personality indelibly upon all with whom he came in contact. There were times when he touched and set vibrating the very pulse of her being, times when her heart quivered and expanded in the heat of his passion as a flower that opens to the sun. But there were also times when he

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filled her with a nameless dread, when the very foundations of her confidence were shaken, and she felt as a prisoner behind iron bars. She did not know him, that was her trouble. There were in him depths that she could not reach, could scarcely even realize. He was slow to reveal himself to her, and she had but the vaguest indications to guide her. She even felt sometimes that he deliberately kept back from her that which she felt to be almost the essential part of him. This she knew that time must remedy. Living his life, she was bound ultimately to know whereof he was made, and she tried to assure herself that when that knowledge came to her she would not be dismayed. And yet she had occasional glimpses of him that made her tremble.

One evening, after they had spent the entire day in the saddle, he went after supper to look at one of the horses that was suffering from a cracked hock. Curtis was busy in the kitchen, and Sybil betook herself to the step to wait for her husband. She often sat in the starlight while he smoked his pipe. She knew that he liked to have her there.

She was drowsy after her long exercise, and must have dozed with her head against the door-post, when suddenly she became conscious of a curious sound. It came from the direction of the stable which was on the other side of the house. But for the absolute stillness of the night she would not have heard it. She started upright in alarm, and listened intently.

It came again—a terrible wailing, unlike anything she had ever heard, ending in a staccato shriek that made her blood run cold.

She sprang up and turned into the house, almost running into Curtis, who had just appeared in the passage behind her.

“Oh, what is it?” she cried. “What is it? Something terrible is happening! Did you hear?”

She would have turned into the kitchen, that being the shortest route to the stable, but he stretched an arm in front of her.

“I shouldn’t go if I were you,” he said. “You can’t do any good.”

She stood and stared at him, a ghastly fear clutching her heart. “What—what do you mean?” she gasped.

“It’s only Beelzebub,” he said, “getting hammered for his sins.”

She gripped her hands tightly over her breast. “You mean that—that my husband—?”

He nodded. “It won’t go on much longer. I should go to bed if I were you.”

He meant it kindly, but the words sounded to her most hideously callous. She turned from him, sobbing hysterically, and sprang for the open door.

The next moment she was running swiftly round the house to the stable. Turning the corner, she heard a sound like a pistol-shot. It was followed instantly by a scream so utterly inhuman that even then she almost wheeled and fled. But she mastered the impulse. She reached the stable-door, fumbled at the latch, finally burst inwards as it swung open.

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A lantern hung on a nail immediately within. By its light she discovered her husband—a gigantic figure—towering over something she could not see, something that crouched, writhing and moaning, in a corner. He was armed with a horsewhip, and even as she entered she saw him raise it and bring it downwards with a horrible precision upon the thing at his feet. She heard again that awful shriek of anguish, and a sick shudder went through her. Unconsciously, a cry broke from her own lips, and, as Mercer's arm went up again, she flung herself forward and tried to catch it.

In her agitation she failed. The heavy end of the whip fell upon her outstretched arm, numbing; it to the shoulder. She heard Mercer utter a frightful oath, and with a gasp she fell.

VIII

When she came to herself she was lying on her bed. Someone—Curtis—was bathing her arm in warm water. He did not speak to her or raise his: eyes from his occupation. She thought he looked very grim.

“Where is—Brett?” she whispered.

Curtis did not answer her, but a moment later she looked beyond him and saw Mercer leaning upon the bed-rail. His eyes were fixed upon her and held her own. She sought to avoid them, but could not. And suddenly she knew that he was angry with her, not merely displeased, but furiously angry.

She made an effort to rise, but at that Curtis laid a restraining hand upon her, and spoke.

“Go away, Mercer!” he said. “Haven’t you done harm enough for one night?”

The words amazed her. She had never thought that he would dare to use such a tone to her husband. She trembled for the result, for Mercer's face just then was terrible, but Curtis did not so much as glance in his direction.

Mercer's eyes remained mercilessly fixed upon her.

“Do you wish me to go?” he said.

“No,” she murmured faintly.

Her arm was beginning to hurt her horribly, and she shuddered uncontrollably once or twice. But that unvarying scrutiny was harder to bear, and at last, in desperation, she made a quivering appeal.

“Come and help me!” she begged. “Come and lift me up!”

For an instant he did not stir, and she even thought he would refuse. Then, stiffly, he straightened himself and moved round to her side.

Stooping, he raised and supported her. But his expression did not alter; the murderous glare was still in his eyes. She turned her face into his breast and lay still.

After what seemed a very long interval Curtis spoke.

“That’s all I can do for the present. I will dress it again in the morning, and it had better be in a sling. Mercer, I should like a word with you outside.”

Sybil stirred sharply at the brief demand. Her nerves were on edge, and a quaking doubt shot through her as to what Mercer might do if Curtis presumed too far.

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She laid an imploring hand on her husband's arm.

"Stay with me!" she begged him faintly.

He did not move or speak.

Curtis stood up.

"Presently, then!" he said, and she heard him move away.

At the door he paused, and she thought he made some rapid sign to Mercer. But the next moment she heard the door close softly, and knew that he had gone.

She lay quite still thereafter, her heart fluttering too much for speech. What would he say to her, she wondered; how would he break his silence? She had no weapon to oppose against his anger. She was as powerless before it as Beelzebub had been.

Suddenly he moved. He turned her head back upon his arm and looked straight down into her eyes. She did not shrink. She would not. But her heart died within her. She felt as if she were gazing into hell, watching a soul in torment.

"Well?" he said at last. "Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" she faltered.

"As to the sort of monster you have married," he explained, with savage bitterness. "You've been putting out feelers ever since you came here. Did you think I didn't know? Well, you've found out a little more than you wanted, this time. Perhaps it will be a lesson to you. Perhaps"—sheer cruelty shone red in his eyes—"when you see what I've done to you, you will remember that I am not a man to play with, and that any one, man or woman, who interferes with me, must pay the price."

"I don't know what you mean," she answered with an effort. "What happened was an accident."

"Was it?" he said brutally. "Was it?"

Still she did not shrink from him.

"Yes," she said. "It was an accident."

"How do you know?" he asked.

She answered him instantly. She had not realized till then that she was fighting the flames for his soul. The knowledge came upon her suddenly, and it gave her strength.

“Because I know that you love me,” she said. “Because—because—though you are cruel, and though you may be wicked—I love you, too.”

She said it with absolute sincerity, but it was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. To tell this man who was half animal and half fiend that he had not somehow touched the woman’s heart in her seemed almost a desecration. She saw the flare of passion leap up in his eyes, and she was conscious for one sick moment of a feeling of downright repulsion. If she had only succeeded in turning his savagery into another channel she had spoken in vain; or, worse, she had made a mistake that could never be remedied.

Abruptly she felt her courage waver. She shrank at last.

“I want you to understand,” she faltered; and again, “I want you to understand.”

But she could get no further. She hid her face against him and began to sob.

There followed a silence, tense and terrible, which she dared not break.

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Then she felt him bend lower, and suddenly his arms were under her. He lifted her like a little child and sat down, holding her. His hand pressed her head against his neck, fondling, soothing, consoling. And she knew, with an overwhelming thankfulness, that she had not offered herself in vain. She had drawn him out of his hell by the magic of her love.

IX

When morning came Mercer departed alone, and Curtis was left in charge. Sybil lay in her room half dressed, while the latter treated her injured arm.

"You ought not to be up at all," he remarked, as he uncovered it. "Have you had any sleep?"

"Not much," she was obliged to confess.

"Why didn't you stay in bed?"

"I don't want—my husband—to think me very bad," she said, flushing a little.

"Why not?" said Curtis. And then he glanced at her, saw the flush, and said no more.

She watched his bandaging with interest.

"You look so professional," she said.

He uttered a short laugh.

"Do I?"

"I mean," she said, unaccountably embarrassed, "that you do it so nicely."

"I have done a good deal of veterinary work," he said rather coldly. And then suddenly he seemed to change his mind. "I was a professional once," he said, without looking at her. "I made a mistake—a bad one—and it broke me. That's all."

"Oh," she said impulsively, "I am so sorry."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Not till he was about to leave her did she manage to ask the question that had been uppermost in her mind since his entrance.

"Have you seen Beelzebub yet?"



He paused—somewhat unwillingly, she thought.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Is he”—she hesitated—“is he very bad?”

“He isn’t going to die, if that is what you mean,” said Curtis.

She felt her heart contract.

“Please tell me!” she urged rather faintly. “I want to know.”

With the air of a man submitting to the inevitable Curtis proceeded to inform her.

“He is lying in the loft over the stable, like a sick dog. He is rather badly mauled, and whimpers a good deal. I shall take him some soup across presently, but I don’t suppose he’ll touch it.”

“Ok, dear!” she said. “What shall you do then?”

“Mercer will have to lend a hand if I can’t manage him,” Curtis answered. “But I shall do my best.”

She suppressed a shudder.

“I hope you will be successful.”

“So do I,” said Curtis, departing.

When she saw him again she asked anxiously for news; but he had none of a cheering nature to give her. Beelzebub would not look at food.

“I knew he wouldn’t,” he said. “He has been like this before.”

“Mr. Curtis!” she exclaimed.

He shrugged his shoulders.

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"It's Mercer's way. He regards the boy as his own personal property, and so he is, more or less. He picked him up in the bush when he wasn't more than a few days old. The mother was dead. Mercer took him, and he was brought up among the farm men. He's a queer young animal, more like a dog than a human being. He needs hammering now and then. I kick him occasionally myself. But Mercer goes too far."

"What had he done?" questioned Sybil.

"Oh, it was some neglect of the horses. I don't know exactly what. Mercer isn't precisely patient, you know. And when the fellow gets thoroughly scared he's like a rabbit; he can't move. Mercer thinks him obstinate, and the rest follows as a natural consequence. I must ask you to excuse me. I have work to do."

"One moment!" Sybil laid a nervous hand on his arm. "Mr. Curtis, if—if you can't persuade the poor boy to take any food, how will my husband do so?"

"He won't," said Curtis. "He'll hold him down while I drench him, that's all."

"That must be very bad for him," she said.

"Of course it is. But we can't let him die, you know." He looked at her suddenly. "Don't you worry yourself, Mrs. Mercer," he said kindly. "He isn't quite the same as a white man, though it may offend your Western prejudices to hear me say so. Beelzebub will pull through all right. They are wonderfully tough, these chaps."

"I wonder if I could persuade him to take something," she said.

He shook his head.

"I don't suppose you could. In any case, you mustn't try. It is against orders."

"Whose orders?" she asked quickly.

"Your husband's," he answered. "His last words to me were that I was on no account to let you go near him."

"Oh, why?" she protested. "And I might be able to help."

"It isn't at all likely," he said. "And he's not a very pretty thing to look at."

"As if that matters!" she exclaimed.

"Well, it does matter, because I don't want to have you in hysterics, as much for my own sake as for yours." He smiled a little. "Also, if Mercer finds he has been disobeyed it will make him savage again, and perhaps I shall be the next victim."

"He would never touch you!" she exclaimed.

"He might. Why shouldn't he?"

"He never would!" she reiterated. "You are not afraid of him."

He looked contemptuous for a second; and then his expression changed.

"You are right," he said. "That is my chief safeguard; and, permit me to say, yours also. It may be worth remembering."

"You think him a coward!" she said.

He considered a little.

"No, not a coward," he said then. "There is nothing mean about him, so far as I can see. He suffers from too much raw material, that's all. They call him Brute Mercer in these parts. But perhaps you will be able to tame him some day."

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"I!" she said, and turned away with a mournful little smile.

She might charm him once or even twice out of a savage mood, but the conviction was strong upon her that he would overwhelm her in the end.

X

For nearly an hour after Curtis had left her she sat still, thinking of Beelzebub. The afternoon sunlight lay blindingly upon all things. The heat of it hung laden in the air. But she could not sleep or even try to rest. Her arm throbbed and burned with a ceaseless pain, and ever the thought of Beelzebub, lying in the loft "like a sick dog," oppressed her like an evil dream.

The shadows had begun to lengthen a little when at last she rose. She could bear it no longer. Whatever the consequences, she could endure them more easily than this torture of inactivity. As for Curtis she believed him fully capable of taking care of himself.

She went to the kitchen and was relieved to find him absent. Searching, she presently found the bowl of soup Beelzebub had refused. She turned it into a saucepan and hung over the fire, scarcely conscious of the heat in her pressing desire to be of use.

Finally, armed with the hot liquor, she stole across the yard to the stable. The place was deserted, save for the horse she usually rode, who whinnied softly to her as she passed. At the foot of the loft ladder she stood awhile, listening, and presently heard a heavy groan.

She had to make the ascent very slowly, using her injured arm to support herself. When she emerged at last she found herself in a twilight which for a time her dazzled eyes could not pierce. The heat was intolerable, and the place hummed with flies.

"Beelzebub!" she said softly at length. "Beelzebub, where are you?"

There was a movement in what she dimly discerned to be a heap of straw, and she heard a feeble whimpering as of an animal in pain.

Her heart throbbed with pity as she crept across the littered floor. She was beginning to see more distinctly, and by sundry chinks she discovered the loft door. She went to it, fumbled for the latch, and opened it. Instantly the place was flooded with light, and turning round, she beheld Beelzebub.

He was lying in a twisted heap in the straw, half naked, looking like some monstrous reptile. In all her life she had never beheld anything so horrible. His black flesh was

scored over and over with long purple stripes; even his face was swollen almost beyond recognition, and out of it the whites of his eyes gleamed, bloodshot and terrible.

For a few moments she was possessed by an almost overpowering desire to flee from the awful sight; and then again he stirred and whimpered, and pity—element most divine—came to her aid.

She went to the poor, whining creature, and knelt beside him.

“See!” she said. “I have brought you some soup. Do try and take a little! It will do you good.”

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There was a note of entreaty in her voice, but Beelzebub's eyes stared as though they would leap out of his head.

He writhed away from her into the straw. "Go 'way, missis!" he hissed at her, with lips drawn back in terror. "Go 'way, or Boss'll come and beat Beelzebub!"

He spoke the white man's language; it was the only one he knew, but there was something curiously unfamiliar, something almost bestial in the way he spat his words.

Again Sybil was conscious of a wild desire to escape before sheer horror paralysed her limbs, but she fought and conquered the impulse.

"Boss won't beat you any more," she said. "And I want you to be a good boy and drink this before I go. I brought it myself, because I knew you would take it to please me. You will, won't you, Beelzebub?"

But Beelzebub was not to be easily persuaded. He cried and moaned and writhed at every word she spoke. But Sybil had mastered herself, and she was very patient. She coaxed him as though he had been in truth the sick dog to which Curtis had likened him. And at last, by sheer persistence, she managed to insert the spoon between his chattering teeth.

He let her feed him then, lying passive, still whimpering between every gulp, while she talked soothingly, scarcely knowing what she said in the resolute effort to keep her ever-recurring horror at bay. When the bowl was empty she rose.

"Perhaps you will go to sleep now," she said kindly. "Suppose you try!"

He stared up at her from his lair with rolling, uneasy eyes. Suddenly he pointed to her bandaged arm.

"Boss did that!" he croaked.

She turned to close the door again, feeling the blood rise in her face.

"Boss didn't mean to," she answered with as much steadiness as she could muster. "And he didn't mean to hurt you so badly, either, Beelzebub. He was sorry afterwards."

She saw his teeth gleam in the twilight like the bared fangs of a wolf, and knew that he grinned in derision of this statement. She picked up her bowl and turned to go. At the same instant he spoke in a piercing whisper out of the darkness.

"Boss kill a white man once, missis!"

She stood still, rooted to the spot. "Beelzebub!"

He shrank away, whimpering.

“No, no! Boss’ll kill poor Beelzebub! Missis won’t tell Boss?”

To her horror his hand shot out and fastened upon her skirt. But she could not have moved in any case. She stood staring down at him, cold—cold to the very heart with foreboding.

“No,” she said at last, and it was as if she stood apart and listened to another woman, very calm and collected, speaking on her behalf. “I will never tell him, Beelzebub. You will be quite safe with me. So tell me what you mean! Don’t be afraid! Speak plainly! When did Boss kill a white man?”

There must have been something of compulsion in her manner, for, albeit quaveringly and with obvious terror, the negro answered her.

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"Down by Bowker Creek, missis, 'fore you come. Boss and the white man fight—a dam' big fight. Beelzebub run away. Afterwards, Boss, come on alone. So Beelzebub know that Boss kill' the white man."

"Oh, then you didn't see him killed! You don't know?"

Was it her own lips uttering the words? They felt quite stiff and powerless.

"Beelzebub run away," she heard him repeating rather vacantly.

"What did they fight with?" she said.

"They fight with their hands," he told her. "White man from Bowker Creek try to shoot Boss, and make Boss very angry."

"But perhaps he wasn't killed," she insisted to herself. "Of course—of course, he wasn't. You shouldn't say such things, Beelzebub. You weren't there to see."

Beelzebub shuffled in the straw and whined depreciatingly.

"Tell me," she heard the other woman say peremptorily, "what was the white man's name?"

But Beelzebub only moaned, and she was forced to conclude that he did not know.

"Where is Bowker Creek?" she asked next.

He could not tell her. His intelligence seemed to have utterly deserted him.

She stood silent, considering, while he coiled about revoltingly in the straw at her feet.

Suddenly through the afternoon silence there came the sound of a horse's hoofs. She started, and listened.

Beelzebub frantically clutched at her shoes.

"Missis won't tell Boss!" he implored again. "Missis won't——"

She stepped desperately out of his reach.

"Hush!" she said. "Hush! He will hear you. I must go. I must go at once."

Emergency gave her strength. She moved to the trap-door, and, she knew not how, found the ladder with her feet.

Grey-faced, dazed, and cold as marble, she descended. Yet she did not stumble. Her limbs moved mechanically, unfalteringly.

When she reached the bottom she turned with absolute steadiness and found Brett Mercer standing in the doorway watching her.

XI

He stood looking at her in silence as she came forward. She did not stop to ascertain if he were angry or not. Somehow it did not seem to matter. She only dealt with the urgent necessity for averting his suspicion.

"I just ran across with some soup for Beelzebub," she said, her pale face raised unflinchingly. "I am glad to say he has taken it. Please don't go up! I want him to get to sleep."

She spoke, with a wholly unconscious authority. The supreme effort she was making seemed to place her upon a different footing. She laid a quiet hand upon his arm and drew him out of the stable.

He went with her as one surprised into submission. One of the farm men who had taken his horse stared after them in amazement.

As they crossed the yard together Mercer found his voice.

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"I told Curtis you weren't to go near Beelzebub."

"I know," she answered. "Mr. Curtis told me."

He cracked his whip savagely.

"Where is Curtis?"

"I don't know," she answered. "But, Brett, if you are angry because I went you must deal with me, not with Mr. Curtis. He had nothing whatever to do with it."

Mercer was silent, and she divined with no sense of elation that he would not turn his anger against her.

They entered the house together, and he strode through the passage, calling for Curtis. But when the latter appeared in answer to the summons, to her surprise Mercer began to speak upon a totally different subject.

"I have just seen Stevens from Wallaroo. They are all in a mortal funk there. He was on his way over here to ask you to go and look at a man who is very bad with something that looks like smallpox. You can please yourself about going; though, if you take my advice, you'll stay away."

Curtis did not at once reply. He gravely took the empty bowl from Sybil's hand, and it was upon her that his eyes rested as he finally said, "Do you think you could manage without me?"

She looked up with perfect steadiness.

"Certainly I could. Please do as you think right!"

"What about Beelzebub?" he said.

Mercer made a restless movement.

"He will be on his legs again in a day or two. One of the men must look after him."

"I shall look after him," Sybil said, with a calmness of resolution that astounded both her hearers.

Mercer put his hand on her shoulder, but said nothing. It was Curtis who spoke with the voice of authority.

“You will have to take care of her,” he said bluntly. “Bear in mind what I said to you last night! I will show you how to treat the arm. And then I think I had better go. It may prevent an epidemic.”

Thereafter he assumed so businesslike an air that he seemed to Sybil to be completely transformed. There never had been much deference in his attitude towards Mercer, but he treated him now without the smallest ceremony. He was as a man suddenly awakened from a long lethargy. From that moment to the moment of his departure his activity was unceasing.

Sybil and Mercer watched him finally ride away, and it was not till he was actually gone that the fact that she was left absolutely alone with her husband came home to her.

With a sense of shock she realized it, and those words of Beelzebub’s—the words that she had been so resolutely forcing into the back of her mind—came crowding back upon her with a vividness and persistence that were wholly beyond her control.

What was she going to do, she wondered? What could she do with this awful, this unspeakable doubt pressing ever upon her? It might all be a mistake, a hideous mistake on Beelzebub’s part. She had no great faith in his intelligence. It might be that by some evil chance his muddled brain had registered the name of Bowker Creek in connection with the fight which she did not for a moment doubt had at some time taken place. Beelzebub was never reliable in the matter of details, and he had not been able to answer her question regarding the place.

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Over and over again she tried to convince herself that her fear was groundless, and over and over again the words came back to her, refusing to be forgotten or ignored—"the white man from Bowker Creek." Who was this white man whom Mercer had fought, this man who had tried to shoot him? She shuddered whenever she pictured the conflict. She was horribly afraid.

Yet she played her part unfalteringly, and Mercer never suspected the seething anguish of suspense and uncertainty that underlay her steadfast composure. He thought her quieter than usual, deemed her shy; and he treated her in consequence with a tenderness of which she had not believed him capable—a tenderness that wrung her heart.

She was thankful when the morning came, and he left her, for the strain was almost more than she could endure.

But in the interval of solitude that ensued she began to build up her strength anew. Alone with her doubts, she faced the fact that she would probably never know the truth. She could not rely upon Beelzebub for accuracy, and she could not refer to her husband. The only course open to her was to bury the evil thing as deeply as might be, to turn her face resolutely away from it, to forget—oh, Heaven, if she could but forget!

All through that day Beelzebub slept, curled up in the straw. She visited him several times, but he needed nothing. Nature had provided her own medicine for his tortured body. In the evening a man came with a note from Curtis. The case was undoubtedly one of smallpox, he wrote, and he did not think his patient would recover. There was a good deal of panic at Wallaroo, and he had removed the man to a cattle-shed at some distance from the township where they were isolated. There were one or two things he needed which he desired Mercer to send on the following day to a place he described, whence he himself would fetch them.

"Beelzebub can go," said Mercer.

"If he is well enough!" said Sybil.

He frowned.

"You don't seem to realize what these niggers are made of. Of course, he will be well enough."

She said no more, for she saw that the topic was unwelcome; but she determined to make a stand on Beelzebub's behalf the next day, unless his condition were very materially improved.

XII

It was with surprise and relief that upon entering the kitchen on the following morning Sybil found Beelzebub back in his accustomed place. He greeted her with a wider grin than usual, which she took for an expression of gratitude. He seemed to have made a complete recovery, for which she was profoundly thankful.

She herself was feeling better that day. Her arm pained her less, and she no longer carried it in a sling. She had breakfasted in bed, Mercer himself waiting upon her.

She was amazed to hear him speak with kindness to Beelzebub, and even ask the boy if he thought he could manage the ride to Wallaroo. Beelzebub, abjectly eager to return to favour, professed himself ready to start at once. And so presently Sybil found herself alone.

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The long day passed without event. The loneliness did not oppress her. She busied herself with preparing delicacies for the sick man, which Beelzebub could take on the following day. Beelzebub had had smallpox, and knew no fear.

He did not return from his errand till the afternoon was well advanced. She went to the door to hear his news, but he was in his least intelligent mood, and seemed able to tell her very little. By dint of close questioning she elicited that he had seen Curtis, who had told him that the man was worse. Beyond this, Beelzebub appeared to know nothing; and yet there was something about him that excited her attention. He seemed more than once to be upon the point of saying something, and to fail at the last moment, as though either his wits or his courage were unequal to the effort. She could not have said what conveyed this impression, but it was curiously strong. She tried hard to elicit further information, but Beelzebub only became more idiotic in response, and she was obliged to relinquish the attempt.

Mercer came in soon after, and she dismissed the matter from her mind. But a vivid dream recalled it. She started up in the night, agitated, incoherent, crying that someone wanted her, someone who could not wait, and she must go. She could not tell her husband what the dream had been and in the morning all memory of it had vanished. But it left a vague disquietude behind, a haunting anxiety that hung heavily upon her. She could not feel at peace.

Mercer left that morning. He had to go a considerable distance to an outlying farm. She saw him off from the gate, and then went back into the house, still with that inexplicable sense of oppression weighing her down.

She prepared the parcel that she purposed to send to Curtis, and went in search of Beelzebub. He was sweeping the kitchen.

"I shall want you to go to Wallaroo again to-day," she said. "You had better start soon, as I should like Mr. Curtis to get this in good time."

Beelzebub stopped sweeping, and cringed before her.

"Boss gone?" he questioned cautiously.

"Yes," she answered, wondering what was coming.

He drew a little nearer to her, still cringing.

"Missis," he whispered piercingly, "Beelzebub see the white man yesterday."

She stared at him.

"What white man, Beelzebub? What do you mean?"

“White man from Bowker Creek,” said Beelzebub.

Her breathing stopped suddenly. She felt as if she had been stabbed. “Where!” she managed to gasp.

Beelzebub looked vacant. There was evidently something that she was expected to understand. She forced her startled brain into activity.

“Is he the man who is ill—the man Mr. Curtis is taking care of?”

Beelzebub looked intelligent again.

“White man very bad,” he said.

“But—but—how was it you saw him? You were told to leave the parcel by the fence for Mr. Curtis to fetch.”

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Beelzebub exerted himself to explain.

“Mr. Curtis away, so Beelzebub creep up close and look in. But the white man see Beelzebub and curse; so Beelzebub go away again.”

“And that is the man you thought Boss killed?” Sybil questioned, relief and fear strangely mingled within her.

Her brain was beginning to whirl, but with all her strength she controlled it. Now or never would she know the truth.

Beelzebub was scared by the question.

“Missis won’t tell Boss?” he begged.

“No, no,” she said impatiently. “When will you learn that I never repeat things? Now, Beelzebub, I want you to do something for me. Can you remember? You are to ask Mr. Curtis to tell you the white man’s name. Say that Boss—do you understand?—say that Boss wants to know! And then come back as fast as you possibly can, before Boss gets home to-night, and tell me!”

She repeated these instructions many times over till it seemed impossible that he could make any mistake. And then she watched him go, and set herself with a heart like lead to face the interminable day.

She thought the hours would never pass, so restless was she, so continuous the torment of doubt that vexed her soul. There were times when she felt that if the thing she feared were true, it would kill her. If her husband—the man whom, in spite of almost every instinct, she had learnt to love—had deceived her, if he had played a double game to win her, if, in short, the man he had fought at Bowker Creek were Robin Wentworth, then she felt as if life for her were over. She might continue to exist, indeed, but the heart within her would be dead. There would be nothing left her but the grey ruins of that which had scarcely begun to be happiness.

She tried hard to compose herself, but all her strength could not still the wild fluttering of her nerves through the long-drawn-out suspense of that dreadful day. At every sound she hastened to the door to look for Beelzebub, long before he could possibly return. At the striking of every hour she strained her ears to listen.

But when at last she heard the hoof-beats that told of the negro’s approach she felt that she could not go again; she lacked the physical strength to seek him and hear the truth.

For a time she sat quite still, gathering all her forces for the ordeal. Then at length she compelled herself, and rose.

Beelzebub was grooming his horse. He looked up at her approach and grinned.

“Well, Beelzebub,” she said through her white lips, “have you seen Mr. Curtis?”

“Yes, missis.” Beelzebub rolled his eyes intelligently. He seemed unaware of the tragedy in the English girl’s drawn face.

“And the white man?” she said.

“Mr. Curtis think the white man die soon,” said Beelzebub.

“Ah!” She pressed her hand tightly against her heart. She felt as if its throbbing would choke her. “And—his name?” she said.

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Beelzebub paused and opened his eyes to their widest extent. He was making a supreme effort, and the result was monstrous. But Sybil did not quail; she scarcely saw him.

“His name?” she said; and again, raising her voice, “His name?”

The whole world seemed to rock while she waited, but she stood firm in the midst of chaos. Her whole soul was concentrated upon Beelzebub’s reply.

It came at last with the effect of something uttered from an immense distance that was yet piercingly distinct.

“Went—” said Beelzebub, and paused; then, with renewed effort, “Wentworth.”

And Sybil turned from him, shrinking as though something evil had touched her, and walked stiffly back into the house. She had known it all day long!

XIII

She never knew afterwards how long a time elapsed between the confirmation of her doubts and the sudden starting to life of a new resolution within her. It came upon her unexpectedly, striking through the numbness of her despair, nerving her to action—the memory of her dream and whence that dream had sprung. Robin Wentworth still lived. It might be he would know her. It might even be that he was wanting her. She would go to him.

It was the only thing left for her to do. Of the risk to herself she did not think, nor would it have deterred her had it presented itself to her mind. She felt as though he had called to her, and she had not answered.

To Beelzebub’s abject entreaties she paid no heed. There were two fresh horses in the stable, and she ordered him to saddle them both. He did not dare to disobey her in the matter, but she knew that no power on earth would have induced him to remain alone at the farm till Mercer’s coming.

She left no word to explain her absence. There seemed no time for any written message, nor was she in a state of mind to frame one. She was driven by a consuming fever that urged her to perpetual movement. It did not seem to matter how the tidings of her going came to Mercer.

Not till she was in the saddle and riding, riding hard, did she know a moment’s relief. The physical exertion eased the inward tumult, but she would not slacken for an instant. She felt that to do so would be to lose her reason. Beelzebub, galloping after her, thought her demented already.

Through the long, long pastures she travelled, never drawing rein, looking neither to right nor left. The animal she rode knew the way to Wallaroo, and followed it undeviatingly. The sun was beginning to slant, and the shadows to lengthen.

Mile after mile of rolling grassland they left behind them, and still they pressed forward. At last came the twilight, brief as the soft sinking of a curtain, and then the dark. But the night was ablaze with stars, and the road was clear.

Sybil rode as one in a nightmare, straining forward eternally. She did not urge her horse, but he bore her so gallantly that she did not need to do so. Beelzebub had increasing difficulty in keeping up with her.

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At last, after what seemed like the passage of many hours, they sighted from afar the lights of Wallaroo. Sybil drew rein, and waited for Beelzebub.

"Which way?" she said.

He pointed to a group of trees upon a knoll some distance from the road, and thither she turned her horse's head. Beelzebub rode up beside her.

They left the knoll on one side, and, skirting it, came to a dip in the hill-side. And here they came at length to the end of their journey—a journey that to Sybil had seemed endless—and halted before a wooden shed that had been built for cattle. A flap of canvas had been nailed above the entrance, behind which a dim light burned. Sybil dismounted and drew near.

At first she heard no sound; then, as she stood hesitating and uncertain, there came a man's voice that uttered low, disjointed words. She thought for a second that someone was praying, and then, with a thrill of horror, she knew otherwise. The voice was uttering the most fearful curses she had ever heard.

Scarcely knowing what she did, but unable to stand there passively listening, she drew aside the canvas flap and looked in.

In an instant the voice ceased. There fell a silence, followed by a wild, half-strangled cry. She had a glimpse of a prone figure in a corner struggling upwards, and then Curtis was before her—Curtis haggard and agitated as she had never seen him—pushing her back out of the dim place into the clean starlight without.

"Mrs. Mercer! Are you mad?" she heard him say.

She resisted his compelling hands; she was strangely composed and undismayed.

"I am coming in," she said. "Nothing on earth will keep me back. That man—Robin Wentworth—is a friend of mine. I am going to see him and speak to him."

"Impossible!" Curtis said.

But she withstood him unfalteringly.

"It is not impossible. You must let me pass. I mean to go to him, and you cannot prevent it."

He saw the hopelessness of opposing her. Her eyes told him that it was no whim but steadfast purpose that had brought her there. He looked beyond her to Beelzebub, but gathered no inspiration in that quarter.

“Let me pass, Mr. Curtis!” said Sybil gently. “I shall take no harm. I must see him before he dies.”

And Curtis yielded. He was worn out by long and fruitless watching, and he could not cope with this fresh emergency. He yielded to her insistence, and suffered her to pass him.

“He is very far gone,” he said.

XIV

As Sybil entered she heard again that strange, choked cry. The sick man was struggling to rise, but could not.

She went straight to the narrow pallet on which he lay and bent over him.

“Robin!” she said.

He gave a great start, and became intensely still, lying face downwards, his body twisted, his head on his arm.

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She stooped lower. She touched him. A superhuman strength was hers.

“Robin,” she said, “do you know me?”

He turned his face a little, and she saw the malignant horror of the disease that gripped him. It was a sight that would have turned her sick at any other time. But to-night she knew no weakness.

“Who are you?” he said, in a gasping whisper.

“I am Sybil,” she answered steadfastly. “Don’t you remember me?”

He lay motionless for a little, his breathing sharp and short. At length:

“You had better get away from this pestilent hole,” he panted out. “It’s no place for a woman.”

“I have come to nurse you,” she said.

“You!” He seemed to collect himself with an effort. He turned his face fully towards her. “Didn’t you marry that devil Mercer, after all?” he gasped, gazing up at her with glassy eyes.

Only by his eyes would she have known him—this man whom once long ago she had fancied that she loved—and even they were strained and unfamiliar. She bent her head in answer. “Yes, Robin, I married him.”

He began to curse inarticulately, spasmodically; but that she would not have. She knelt down suddenly by his side, and took his hand in hers. The terrible, disfigured countenance did not appal her, though the memory of it would haunt her all her life.

“Robin, listen!” she said earnestly. “We may not have very long together. Let us make the most of what time we have! Don’t waste your strength! Try to tell me quietly what happened, how it was you gave me up! I want to understand it all. I have never yet heard the truth.”

Her quiet words, the steady pressure of her hand, calmed him. He lay still for a space, gazing at her.

“You’re not afraid?” he muttered at last.

“No,” she said.

He continued to stare at her.



"Is he—good to you?" he said.

The words came with difficulty. She saw his throat working with the convulsive effort to produce sound.

Curtis touched her arm. "Give him this!"

She took a cup from his hand, and held it to the swollen lips. But he could not swallow. The liquid trickled down into his beard.

"He's past it," murmured Curtis.

"Sybil!" The words came with a hard, rending sound. "Is he—good to you?"

She was wiping away the spilt drops with infinite, unfaltering tenderness.

"Yes, dear," she answered. "He is very good to me."

He uttered a great gasping sigh.

"That's—all—that matters," he said, and fell silent, still gazing at her with eyes that seemed too fixed to take her in.

In the long, long silence that followed no one moved. But for those wild eyes Sybil would have thought him sleeping.

Minutes passed, and at last Curtis spoke under his breath.

"You had better go. You can't do any more."



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But she would not stir. She had a feeling that Robin still wanted her.

Suddenly through the night silence there came a sound—the hoof-beats of a galloping horse.

She turned her head and listened. “What is that?”

As if in answer, Beelzebub’s black face appeared in the entrance. His eyes were distended with fright.

“Missis!” he hissed in a guttural whisper.

“Here’s Boss comin’!” and disappeared again like a monstrous goblin.

Sybil glanced up at Curtis. “Don’t let him come here!” she said.

But for once he seemed to be at a loss. He made no response to her appeal. While they waited, the hoofs drew steadily nearer, thudding over the grass.

“Mr. Curtis!” she said urgently.

He made a sharp, despairing gesture. “I can’t help it,” he said. “You must go. For Heaven’s sake, don’t let him touch you, and burn the clothes you have on as soon as possible! I am going to set fire to this place immediately.”

“Going to—set fire to it?” She stared at him in surprise, still scarcely understanding.

“The poor chap is dead,” he said. “It’s the only thing to do.”

She turned back to the face upon the pillow with its staring, sightless eyes. She raised a pitying hand to close them, but Curtis intervened.

He drew her to her feet. “Go!” he said. “Go! Keep Mercer away, that’s all!”

She heard the jingling of a horse’s bit and knew that the rider was very near. Mechanically almost, she turned from the place of death and went to meet him.

XV

He was off his horse and striding for the entrance when she encountered him. The starlight on his face showed it livid and terrible. At sight of her he stopped short.

“Are you mad?” he said.

They were the identical words that Curtis had used; but his voice, hoarse, unnatural, told her that he was in a dangerous mood.

She backed away from him. "Don't come near me!" she said quickly. "He—he is just dead. And I have been with him."

"He?" he flung at her furiously, and she knew by his tone that he suspected the truth.

She tried to answer him steadily, but her strength was beginning to fail her. The long strain was telling upon her at last. She was uncertain of herself.

"It—was Robin Wentworth," she said.

He took a swift stride towards her. His face was convulsed with passion. "You came here to see that soddened cur?" he said.

She shrank away from him. The tempest of his anger overwhelmed her. She could not stand against it. For the first time she quailed.

"I have seen him," she said. "And he is dead. Ah, don't—don't touch me!"

He paid no attention to her cry. He seized her by the shoulders and almost swung her from his path.

"It would have been better for you," he said between his teeth, "if he had died before you got here. You have begun to repent already, and you'll go on repenting for the rest of your life."

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"What are you going to do?" she cried, seeing him turn. "Brett, don't go in there! Don't! Don't! You must not! You shall not!"

In a frenzy of fear she threw herself upon him, struggling with all her puny strength to hold him back.

"I tell you he is dead!" she gasped. "Why do you want to go in?"

"I am going to see for myself," he said stubbornly, putting her away.

"No!" she cried. "No!"

His eyes gleamed red with a savage fury as she clung to him afresh. He caught her wrists, forcing her backwards.

"I don't believe he is dead!" he snarled.

"He is! He is! Mr. Curtis told me so."

"If he isn't, I'll murder him!" Brett Mercer vowed, and flung her fiercely from him.

She fell with violence and lay half-stunned, while he, blinded with rage, possessed by devils, strode forward into that silent place, leaving her prone.

She thought later that she must have fainted, for the next thing she knew—and it must have been after the passage of several minutes—was Mercer kneeling beside her and lifting her. His touch was perfectly gentle, but she dared not look into his face. She cowered in his arms in mortal fear. He had crushed her at last.

"Have I hurt you?" he said.

She did not answer. Her voice was gone. She was as powerless as an infant. He raised her and bore her steadily away.

When he paused finally, it was to speak to Beelzebub, who was holding the horses. And then, without a word to her, he lifted her up on to a saddle, and mounted himself behind her. She lay against his breast as one dazed, incapable of speech or action. And so, with his arm about her, moving slowly through a world of shadows, they began the long, long journey back.

They travelled so for the greater part of the night, and during the whole of that time Mercer never uttered a word. The horse he rode was jaded, and he did not press it. Beelzebub, with the other two, rode far ahead.

It was still dark when at last they turned in to the Home Farm, and, still in that awful silence, Mercer dismounted and lifted his wife to the ground.

He set her on her feet, but her limbs trembled so much that she could scarcely stand. He kept his arm around her, and led her into the house.

He took her to her room and left her there; but in a few minutes he returned with food on a tray which he set before her without raising his eyes, and again departed. She did not see him again for many hours.

XVI

From sheer exhaustion she slept at last, but her sleep was broken and unrefreshing. She turned and tossed, dozing and waking in utter weariness of mind and body till the day was far advanced. Finally, too restless to lie any longer, she arose and dressed.

The sound of voices took her to her window before she left her room, and she saw her husband on horseback with Curtis standing by his side. A sense of relief shot through her at sight of the latter. She had come to rely upon him more than she knew. While she watched, Mercer raised his bridle and rode slowly away without a backward glance. And again she was conscious of relief.

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Curtis stood looking after him for a few seconds, then turned and entered the house.

She met him in the passage outside her room. He greeted her gravely.

"I was just coming to see if I could do anything for you," he said.

"Thank you," she answered nervously. "I am better now. Where has my husband gone?"

He did not answer her immediately. He turned aside to the room in which she generally sat, standing back for her to pass him. "I have something to say to you," he said.

She glanced at him anxiously as she took the chair he offered her.

"In the first place," he said, "you will be wise if you keep absolutely quiet for the next few days. There will be nothing to disturb you. Mercer is not returning at present. He has left you in my charge."

"Oh, why?" she said.

Her hands were locked together. She had begun to tremble from head to foot.

Curtis was watching her quietly.

"I think," he said, "that he is better away from you for a time, and he agrees with me."

"Why?" she said again, lifting her piteous eyes. "Is he so angry with me?"

"With you? No. He has come to his senses in that respect. But he is not in a particularly safe mood, and he knows it. He has gone to fight it out by himself."

Curtis paused, but Sybil did not speak. Her attitude had relaxed. He read unmistakable relief in every line.

"Well, now," he said deliberately, "I am going to tell you the exact truth of this business, as Mercer himself has told it to me."

"He wishes me to know it?" she asked quickly.

"He is willing that I should tell you," Curtis answered. "In fact, until he saw me to-day he believed that you knew it already. That was the primary cause of his savagery last night. You have probably formed a very shrewd suspicion of what happened, but it is better for you to know things as they actually stand. If it makes you hate him—well, it's no more than he deserves."

“Ah, but I have to live with him,” she broke in, with sudden passion. “It is easy for you to talk of hating him, but I—I am his wife. I must go on living by his side, whatever I may feel.”

“Yes, I know,” Curtis said. “But it won’t make it any easier for either of you to feel that there is this thing between you. Even he sees that. You can’t forgive him if you don’t know what he has done.”

“Then why doesn’t he tell me himself?” she said.

“Because,” Curtis answered, looking at her steadily, “it will be easier for you to hear it from me. He saw that, too.”

She could not deny it, but for some reason it hurt her to hear him say so. She had a feeling that it was to Curtis’s insistence, rather than to her husband’s consideration, that she owed this present respite.

“I will listen to you, then,” she said.

Curtis began to walk up and down the room.

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"First, with regard to Wentworth," he said. "There was a time once when he occupied very much the position that I now hold. He was Mercer's right-hand man. But he took to drink, and that did for him. I am afraid he was never very sound. Anyhow, Mercer gave him up, and he disappeared.

"After he had gone, after I took his place, we found out one or two things he had done which might have landed him in prison if Mercer had followed them up. However, the man was gone, and it didn't seem worth while to track him. It was not till afterwards that we heard he was at Bowker Creek, and Mercer was then on the point of starting for England, and decided to leave him alone.

"It's a poor place—Bowker Creek. He had got a job there as boundary rider. I suppose he counted on the shearing season to set him up. But he wasn't the sort of chap who ever gets on. And when Mercer met you on his way out from the old country it was something of a shock to him to hear that you were on your way to marry Robin Wentworth.

"Of course, he ought to have told you the truth, but instead of that he made up his mind to take the business into his own hands and marry you himself. He cabled from Colombo to Wentworth to wait for him at Bowker Creek, hinted that if he went to the coast he would have him arrested, and said something vague about coming to an understanding which induced Wentworth to obey orders.

"Then he came straight here and pressed on to Rollandstown, taking Beelzebub with him to show him the short cuts. It's a hard day's ride in any case. He reached Bowker Creek the day after, and had it out with Wentworth. The man had been drinking, was unreasonable, furious, finally tried to shoot him.

"Well, you know Mercer. He won't stand that sort of thing. He thrashed him within an inch of his life, and then made him write and give you up. It was a despicable affair from start to finish. Mercer's only excuse was that Wentworth was not the sort of man to make any woman happy. Finally, when he had got what he wanted, Mercer left him, after swearing eternal vengeance on him if he ever came within reach of you. The rest you know."

Yes, Sybil knew the rest. She understood the whole story from beginning to end, realized with what unscrupulous ingenuity she had been trapped and wondered bitterly if she would ever endure her husband's presence again without the shuddering sense of nausea which now overcame her at the bare thought of him.

She sat in stony silence, till at last Curtis paused beside her.

"I want you to rest," he said. "I think, if you don't, the consequences may be serious."

She looked up at him uncomprehendingly.

“Come, Mrs. Mercer!” he said.

She shrank at the name.

“Don’t call me that!” she said, and stumbled uncertainly to her feet. “I—I am going away.”

He put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

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"You can't," he said quietly. "You are not fit for it. Besides, there is nowhere for you to go to. But I will get Mrs. Stevens, the innkeeper's wife at Wallaroo, to come to you for a time. She is a good sort, you can count on her. As for Mercer, he will not return unless you—or I—send for him."

She shivered violently, uncontrollably.

"You will never send for him?"

"Never," he answered, "unless you need him."

She glanced around her wildly. Her eyes were hunted.

"Why do you say that?" she gasped.

"I think you know why I say it," said Curtis very steadily.

Her hands were clenched.

"No!" she cried back sharply. "No!"

Curtis was silent. There was deep compassion in his eyes.

She glanced around her wildly. Her eyes were on his eyes.

She shuddered again, shuddered from head to foot.

"If I thought that," she whispered, "if I thought that, I would——"

"Hush!" he interposed gently. "Don't say it! Go and lie down! You will see things differently by and bye."

She knew that he was right, and worn out, broken as she was, she moved to obey him. But before she reached the door her little strength was gone. She felt herself sinking swiftly into a silence that she hoped and even prayed was death. She did not know when Curtis lifted her.

XVII

During many days Sybil lay in her darkened room, facing, in weariness of body and bitterness of soul, the problem of life. She was not actually ill, but there were times when she longed intensely, passionately, for death. She was weak, physically and mentally, after the long strain. Courage and endurance had alike given way at last. She had no strength with which to face what lay before her.

So far as outward circumstances went, she was in good hands. Curtis watched over her with a care that never flagged, and the innkeeper's wife from Wallaroo, large and slow and patient, was her constant attendant. But neither of them could touch or in any way soothe the perpetual pain that throbbed night and day in the girl's heart, giving her no rest.

She left her bed at length after many days, but it was only to wander aimlessly about the house, lacking the energy to employ herself. Her nerves were quieter, but she still started at any sudden sound, and would sit as one listening yet dreading to hear. Her husband's name never passed her lips, and Curtis never made the vaguest reference to him. He knew that sooner or later a change would come, that the long suffering that lined her face must draw at last to a climax; but he would do nothing to hasten it. He believed that Nature would eventually find her own remedy.

But Nature is ever slow, and sometimes the wheel of life moves too quickly for her methods to take effect.

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Sybil was sitting one day by an open window when Beelzebub dashed suddenly into view. He was on horseback, riding barebacked, and was evidently in a ferment of excitement. He bawled some incoherent words as he passed the window, words which Sybil could not distinguish, but which nevertheless sent a sharp sense of foreboding through her heart. Had he—or had he not—yelled something to her about “Boss”? She could not possibly have said, but the suspicion was sufficiently strong to rouse her to lean out of the window and try to catch something of what the boy was saying.

He had reached the yard, and had flung himself off the sweating animal. As she peered forth she caught sight of Curtis coming out of the stable. Beelzebub saw him too, and broke out afresh with his wild cry. This time, straining her ears to listen, she caught the words, all jumbled together though they were.

“Boss got smallpox!”

She saw Curtis stop dead, and she wondered if his heart, like hers, had ceased to beat. The next instant he moved forward, and for the first time she saw him deliberately punch the gesticulating negro’s woolly head. Beelzebub cried out like a whipped dog and slunk back. Then, very calmly, Curtis took him by the scruff of his neck, and began to question him.

Sybil stood, gripping the curtain, and watched it all as one watches a scene on the stage. Somehow, though she knew herself to be vitally concerned, she felt no agitation. It was as if the blood had ceased to run in her veins.

At length she saw Curtis release the palpitating Beelzebub, and turn towards the house. Quite calmly she also turned.

They met in the passage.

“You needn’t trouble to keep it from me,” she said. “I know.”

He gave her a keen look.

“I am going to him at once,” was all he said.

She stood quite still, facing him; and suddenly she was conscious of a great glow pulsing through her, as though some arrested force had been set free. She knew that her heart was beating again, strongly, steadily, fearlessly.

“I shall come with you,” she said.

She saw his face change.

“I am sorry,” he said, “but that is out of the question. You must know it.”



She answered him instantly, unhesitatingly, with some of the old, quick spirit that had won Brett Mercer's heart.

"There you are wrong. I know it to be the only thing possible for me to do."

Curtis looked at her for a second as if he scarcely knew her, and then abruptly abandoned the argument.

"I will not be responsible," he said, turning aside.

And she answered him unfalteringly:

"I will take the responsibility."

XVIII

Slowly Brett Mercer raised himself and tried to peer through his swollen eyelids at the door.

"Don't bring any woman here!" he mumbled.

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The effort to see was fruitless. He sank back, blind and tortured, upon the pillow. He had been taken ill at one of his own outlying farms, and here he had lain for days—a giant bereft of his strength, waiting for death.

His only attendant was a farm-hand who had had the disease, but knew nothing of its treatment, who was, moreover, afraid to go near him.

Curtis took in the whole situation at a glance as he bent over him.

“Why didn’t you send for me?” he said.

“That you?” gasped Mercer. “Man, I’m in hell! Can’t you give me something to put me out of my misery?”

Curtis was already at work over him.

“No,” he said briefly. “I’m going to pull you through. You’re wanted.”

“You lie!” gasped back Mercer, and said no more.

Some hours after, starting suddenly from fevered sleep, he asked an abrupt question:

“Does my wife know?”

“Yes, she knows,” Curtis answered.

He flung his arms wide with a bitter gesture. “She’ll soon be free,” he said.

“Not if I know it,” said Curtis, in his quiet, unemotional style.

“You can’t make me live against my will,” muttered Mercer.

“Don’t talk like a fool!” responded Curtis.

Late that night a hand that was not Curtis’s smoothed the sick man’s pillow, and presently gave him nourishment. He noticed the difference instantly, though he could not open his eyes; but he said nothing at the time, and she fancied he did not know her.

But presently, when she thought him sleeping, he spoke.

“When did you come?”

Even then she was not sure that he was in his right mind. His face was so swollen and disfigured that it told her nothing. She answered him very softly:

“I came with Mr. Curtis.”



"Why?" That one word told her that he was in full possession of his senses. He moved his head to and fro on the pillow as one vainly seeking rest. "Did you want to see me in hell?" he questioned harshly.

She leaned towards him. She was sitting by his bed.

"No," she said, speaking under her breath. "I came because—because it was the only way out—for us both."

"What?" he said, and the old impatient frown drew his forehead. "You came to see me die, then?"

"I came," she answered, "to try and make you live."

He drew a breath that was a groan.

"You won't succeed," he said.

"Why not?" she asked.

Again feverishly he moved his head, and she smoothed his pillow afresh with hands that trembled.

"Don't touch me!" he said sharply. "What was Curtis dreaming of to bring you here?"

"Mr. Curtis couldn't help it," she answered, with more assurance. "I came." And then after a moment, "Are you—sorry—I came?"

"Yes," he muttered.

"Oh, why?" she said.

"I would sooner die—without you looking on," he said, forcing out his words through set teeth.

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"Oh, why?" she said again. "Don't you believe—can't you believe—that I want you to live?"

"No," he groaned.

"Not if I swear it?" she asked, her voice sunk very low.

"No!" He flung the word with something of his ancient ferocity. She was torturing him past endurance. He even madly hoped that he could scare her away.

But Sybil made no move to go. She sat quite still for a few seconds. Then slowly she went down upon her knees beside his pillow.

"Brett," she said, and he felt her breath quick and tremulous upon his face as she spoke, "you may refuse to believe what I say. But—I can convince you without words."

And before he knew her meaning, she had pressed her quivering lips to his.

He recoiled, with an anguished sound that was half of protest and half of unutterable pain.

"Do you want to die too?" he said. "Or don't you know the risk?"

"Yes, I know it," she answered. "I know it," and in her voice was such a thrill of passion as he had never heard or thought to hear from her. "But I know this, too, and I mean that you shall know it. My life is nothing to me—do you understand?—nothing, unless you share it. Now—will you believe me?"

Yes, he believed her then. He had no choice. The knowledge was as a sword cutting its way straight to his heart. He tried to answer her, tried desperately hard, because he knew that she was waiting for him to speak, that his silence would hurt her who from that day forward he would never hurt again.

But no words would come. He could not force his utterance. The power of speech was gone from him. He turned his face away from her in choking tears.

And Sybil knew that the victory was hers. Those tears were more to her than words. She knew that he would live—if he could—for her sake.

XIX

It was more than six weeks later that Brett Mercer and his wife turned in at the Home Farm, as they had turned in on that memorable night that he had brought his bride from Wallaroo.

Now, as then, Curtis was ready for them in the open doorway, and Beelzebub advanced grinning to take the horses. But there the resemblance ceased. The woman who entered with her husband leaning on her shoulder was no nervous, shrinking stranger, but a wife entering her home with gladness, bearing her burden with rejoicing. The woman from Wallaroo looked at her with a doubtful sort of sympathy. She also looked at the gaunt, bowed man who accompanied her, and questioned with herself if this were indeed Brett Mercer.

Brett Mercer it undoubtedly was, nor could she have said, save for his slow, stooping gait, wherein lay the change that so amazed her.

Perhaps it was more apparent in Sybil than in the man himself as she raised her face on entering, and murmured:

“So good to get home again, isn’t it, dear?”

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He did not speak in answer. He scarcely spoke at all that night. But his silence satisfied her.

It was not till the following morning that he stretched out a great, bony hand to her as she waited on him, and drew her down to his side.

"There has been enough of this," he said, with a touch of his old imperiousness. "You have worked too hard already, harder than I ever meant you to work. You are to take a rest, and get strong."

She uttered her gay little laugh.

"My dearest Brett, I am strong."

He lay staring at her in his most direct, disconcerting fashion. She endured his look for a moment, and then averted her eyes. She would have risen, but he prevented her.

"Sybil!" he said abruptly.

"Yes?" she answered, with her head bent.

"Are you afraid of me?" he said.

She shook her head instantly.

"Don't be absurd!"

"Then look at me!" he said.

She raised her eyes slowly, not very willingly. But, having raised them, she kept them so, for there was that in his look which no longer made her shy.

He made a slight gesture towards her that was rather of invitation than insistence.

"Don't you think I'm nearly well enough to be let into the secret?" he said.

His action, his tone, above all his look, broke down the last of the barrier between them. She went into his arms with a shaky little laugh, and hid her face against him.

"I would have told you long ago," she whispered, "only somehow—I couldn't. Besides, I was so sure that you knew."

"Oh, yes, I knew," said Mercer. "Curtis saw to that; literally flayed me with it till I took his advice and cleared out. You know, I've often wondered since if it was that that made you want me, after all."

She shook her head, still with her face against his breast.

“No, dear, it wasn’t. It—it made things worse at first. It was only when I heard you were ill that—that I found—quite suddenly—that I couldn’t possibly go on without you. It was as if—as if something bound round my heart had suddenly given way, and I could breathe again. When I saw you I knew how terribly I wanted you.”

“And that was how you came to kiss me with that loathsome disease upon me?” he whispered. “That was what made you follow me down to hell to bring me back?”

She turned her face upwards. Her eyes were shining.

“My dear,” she said, and in her voice was a thrill like the first sweet notes of a bird in the dawning, “you don’t need to ask me why did these things. For you know—you know. It was simply and only because I loved you.”

“Heaven knows why,” he said, as he bent to kiss her.

“Heavens knows,” she answered, and softly laughed as she surrendered her lips to his.

The Secret Service Man

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I

A TIGHT PLACE

“Shoulder to shoulder, boys! Give it ’em straight! There’s no going back this journey.” And the speaker slapped his thigh and laughed.

He was penned in a hot corner with a handful of grinning little Goorkhas, as ready and exultant as himself. He had no earthly business in that particular spot. But he had won his way there in a hand-to-hand combat, which had rendered that bit of ground the most desirable abiding-place on the face of the earth. And being there he meant to stay.

He was established with the inimitable effrontery of British insolence. He had pushed on through the dark, fired by the enthusiasm which is born of hard resistance. It had been no slight matter, but neither he nor his men were to be easily dismayed. Moreover, their patience had been severely tried for many tedious hours, and the removal of the curb had gone to their heads like wine.

Young Derrick Rose, war correspondent, was hot of head and ready of hand. He had a knack also of getting into tight places and extricating himself therefrom with amazing agility; which knack served to procure for him the admiration of his friends and the respect of his enemies. It was his first Frontier campaign, but it was not apparently destined to be his last, for he bore a charmed life. And he went his way with a cheery recklessness that seemed its own security.

On the present occasion he had planted himself, with a serene assumption of authority, at the head of a handful of Goorkhas who had been pressed forward too far by an over-zealous officer in the darkness, and had lost their leader in consequence.

Derrick had stumbled on the group and had forthwith taken upon himself to direct them to a position which, with a good deal of astuteness, he had marked out in his own mind earlier in the day as a desirable acquisition.

There had been a hand-to-hand scuffle in the darkness, and then the tribesmen had fallen back, believing themselves overwhelmed by superior numbers.

Derrick and his Goorkhas had promptly taken possession of the rocky eminence which was the object of their desire, and now prepared, with commendable determination, to maintain themselves at the post thus captured; an impossible feat in consideration of the paucity of their numbers, which fact a wily enemy had already begun to suspect.

That the main force could by any means fail them was a possibility over which for long neither Derrick nor his followers wasted a thought. Nevertheless half-an-hour of mad turmoil passed, and no help came.

Derrick charitably set down its non-appearance to ignorance of his state and whereabouts, and he began at length to wonder within himself how the place was to be defended throughout the night. Retreat he would not think of, for he was game to the finger-tips. But even he could not fail to see that, when the moon rose, he and his followers would be in a very tight fix.

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"Confound their caution! What are they thinking of?" he muttered savagely. "If they only came straight ahead they would be bound to find us."

And then a yelling crowd of dim figures breasted the rocks and dashed forward with the force of a hurricane upon the little body of Goorkhas. In a second Derrick was fighting in the dark with mad enthusiasm for bare foothold, and shouting at the top of his voice exhortations to his men to keep together.

It was a desperate struggle, but once more the little party of invaders held their ground. And Derrick, yelling encouragement to his friends and defiance to his foes, became vaguely conscious of a new element in the strife.

Someone, not a Goorkha, was standing beside him, fighting as he fought, but in grim silence.

Derrick wondered considerably, but was too busy to ask questions. Only when he missed his footing, and a strong hand shot out and dragged him up, his wonder turned to admiration. Here was evidently a mighty fighting-man!

The tribesmen drew off at length baffled, to wait for the moon to rise. They were pretty sure of their prey despite the determined resistance they had encountered. They did not know of the new force that had come to strengthen that forsaken little knot of men. Had they known, their estimate of the task before them would have undergone a very material amendment.

"Hullo!" said Derrick, rubbing his sleeve across his forehead. "Where on earth did you spring from?"

A steady voice answered him out of the gloom. "I came up from the valley. The troops are halted at the entrance of the ravine. There will be no further advance to-night."

Derrick swore a sudden, fierce oath.

"No further advance! Do you mean that? Then Carlyon doesn't know we are here."

"Oh, yes, he knows," answered the man indifferently. "But he says very reasonably that he didn't order you to come up here, and he can't sacrifice twice the number of men here to get you down again. Unfortunate for you, of course; but we all have to swallow bad luck at one time or another. Make the best of it!"

Derrick swore again with less violence and greater resolution.

"And who, in wonder, may you be?" he broke off to enquire. "I'm a war correspondent myself."

There was a vein of humour in the quiet reply.

“Oh, I’m a non-combatant, too. It’s always the non-combatants that do the work. Have you got a revolver? Good! Any cartridges? That’s right. Now, look here, it’s out of the question to remain in this place till moonrise.”

“I won’t go back,” said Derrick doggedly. “I’ll see Carlyon hang first.”

“Quite right. I wasn’t going to propose that. It’s impossible, in the first place. Perhaps it is only fair to Colonel Carlyon to mention that he had no notion that there is anything so important as a newspaper man at the head of this expedition. It’s a detail, of course. Still, if you get through, it is just as well that you should know the rights of the case.”

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Derrick broke into an involuntary laugh.

"Did Carlyon get you to come and tell me so?" He turned and peered through the darkness at the man beside him. "You never got up here alone?" he said incredulously.

"Oh, yes. It wasn't difficult. I was guided by the noise you made. How many men have you?"

"Ten or twelve; not more—all Goorkhas."

"Good! We must quit this place at once. It will be a death-trap when the moon rises. There are some boulders higher up, away to the right. We can occupy them till morning and fight back to back if they try to rush us. There ought to be plenty of shelter among those rocks."

The man's cool speech caught Derrick's fancy. He spoke as quietly as if he were sitting at an English dinner-table.

"You had better take command," said Derrick.

"No, thanks; you are going to pull this through. Are you ready to move? Pass the word to the men! And then all together! It is now or never!"

A few seconds later they were stumbling in an indistinguishable mass towards the haven indicated by the latest comer. It was a difficult scramble, not the least difficult part of it being the task of keeping in touch with each other. But Derrick's spirits returned at a bound with this further adventure, and he began to rejoice somewhat prematurely in his triumph over Carlyon's caution.

The man who had come to his assistance kept at his elbow throughout the climb. Not a word was spoken. The men moved like cats through the dimness. Below them was a confused din of rifle-firing. Their advance had evidently not been detected.

"Silly owls! Wasting their ammunition!" murmured Derrick to the man beside him. He received no response. A warning hand closed with a grip on his elbow. And Derrick subsided.

When the moon rose, magnificent and glowing from behind the mountains, Derrick and his men looked down from a high perch on the hillside, and watched a furious party of tribesmen charge and occupy their abandoned position.

"Now, this is good!" said Derrick, and he was in the act of firing his revolver into the thick of the crowd below him when again the sinewy hand of his unknown friend checked him.

“Hold your fire, man!” the man said, in his quiet, unmoved voice. “You will want it presently.”

But the stranger’s hold tightened. He was standing in the shadow slightly behind Derrick.

“Wait!” he said. “They will find you soon enough. You are not in a position to take the offensive.”

Derrick swung round with a restless word. And then he pulled up short. He was facing a tribesman, gaunt and tall, with odd, light eyes that glittered strangely in the moonlight. Derrick stared at the apparition, dumbfounded. After a pause the man took his hand from the correspondent’s arm.

“Don’t give the show away for want of a little caution!” he said. “There are your men to think of, remember. This is no picnic.”

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Derrick was still staring hard at the strange figure before him.

"I say," he said at length, "what in the name of wonder are you?"

He heard a faint, contemptuous laugh. The unknown drew the end of his *chuddah* farther across his face.

"You are marvellously guileless for a war correspondent," he said. And he turned on his heel and stalked away into the shadows.

Derrick stood gazing after him in stupefaction.

"A Secret Service agent, is he?" he murmured at length to himself. "By Jove! What a marvellous fake! On Carlyon's business, I suppose. Confound Carlyon! I'll tell him what I think of him if I come through this all right."

Carlyon, in times of peace, was one of Derrick Rose's most intimate friends. That Carlyon, upon whom he relied as upon a tower of strength should fail him at such a pinch as this, and for motives of caution alone, was a circumstance so preposterous and unheard-of that Derrick's credulity was hardly equal to the strain.

He began to wonder if this stranger who had guided him into safety, from what he now realized to be a positive death-trap, had given him a wholly unexaggerated account of Carlyon's attitude.

He waited awhile, thinking the matter over with rising indignation; and at length, as the noise below him subsided, he moved from his shelter to find his informant. It was a rash thing to do, but prudence was not his strong point. Moreover, the Secret Service man had aroused his curiosity. He wanted to see more of this fellow. So, with an indifference to danger, foolhardy, though too genuine to be contemptible, he strolled across an unprotected space of moonlight to join him.

Two seconds later he was lying on his face, struggling with the futile, convulsive effort of a stricken man to recover his footing. And even while he struggled, he lost consciousness.

He awoke at length as one awakes from a troublous dream, and looked about him with a dazed consciousness of great tumult.

The space in which he lay was no longer wide and empty. The white world was peopled with demons that leapt and surged around his prostrate body. And someone, a man in white, with naked, uplifted arms, stood above him and quelled the tumult.

Derrick saw it all, heard the mad yells lessen and die down, watched with a dumb amazement the melting away of the fierce crowd.

And then the man who stood over him turned suddenly and, kneeling, lifted him from his prostrate position. It was a man in native dress whose eyes held for Derrick an odd, half-familiar fascination.

Where had he met those eyes before? Ah, he remembered. It was the Secret Service man. And that was strange, too. For Carlyon always scoffed at Secret Service men. Still, this was a small matter which, no doubt, would right itself. Everything looked a little peculiar and distorted on this night of wonders. Carlyon himself had sadly degenerated in his opinion since the morning. Bother Carlyon!



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Suddenly a great sigh burst from Derrick, and the moonlight broke up into tiny, dazzling fragments. The darkness was full of them, alive with them.

"Fire-flies!" gasped Derrick, and began to cough, at first slowly, with pauses for breath, then quickly, spasmodically, convulsively. For breath had finally failed him.

The arm behind him raised him with the steady strength of iron muscles, and a hand pressed his chest. But the coughing did not cease. It was the anguished strife of wounded Nature to assert her damaged authority; the wild, last effort to clutch and hold fast the elusive torch that, flickering in the midst of darkness, is called life—the one priceless possession of our little mortal treasury.

And while he coughed and fought with the demon of suffocation Derrick was strongly aware of the eyes that watched him, burning like two brilliant blue points out of the darkness. Wonderful eyes! Steady, strong, unflinching. The eyes of a friend—a true friend—not such an one as Carlyon—Carlyon who had failed him.

A thick, unexplored darkness fell upon Derrick as he thought of Carlyon's desertion; and he forgot at length to wonder at the strangeness of the night.

II

A BROKEN FRIENDSHIP

By and bye, when the light dawned in his eyes, Derrick began to dream of many strange things.

But he came back at last out of the shadows, weak and faint and weary. And then he found that he was in hospital and had been there for weeks.

The discovery was rather staggering. Somehow he had never quite rid himself of the impression that he was still lying on the great, rocky boulder where the Secret Service man had so magically scattered his enemies. But as life and full consciousness returned to him he became aware that this had for weeks been no more than a fevered illusion.

When he was at length fairly out of danger he was dispatched southwards on the first stage of the homeward journey.

He sailed for Home with his resentment against Carlyon yet strong upon him. He had no parents. In his reckless young days, during the last three years of his minority, Carlyon had been this boy's guardian. But Derrick had been his own master for nearly four years, and the conscious joy of independence was yet dear to his heart. He had no

settled home of his own, but he had plenty of money. And that, after all, was the essential thing.

He had been brought up with the daughter of a clergyman in whose home he had lived all his early life. The two had grown up together in close companionship. They had been comrades all their lives.

Only of recent years, at the end of an uneventful college career, had Derrick awakened to the astounding fact that Averil Eversley, his little playmate, was a maiden sweet and comely whom he wanted badly for his very own. She was three years younger than himself, but she had always taken the lead in all their exploits.

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Derrick discovered for the first time that this was not a proper state of affairs. He had tried, not over tactfully, to show her that man was, after all, the superior animal. Averil had first stared at his efforts, and then laughed with uncontrollable mirth.

Then Derrick had set to work with splendid energy, and achieved in two years a certain amount of literary success. Averil had praised him for this; which reward of merit had so turned his head that he had at once clumsily proposed to her. Averil had not laughed at that. She had rejected him instantly, with so severe a scolding that Derrick had lost his temper, and gone away to sulk. Later, he had turned his attention again to journalistic work, hoping thereby to recover favour.

Then, and this had brought him to the previous winter, he had returned to find Averil going in for a little innocent hero-worship on her own account. And Carlyon, his own particular friend and adviser, had happened to be the hero.

Whether Carlyon were aware of the state of affairs or not, Derrick in his wrath had not stopped to enquire. He had simply and blindly gone direct to the attack, with the result that Averil had been deeply and irreconcilably offended, and Carlyon had so nearly kicked him for making such a fool of himself that Derrick had retired in disgust from the fray, had clamoured for and, with infinite difficulty, obtained a post as war-correspondent in the ensuing Frontier campaign, and had departed on his adventurous way, sulking hard.

Later, Carlyon had sought him out, had shaken hands with him, called him an impetuous young ass, and had enjoined him to stick to himself during the expedition in which Derrick was thus recklessly determined to take part. They had, in fact, been entirely reconciled, avoiding by mutual consent the delicate ground of their dispute. Carlyon was a man of considerable reputation on the Frontier, and Derrick Rose was secretly proud of the friendship that existed between them.

Now, however, the friendship had split to its very foundation. Carlyon had failed him when life itself had been in the balance.

Impetuous as he was, Derrick was not one to forgive quickly so gross an injury as this. He did not think, moreover, that Averil herself would continue to offer homage before so obvious a piece of clay as her idol had proved himself to be. Derrick was beginning to apply to Carlyon the most odious of all epithets—that of coward.

He had set his heart upon a reconciliation with Averil, and earnestly he hoped she would see the matter with his eyes.

III

DERRICK'S PARADISE

“So it was the Secret Service man who saved your life,” said Averil, with flushed cheeks. “Really, Dick, how splendid of him!”

“Finest chap I ever saw!” declared Derrick. “He looked about eight feet high in native dress. I shall have to find that man some day, and tell him what I think of him.”

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"Yes, indeed!" agreed Averil. "I expect, you know, it was really Colonel Carlyon who sent him."

"Being too great a—strategist to advance himself," said Derrick.

"But he didn't know you were at the head of the Goorkhas," Averil reminded him.

"Perhaps not," said Derrick. "But he knew I was there. And, putting me out of the question altogether, what can you think of an officer who will coolly leave a party of his men to be slaughtered like sheep in a butcher's yard because the poor beggars happen to have got into a tight place?"

Derrick spoke with strong indignation, and Averil was silent awhile. Presently, however, she spoke again, slowly.

"I can't help thinking, Dick," she said, "that there is an explanation somewhere. We ought not—it would not be fair—to say Colonel Carlyon acted unworthily before he has had a chance of justifying himself."

There was justice in this remark. Derrick, who was lying at the girl's feet on the hearthrug in the Rectory drawing-room, reached up a bony hand and took possession of one of hers. For Averil had received him with a warmer welcome than he had deemed possible in his most sanguine moments, and he was very happy in consequence.

"All right," he said equably. "We'll shunt Carlyon for a bit, and talk about ourselves. Shall we?"

Averil drew the bony hand on to her lap and looked at it critically.

"Poor old boy!" she said. "It is thin."

Derrick drew himself up to a sitting position. There was an air of mastery about him as he raised a determined face to hers.

"Averil," he said suddenly, "you aren't going to send me to the right-about again, are you?"

"Oh, don't let us squabble on your first night!" said Averil hastily.

"Squabble!" the boy exclaimed, springing to his feet vigorously. "Do you call—that—squabbling?"

Averil stood up, too, tall and straight, and slightly defiant.

"I don't want you to go away, Dick," she said, "if you can stay and behave nicely. I thought it was horribly selfish of you to go off as you did last winter. I think so still. If you had got killed, I should have been very—very—"

"What?" demanded Derrick impatiently. "Sorry? Angry—what?"

"Angry," said Averil, with great decision. "I should never have forgiven you. I am not sure that I shall, as it is."

Derrick uttered a sudden passionate laugh. Then abruptly his mood changed. He held out his hands to her.

"Averil!" he said. "Averil! Can't you see how I want you—how I love you? Why do you treat me like this? I've thought about you, dreamt about you, day after day, night after night, ever since I went away. You thought it beastly selfish of me to go. But it hasn't been such fun, after all. All the weeks I was in hospital I felt sick for the sight of you. It was worse than starvation. Can't you see what it is to me? Can't you see that I—I worship you?"

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"My dear Dick!" Averil put her hands into his, but her gesture was one of restraint. "You mustn't talk so wildly," she said. "And, dear boy, do try not to be quite so impulsive—so headstrong. You know, you—you—"

She broke off. Derrick, with a set jaw and burning eyes, was drawing her to him, strongly, irresistibly.

"Derrick!" she said, with a flash of anger.

"I can't help it!" Derrick said passionately. "I've been counting on this, living for this. Averil I—I—you can call me mad if you like, but if you send me away again—I believe I shall shoot myself."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Averil, half-angry, half-scornful.

He dropped her hands and stood quite still for the space of a few seconds, his face white and twitching. And then, to her utter amazement, he sank heavily into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Dick!" she ejaculated.

Silence followed the word, a breathless silence. Derrick sat perfectly motionless, his fingers gripping his hair. At last Averil moved up to him, a little frightened by his stillness, and very intensely compassionate. She bent and touched his shoulder.

"Dick!" she said. "Dick! Don't!"

He stirred under her hand, but did not raise his head. "Get away, Averil!" he muttered. "You don't understand."

And quite suddenly Averil was transported back to the far, receding schooldays, when Derrick had got into trouble for smoking his first cigar. The memory unconsciously influenced her speech.

"But, Dick," she said persuasively, "don't you think you are the least bit in the world unreasonable? It's true I don't quite understand. We've been such splendid chums all our lives, I really don't see why we should begin to be anything different now. Besides, Dick"—there was appeal in her voice—"I don't truly want to get married. It seems such a silly thing to go and do when one had such really jolly times without. It does spoil things so."

Derrick sat up. He was still absurdly boyish, despite his four-and-twenty years.

"Look here, Averil!" he said doggedly. "If you won't have me, I'm not going to hang about after you like a tame monkey. It's going to be one thing or the other. I've made a

big enough fool of myself over you. We can't be chums, as you call it"—a passionate ring crept into his voice—"when all the while you're holding me off at arm's length as if I'd got the plague. So"—rising abruptly and facing her—"which is it to be?"

Averil looked at him. His face was still white, but his lips were sternly compressed. He was weak no longer. She was conscious of a sudden thrill of admiration banishing her pity. After all, was he indeed only a boy? He scarcely seemed so at that moment. He was, moreover, straight and handsome despite his gaunt appearance.

"Answer me, Averil!" he said with determination.

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But Averil had no answer ready. She stood silent.

Derrick laid his hand on her arm. It was a light touch, but somehow it conveyed to her the fact that he was holding himself in with a tighter rein than ever before.

"Don't torture me!" he said, speaking quickly, nervously. "Tell me either to stay or—go!" His voice dropped on the last word, and for a second Averil saw the torture on his face.

It was too much for her resolution. All her life she had been this boy's chosen companion and confidante. She felt she could not turn from him now in his distress, and deliberately break his heart. Yet for one tumultuous second she battled with her impulse. Then—she yielded. Somehow that look in Derrick's eyes compelled her.

She put her hands on his shoulders.

"Dick—stay!" she said.

His arms closed round her in a second. "You mean—" he said, under his breath.

"Yes, Dick," she answered bravely, "I do mean. Dear boy, don't ever look like that again! You have hurt me horribly."

Derrick turned her face up to his own and kissed her repeatedly and passionately.

"You shall never regret it, my darling," he said. "You have turned my world into a paradise. I will do the same for yours."

"It doesn't take much to make me happy," Averil said, leaning her forehead against his shoulder. "I hope you will be a kind master, Dick, and let me have my own way sometimes."

"Master?" scoffed Derrick, kissing her hair. "You know you can lead me by the nose from world's end to world's end."

"I wonder," said Averil, with a little sigh. "Do you know, Dick, I'm not quite sure of that."

"What!" said Derrick softly. "Not—quite—sure!"

"Not when you look as you did thirty seconds ago," Averil explained. "Never mind, dear old boy! I'm glad you can look like that, though, mind, you must never, never do it again if you live to be a hundred."

She looked up at him suddenly and clasped her hands behind his neck. "You do love me, don't you, Dick?" she said.

“My darling, I worship you!” Derrick answered very solemnly.

And Averil drew his head down with a quivering smile and kissed him on the lips.

IV

CARLYON DEFENDS HIMSELF

“Ah, Derrick! I thought I could not be mistaken.”

Derrick turned swiftly at the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and nearly tumbled into the roadway. He had been sauntering somewhat aimlessly down the Strand till pulled up in this rather summary fashion. He now found himself staring at a tall man who had come up behind him—a man with a lined face and drooping eyelids, and a settled weariness about his whole demeanour which, somehow, conveyed the impression that, in his opinion, at least, there was nothing on earth worth striving for.

Derrick recovered his balance and stood still before him. Speech, however, quite unexpectedly failed him. The quiet greeting had scattered his ideas momentarily.

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The hand that had touched his shoulder was deliberately transferred to his elbow.

"Come!" said his acquaintance, smiling a little. "We are blocking the gangway. I am staying at the Grand. If you are at liberty you might dine with me. By the way, how are you, old fellow?"

He spoke very quietly and wholly without affectation. There was a touch of tenderness in his last sentence that quite restored Derrick's faculties.

He shook his arm free from the other's hand with a vehemence of action that was unmistakably hostile.

"No, thanks, Colonel Carlyon!" he said, speaking fast and feverishly. "If I were starving, I wouldn't accept hospitality from you!"

"Don't be a fool!" said Carlyon.

His tone was still quiet, but it was also stern. He pushed a determined hand through Derrick's arm. "If you won't come my way," he said, "I shall come yours."

Derrick swore under his breath. But he yielded. "Very well," he said aloud. "I'll come. But I swear I won't touch anything."

"You needn't swear," said Carlyon; "it's unnecessary."

And Derrick bit his lip nearly through, being exasperated. He did not, however, resist the compelling hand a second time, realizing the futility of such a proceeding.

So in dead silence they reached the Grand and entered. Then Carlyon spoke again.

"Come up to my room first!" he said.

Derrick went with him unprotesting.

In his own room Carlyon turned round and took him by the shoulders. "Now," he said, "are you ill or merely sulky? Just tell me which, and I shall know how to treat you!"

"It's no thanks to you I'm not dead!" exclaimed Derrick stormily. "I didn't want to meet you, but, by Heaven, since I have, and since you have forced an interview upon me, I'll go ahead and tell you what I think of you."

Carlyon turned away from him and sat down. "Do, by all means," he said, "if it will get you into a healthier frame of mind!"

But Derrick's flow of eloquence unexpectedly failed him at this juncture, and he stood awkwardly silent.

Carlyon turned round at last and looked at him. "Sit down, Dick," he said patiently, "and stop being an ass! I'm a difficult man to quarrel with, as you know. So sit down and state your grievance, and have done with it!"

"You know very well what's wrong!" Derrick burst out fiercely, beginning to prowl to and fro.

"Do I?" said Carlyon. He got up deliberately and intercepted Derrick. "Just stop tramping," he said, with sudden sternness, "and listen to me! You have your wound alone to thank for keeping you out of the worst mess you ever got into. If you hadn't gone back in a hospital truck, you would have gone back under escort. Do you understand that?"

"Why?" flashed Derrick.

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"Why?" echoed Carlyon, striking him abruptly on the shoulder. "Tell me your own opinion of a hot-headed, meddling young fool who not only got into mischief himself at a most critical moment, but led half-a-score of valuable men into what was practically a death-trap, for the sake of, I suppose he would call it, an hour's sport. On my soul, Derrick," he ended, with a species of quiet vigour that carried considerable weight behind it, "if you weren't such a skeleton I'd give you a sound thrashing for your sins. As it is, you will be wise to get off that high horse of yours and take a back seat. I never have put up with this sort of thing from you. And I never mean to."

Derrick had no answer ready. He stood still, considering these things.

Colonel Carlyon turned his back on him and cut the end of a cigar. "Do you grasp my meaning?" he enquired at length, as Derrick remained silent.

Derrick moved to a chair and sat down. Somehow Carlyon had taken the backbone out of his indignation. He spoke at last, but without anger. "Even if it were as you say," he said, "I don't consider you treated me decently."

Carlyon suddenly laughed. "Even if by some odd chance I have actually spoken the truth," he said, "I shall not, and do not, feel called upon to justify my action for your benefit."

"I think you owe me that," Derrick said quickly.

"I disagree with you," Carlyon rejoined. "I owe you nothing whatever except the aforementioned thrashing which must, unfortunately, under the circumstances, remain a debt for the present."

Derrick leant forward suddenly

"Stop rotting, Carlyon!" he said, with impulsive earnestness. "I can't help talking seriously. You didn't know, surely, what a tight fix we were in? You couldn't have intended us to—to—die in the dark like that?"

"Intended!" said Carlyon sharply. "I never intended you to occupy that position at all, remember."

"Yes; but—since we were in that position, since—if you choose to put it so—I exceeded all bounds and intentions and took those splendid little Goorkhas into a death-trap; I may have been a headstrong, idiotic fool to do it; but, granted all that, you did not deliberately and knowingly leave us to be massacred? You couldn't have done actually that."

Carlyon laid his cigar-case on the table at Derrick's elbow, and lighted his own cigar with great deliberation.



“You may remember, Dick,” he said quietly, after a pause, “that once upon a time you wrote—and published—a book. It had its merits and it had its faults. But a fool of a critic took it into his head to give you a thorough slating. You were furious, weren’t you? I remember giving you a bit of sound advice over that book. Probably you have forgotten it. But it chances to be one of the guiding principles of my life. It is this: Never answer your critics! Go straight ahead!”

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He paused.

"I remember," said Derrick. "Well?"

"Well," said Carlyon gravely, "that is what I have done all my life, what I mean to do now. You are in full possession of the facts of the case. You have defined my position fairly accurately. I did know you were in an impossible corner. I did know that you and the men with you were in all probability doomed. And—I did not think good to send a rescue. You do not understand the game of war. You merely went in for it for the sake of sport, I for the sake of the stakes. There is a difference. More than that I do not mean to say."

He sat down opposite Derrick as he ended and began to smoke with an air of indifference. But his eyes were on the boy's face. They had been close friends for years.

Derrick still sat forward. He was staring at the ground heavily, silently Carlyon had given him a shock. Somehow he had not expected from him this cool acknowledgment of an action from which he himself shrank with unspeakable abhorrence.

To leave a friend in the lurch was, in Derrick's eyes, an act so infamous that he would have cut his own throat sooner than be guilty of it. It did not occur to him that Carlyon might have urged extenuating circumstances, but had rather scornfully abstained from doing so.

He did not even consider the fact that, as commanding-officer, Carlyon's responsibility for the lives in his charge was a burden not to be ignored or lightly borne. He did not consider the risk to these same valuable lives that a rescue in force would have involved.

He saw only himself fighting for a forlorn hope, his grinning little Goorkhas gallantly and intrepidly following wherever he would lead, and he saw the awful darkness down which his feet had stumbled, a terrible chasm that had yawned to engulf them all.

He sat up at last and looked straight at Carlyon. He spoke slowly, with an effort.

"If it had been only myself," he said, "I—perhaps, I might have found it easier. But there were the men, my men. You could not alter your plans by one hair's-breadth to save their gallant lives. I can't get over that. I never shall. You left us to die like rats in a hole. But for a total stranger—a spy, a Secret Service man—we should have been cut to pieces, every one of us. You did not, I suppose, send that man to help us out?"

Carlyon blew a cloud of smoke upwards. He frowned a little, but his look was more one of boredom than annoyance.

“What exactly are you talking about?” he said. “I don’t employ spies. As to Secret Service agents, I think you have heard my opinion of them before.”

“Yes,” said Derrick. He rose with an air of finality. His young face was very stern. “He was probably attached to General Harford’s division. He found us in a fix, and he helped us out of it. He knew the land. We didn’t. He was the most splendid fighting-man I ever saw. He tried to stick up for you, too—said you didn’t know. That, of course, was a mistake. You did know, and are not ashamed to own it.”

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"Not in the least," said Carlyon.

"The men couldn't have held out without him," Derrick continued. "After I was hit, he stood by them. He only took himself off just before morning came and you ventured to move to our assistance."

"He had no possible right to do it," observed Carlyon thoughtfully ignoring the bitter ring of sarcasm in the boy's tone.

"Oh, none whatever," said Derrick. He spoke hastily, jerkily, as a man not sure of himself. "No doubt his life was Government property, and he had no right to risk it. Still he did it, and I am weak-minded enough to be grateful. My own life may be worthless; at least, it was then. And I would not have survived my Goorkhas. But he saved them, too. That, odd as it may seem to you, made all the difference to me."

"Is your life more valuable now than it was a few months ago?" enquired Carlyon, in a casual tone.

"Yes," said Derrick shorty.

"Has Averil accepted you?" Carlyon asked him point-blank.

"Yes," said Derrick again.

There was a momentary pause. Then: "Permit me to offer my felicitations!" said Carlyon, through a haze of tobacco-smoke.

Derrick started as if stung. "I beg you won't do anything of the sort!" he said with vehemence. "I don't want your good wishes. I would rather be without them. I may be a hare-brained fool. I won't deny it. But as for you—you are a blackguard—the worst sort of blackguard! I hope I shall never speak to you again!"

Carlyon, lying back in his chair, neither stirred nor spoke. He looked up at Derrick from beneath steady eyelids. But he offered him nothing in return for his insulting words.

Derrick waited for seconds. Then patience and resolution alike failed him. He swung round abruptly on his heel and walked out of the room.

As for Colonel Carlyon, he did not rise from his chair till he had conscientiously finished his cigar. He had stuck to his principles. He had not answered his critic. Incidentally he had borne more from that critic than any man had ever before dared to offer him, more than he had told Derrick himself that he would bear. Yet Derrick had gone away from the encounter with a whole skin in order that Colonel Carlyon might stick to his principles. Carlyon's forbearance was a plant of peculiar growth.

V

A WOMAN'S FORGIVENESS

"Colonel Carlyon," said Averil, turning to face him fully, her eyes very bright, "will you take the trouble to make me understand about Derrick? I have been awaiting an opportunity to ask you ever since I heard about it."

Carlyon paused. They chanced to be staying simultaneously in the house of a mutual friend. He had arrived only the previous evening, and till that moment had scarcely spoken to the girl.

Carlyon smothered an involuntary sigh. He could have wished that this girl, with her straight eyes and honest speech, would have spared him the explanation which she had made such speed to demand of him.

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"Make you understand, Miss Eversley!" he said, halting deliberately before a bookcase. "What exactly is it that you do not understand?"

"Everything," Averil said, with a comprehensive gesture. "I have always believed that you thought more of Derrick than anything else in the world."

"Ah!" said Carlyon quietly. "That is probably the root of the misunderstanding. Correct that, and the rest will be comparatively easy."

He took a book from the shelf before him and ran a quick eye through its pages. After a brief pause he put the volume back and joined the girl on the hearthrug.

"Is my behaviour still an enigma?" he said, with a slight smile.

She turned to him impulsively. "Of course," she said, colouring vividly, "I am aware that to a celebrated man like you the opinion of a nobody like myself cannot matter one straw. But—"

"Pardon me!" Carlyon gravely. "Even celebrated men are human, you know. They have their feelings like the rest of mankind. I shall be sorry to forfeit your good opinion. But I have no means of retaining it. Derrick cannot see my point of view. You, of course, will share his difficulties."

"That does not follow, does it?" said Averil.

"I should say so," said Carlyon. "You see, Miss Eversley, you have already told me that you do not understand my action. Non-comprehension in such a matter is synonymous with disapproval. You are, no doubt, in full possession of the facts. More than the bare facts I cannot give you. I will not attempt to justify myself where I admit no guilt."

"No," Averil said. "Pray don't think I am asking you to do anything of the sort! Only, Colonel Carlyon," she laid a pleading hand on his arm and lifted a very anxious face, "you remember we used to be friends, if you will allow the presumption of such a term. Won't you even try to show me your point of view in this matter? I think I could understand. I want to understand."

Carlyon leant his elbow on the mantelpiece and looked very gravely into the girl's troubled eyes.

"You are very generous, Averil," he said.

"Generous," she echoed, with a touch of impatience. "No; I only want to be just—for my own sake. I hate to take a narrow, cramped view of things. I hate that Dick should. A few words from you would set us both right, and we could all be friends again."

“Ah!” said Carlyon. “But suppose—I have nothing to say?”

“You must have something!” she declared vehemently. “You never do anything without a reason.”

“Generous again!” said Carlyon.

“Oh, don’t laugh at me!” cried Averil, stung by the quiet unconcern of his words.

He straightened himself instantly, his face suddenly stern. “At least you wrong me there!” he said, and before the curt reproof of his tone she felt humbled and ashamed. “Listen to me a moment! You want my point of view clearly stated. You shall have it.

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"I am employed by a blundering Government to do a certain task which bigger men shirk. Carlyon of the Frontier, they say, will stick at no dirty job. I undertake the task. I lay my plans—subtle plans which you, with your blind British generosity, would neither understand nor approve. I proceed to carry them out. I am within sight of the end and success, when an idiotic fool of a boy, who is not so much as a combatant himself, blunders into the business and throws the whole scheme out of gear. He assumes the leadership of a dozen stranded Goorkhas, and instead of bringing them back he drags them forward into an impossible position, and then expects a rescue.

"I meanwhile have my own work to do. I am responsible to the Government for the lives of my men. I cannot expend them on other than Government work.

"On one side of the scale is this same Government and the plans made in its interest; on the other the life of a boy, strategically speaking, worth nothing, and the lives of half-a-score of fighting men, already accounted a loss. It may astonish you to know that the Government turned the scale. Those who had incurred the penalty of rashness were left to pay it. That, Miss Eversley, is all I have to say. You will be good enough to remember that I have said it at your request and not in my own defence."

He ceased to speak as abruptly as he had begun. He was standing at his full height, and, tall though she was, Averil felt unaccountably small and insignificant before him. Curtly, almost rudely, as he had spoken, she admired him immensely for the stern code of honour he professed.

She did not utter a word for several seconds. He had impressed her very strongly. She stayed to weigh his words in the balance of her own judgment.

"It is a man's point of view," she said slowly at last, "not a woman's."

"Even so," said Carlyon, dropping back suddenly to his former attitude.

She looked at him very earnestly, her brows drawn together.

"You have not told me about the Secret Service man," she said at length. "You sent him, did you not, on the forlorn chance of saving Dick?"

Carlyon shook his head in a grim disclaimer.

"Derrick's information was the first I heard of the individual," he said. "I was unaware of the existence of a Secret Service agent within a radius of fifty miles. I believe General Harford encourages the breed. I do the precise opposite. I have no faith in professional spies in that part of the world. Russian territory is too near, and Russian gold too tempting."

Averil's face fell. "Colonel Carlyon," she said, in a very small voice, "forgive me, but—but—you cannot be so hard as you sound. You are fond of Dick, surely?"

"Yes," he said deliberately. "I am fond of you both, if I may be permitted to say so."

Averil coloured a little. "Thank you," she said. "I shall try presently to make him understand."

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"Understand what?" said Carlyon curiously.

"Your feeling in the matter."

"My what?" he said roughly. Then hastily, "I beg your pardon, Miss Eversley. But are you sure you understand it yourself?"

"I am doing my best," she said, in a low voice.

"But you are sorely disappointed, nevertheless," he said, in a more kindly tone. "You expected something different. Well, it can't be helped. I should leave Dick's convictions alone, if I were you. At least he has no illusions left with regard to Carlyon of the Frontier."

There was an involuntary touch of sadness in the man's quiet speech. He no longer looked at Averil, and his face in repose wore an expression of unutterable weariness.

Averil held out her hand with an abrupt, childlike impulse.

"Colonel Carlyon," she said, speaking very rapidly, "you are right. I don't understand. I think you hold too stern a view of your responsibilities. I believe no woman could think otherwise. But at the same time I do still believe you are a good man. I shall always believe it."

Carlyon glanced at her quickly. Her face was flushed, her eyes very eager. He looked away again almost instantly, but he took her outstretched hand.

"Thank you, Averil," he said gravely. "I believe under the circumstances few women would have said the same. Tell me! Did I hear a rumour that you are going out to India yourself very shortly?"

She nodded. "I have almost promised to go," she said. "I have a married sister at Sharapura. I wrote to her of my engagement, and she wrote back, begging me to go to her if I could. She and her husband have been disappointed several times about coming home, and it is still uncertain when they will manage it. She wants to see me before I marry and settle down, she says."

"And you want to go?"

"Of course I do," said Averil, with enthusiasm. "It has always been a standing promise that I should go some day."

"And what does Derrick say to it?"

"Oh, Dick! He was very cross at first. But I have propitiated him by promising to marry him as soon as I get back, which will be probably this time next year."

Averil's face grew suddenly grave.

"I hope you will both be very happy," said Carlyon, rather formally.

"Thank you," said Averil, looking up at him. "It would make me much happier if—you and Dick could be friends before then."

"Would it?" said Carlyon thoughtfully. "I wonder why."

"I should like my friends to be Dick's friends," she said, with slight hesitation.

Carlyon smiled a little. "Forgive me, Miss Eversley, for being monotonous!" he said....
"But, once more—how generous!"

Averil turned sharply away, inexplicably hurt by what she considered the note of mockery in his voice, and went out, leaving him alone before the fire. Emphatically this man was entirely beyond her understanding.

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But, nevertheless, when they met again, she had forgiven him.

VI

FIEND OR KING?

"Hullo, doctor! What news?" sang out a curly-haired subaltern on the steps of the club, a newly-erected, wooden bungalow of which the little Frontier station was immensely proud. "You're looking infernally serious. What's the matter?"

Dr. Seddon rolled stoutly off his steaming pony and went to join his questioner.

"What do you think you're doing, Toby?" he said, with a glance at an enormous pair of scissors in the boy's hand.

"I'm making lamp-shades," Toby responded, leading the way within. "What's your drink? Nothing? What a horribly dry beast you are! Yes, lamp-shades—for the ball, you know. Got to be ready by to-morrow night. We're doing them with crinkly paper. Miss Eversley promised to come and help me. But she hasn't turned up."

"What?" exclaimed Seddon. "Not come back yet?"

Toby dropped his scissors with a clatter, and dived for them under the reading-room table.

"Don't make me jump, I say, doctor!" he said pathetically. "I'm quite upset enough as it is. That lazy lout, Soames, won't stir a finger. The other chaps are on duty. And Miss Eversley has proved faithless. Why can't you turn to and help?"

But Seddon was already striding to the door again in hot haste.

"That idiot of a girl must have crossed the Frontier!" he said, as he went. "There was a fellow shot on sentry-go last night. It's infernally dangerous, I tell you!"

Toby raced after him swearing inarticulately. A couple of subalterns just entering were nearly overwhelmed by their vigorous exit. They recovered themselves and followed to the tune of Toby's excited questioning. But none of the party got beyond the veranda steps, for there the sound of clattering hoofs arrested them, and a jaded horse bearing a dishevelled rider was pulled up short in front of the club.

"Miss Eversley herself!" cried Toby, making a dash forward.

A native servant slipped unobtrusively to the sweating horse's bridle. Averil was on the ground in a moment and turned to ascend the steps of the club-house.

"Is my brother-in-law here?" she said to Toby, accepting the hand he offered.

"Who? Raymond? No; he's in the North Camp somewhere. Do you want him? Anything wrong? By Jove, Miss Eversley, you've given us an awful fright!"

Averil went up the steps with so palpable an effort that Seddon hastily dragged forward a chair. Her lips, as she answered Toby, were quite colourless.

"I have had a fright myself," she said. Then she looked round at the other men with a shaky laugh. "I have been riding for my life," she said a little breathlessly. "I have never done that before. It—it's very exciting—almost more so than riding to hounds. I have often wondered how the fox felt. Now I know."

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She ignored the chair Seddon placed for her, turning to the boy called Toby with great resolution.

"Those lamp-shades, Mr. Carey," she said. "I'm sorry I'm so late. You must have thought I was never coming. In fact"—the colour was returning to her face, and her smile became more natural—"I thought so myself a few minutes ago. Let us set to work at once!"

Toby burst into a rude whoop of admiration and flung a ball of string into the air.

"Miss Eversley, well done! Well done!" he gasped. "You—you deserve a V.C.!"

"Indeed I don't," she returned. "I have been running away hard."

"Tell us all about it, Miss Eversley!" urged one of her listeners. "You have been across the Frontier, now, haven't you? What happened? Someone tried to snipe you from afar?"

But Miss Eversley refused to be communicative. "I am much too busy," she said, "to discuss anything so unimportant. Come, Mr. Carey, the lamp-shades!"

Toby bore her off in triumph to inspect his works of art. There was a good deal of understanding in Toby's head despite its curls which he kept so resolutely cropped. He attended to business without a hint of surprise or inattention. And he was presently rewarded for his good behaviour.

Averil, raising her eyes for a moment from one of the shades which she was tacking together while he held it in shape, said presently:

"A very peculiar thing happened to me this morning, Mr. Carey."

"Yes?" he replied, trying to keep the note of expectancy out of his voice.

Averil nodded gravely. "I crossed the Frontier," she said, "and rode into the mountains. I thought I heard a child crying. I lost my way and fell among thieves."

"Yes?" said Toby again. He looked up, frankly interested this time.

"I was shot at," she resumed. "It was my own fault, of course. I shouldn't have gone. My brother-in-law warned me very seriously against going an inch beyond the Frontier only last night. Well, one buys one's experience. I certainly shall never go again, not for a hundred wailing babies."

"Probably a bird," remarked Toby practically.

"Probably," assented Averil, equally practical. "To continue: I didn't know what to do. I was horribly frightened. I had lost my bearings. And then out of the very midst of my enemies there came a friend."

"Ah!" said Toby quickly. "The right sort?"

"There is only one sort," she said, with a touch of dignity.

"And what did he do?" said Toby, with eager interest.

"He simply took my bridle and ran by my side till we were out of danger," Averil said, a sudden soft glow creeping up over her face.

Toby looked at her very seriously. "In native rig, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes," said Averil.

"Carlyon of the Frontier," said Toby, with abrupt decision.

She nodded. "I did not know he had left England," she said.

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"He hasn't—officially speaking," said Toby. He was watching her steadily. "Do you know, Miss Eversley," he said, "I think I wouldn't mention your discovery to any one else?"

"I am not going to," she said.

"No? Then why did you tell me?" he asked, with a tinge of rude suspicion in his voice.

Averil looked him suddenly and steadily in the face. It was a very innocent face that Toby Carey presented to a serenely credulous world.

"Because," said Averil slowly, "he told me to tell you alone. 'Tell Toby Carey only,' he said, 'to watch when the beasts go down to drink.' They were his last words."

"Good!" said Toby unconcernedly. "Then he knew you recognized him?"

"Yes," Averil said; "he knew." She smiled faintly as she said it. "He told me he was in no danger," she added.

"Is he a friend of yours?" asked Toby sharply.

"Yes," said Averil, with pride.

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Toby bluntly.

"Why?" she asked, with a swift flash of anger.

"Why?" he echoed vehemently. "Ask your brother-in-law, ask Seddon, ask any one! The man is a fiend!"

Averil sprang to her feet in sudden fury.

"How dare you!" she cried passionately. "He is a king!"

Toby stared for a moment, then grew calm. "We are not talking about the same man, Miss Eversley," he said shortly. "The man I know is a fiend among fiends. The man you know is, no doubt—different."

But Averil swept from the club-room without a word. She was very angry with Toby Carey.

VII

THE REAL COLONEL CARLYON

Averil rode back to her brother-in-law's bungalow, vexed with herself, weary at heart, troubled. She had arrived at the station among the mountains on the Frontier two months before, and had spent a very happy time there with the sister whom she had not seen for years. The ladies of the station numbered a very scanty minority, but there was no lack of gaiety and merriment on that account.

That the hills beyond the Great Frontier were peopled by tribes in a seething state of discontent was a matter known, but little recked of, by the majority of the community. Officers went their several ways, fully awake to threatening rumours, but counting them of small importance. They went to their sport; to their polo, their racing, their gymkhanas, with light hearts and in perfect security. They lay down in the dread shadow of a mighty Empire and slept secure in the very jaws of danger.

The fierce and fanatical hatred that raged over the Frontier was less than nothing to most of them. The power that sheltered them was wholly sufficient for their confidence.

The toughness of the good northern breed is of a quality untearable, made to endure in all climates, under all conditions. Ordered to carry revolvers, they stuffed them unloaded into side-pockets, or left them in the hands of syces to bear behind them.

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Proof positive of their total failure to realize the danger that threatened from amidst the frowning, grey-cragged mountains was the fact that their womenkind were allowed to remain at the station, and even rode and drove forth unattended on the rocky, mountain roads.

True, they were warned against crossing the Frontier. A few officers, of whom Captain Raymond, who was Averil's brother-in-law, and Toby Carey, the innocent-faced subaltern, were two, saw the rising wave from afar; but they saw it vaguely as inevitable but not imminent. Captain Raymond planned to himself to send his wife and her sister to Simla before the monsoon broke up the fine weather.

And this was all he accomplished beyond administering a severe reprimand to his young sister-in-law for running into danger among the hills.

"There are always thieves waiting to bag anyone foolish enough to show his nose over the border," he said. "Isn't the Indian Empire large enough for you that you must needs go trespassing among savages?"

Averil heard him out with the patience of a slightly wandering attention. She had not recounted the whole of her experience for his benefit, nor did she intend to do so. She was still wondering what the mysterious message she had delivered to Toby Carey might be held to mean.

When Captain Raymond had exhausted himself she went away to her own room and sat for a long while gazing towards the great mountains, thinking, thinking.

Her sister presently joined her. Mrs. Raymond was a dark-eyed, merry-hearted little woman, the gay originator of many a frolic, and an immense favourite with men and women alike.

"Poor darling! I declare Harry has made you look quite miserable!" was her exclamation, as she ran lightly in and seated herself on the arm of Averil's chair.

"Harry!" echoed Averil, in a tone of such genuine scorn that Mrs. Raymond laughed aloud.

"You're very rude," she said. "Still, I'm glad Harry isn't the offender. Who is it, I wonder? But, never mind! I have a splendid piece of news for you, dear. Shut your eyes and guess!"

"Oh, I can't indeed!" protested Averil. "I am much too tired."

Mrs. Raymond looked at her with laughing eyes.

“There! She shan’t be teased!” she cried gaily. “It’s the loveliest surprise you ever had, darling; but I can’t keep it a secret any longer. I wanted to see him now that he is grown up, and quite satisfy myself that he is really good enough for you. So, dear, I wrote to him and begged him to join us here. And the result is—now guess!”

Averil had turned sharply to look at her.

“Do you mean you have asked Dick to come here?” she said, in a quick, startled way.

“Exactly, dear; I actually have,” said Mrs. Raymond. “More—we had a wire this morning. He will be here to dinner.”

“Oh!” said Averil. She rose hastily, so hastily that her sister was left sitting on the arm of the bamboo chair, which instantly overturned on the top of her.

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Averil extricated her with many laughing apologies, and, by the time Mrs. Raymond had recovered her equilibrium, the younger girl had lost her expression of astonishment and was looking as bright and eager as her sister could desire.

"Only Dick is such a madcap," she said. "How shall we keep him from getting up to mischief in No Man's Land precisely as I have done?"

Mrs. Raymond opined that Averil ought by then to have discovered the secret of managing the young man, and they went to *tiffin* on the veranda in excellent spirits.

Dr. Seddon was there and young Steele, one of Raymond's subalterns. Averil found herself next to the doctor, who, rather to her surprise, forebore to twit her with her early morning adventure. He was, in fact, very grave, and she wondered why.

Steele, strolling by her side in the shady compound, by and bye volunteered information.

"Poor old Seddon is in a mortal funk," he said, "which accounts for his wretched appetite. He has been wasting steadily ever since Carlyon went away. He thinks Carlyon is the only fellow capable of taking care of him. No one else is monster enough."

"Is Colonel Carlyon expected out here?" Averil asked, in a casual tone.

One of Steele's eyelids contracted a little as if it wanted to wink. He answered her in a low voice: "Carlyon is never expected before his arrival, Miss Eversley."

"No?" said Averil indifferently. "And, why, please do you call him a monster?"

Steele laughed a little. "Didn't you know?" he said. "Why, he is the King of Evil in these parts!"

Averil felt her face slowly flushing. "I don't understand," she said.

"Don't you?" said Steele. "Honestly now?"

The flush heightened. "Of course I don't," she said. "Otherwise why should I tell you so?"

"Pardon!" said Steele, unabashed. "Well, then, you must know that we are all frightened of Carlyon of the Frontier. We hate him badly, but he has the whip-hand of us, and so we have to do the tame trot for him. Over there"—he jerked his head towards the mountains—"they would lie down in a row miles long and let him walk over their necks. And not a single blackguard among them would dare to stab upwards, because Carlyon

is immortal, as everyone knows, and it wouldn't be worth the blackguard's while to survive the deed.

"They don't call him Carlyon in the mountains, but it's the same man, for all that. He is a prophet, a deity, among them. They believe in him blindly as a special messenger from Heaven. And he plays with them, barterers them, betrays them, every single day he spends among them. He is strong, he is unscrupulous, he is merciless. He respects no friendship. He keeps no oath. He betrays, he tortures, he slays. Even we, the enlightened race, shrink from him as if he were the very fiend incarnate.



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"But he is a valuable man. The information he obtains is priceless. But he trades with blood. He lives on treachery. He is more subtle than the subtlest Pathan. He would betray any one or all of us to death if it were to the interest of the Empire that we should be sacrificed. That, you know, in reason, is all very well. But, personally, I would sooner tread barefoot on a scorpion than get entangled in Carlyon's web. He is more false and more cruel than a serpent. At least, that is his reputation among us. And those heathen beggars trust him so utterly."

Steele stopped abruptly. He had spoken with strong passion. His honest face was glowing with indignation. He was British to the backbone, and he loathed all treachery instinctively.

Suddenly he saw that the girl beside him had turned very white. He paused in his walk with an awkward sense of having spoken unadvisedly.

"Of course," he said, with a boyish effort to recover his ground, "it has to be done. Someone must do the dirty work. But that doesn't make you like the man who does it a bit the better. One wouldn't brush shoulders with the hangman if one knew it."

Averil was standing still. Her hands were clenched.

"Are you talking of Colonel Carlyon—my friend?" she said slowly.

Steele turned sharply away from the wide gaze of her grey eyes.

"I hope not, Miss Eversley," he said. "The man I mean is not fit to be the friend of any woman."

VIII

THE STRANGER ON THE VERANDA

It was to all outward seeming a very gay crowd that assembled at the club-house on the following night for the first dance of the season. For some unexplained reason sentries had been doubled on all sides of the Camp, but no one seemed to have any anxiety on that account.

"We ought to feel all the safer," laughed Mrs. Raymond when she heard. "No one ever took such care of us before."

"It must be all rot," said Derrick who had arrived the previous evening in excellent spirits. "If there were the smallest danger of a rising you wouldn't be here."

"Quite true," laughed Mrs. Raymond, "unless the road to Fort Akbar is considered unsafe."

"I never saw a single border thief all the way here!" declared Derrick, departing to look for Averil.

He claimed the first waltz imperiously, and she gave it to him. She was the prettiest girl in the room, and she danced with a queenly grace of movement. Derrick was delighted. He did not like giving her up, but Steele was insistent on this point. He had made Derrick's acquaintance in the Frontier campaign of a year before, and he parted the two without scruple, declaring he would not stand by and see a good chap like Derrick make a selfish beast of himself on such an occasion.

Derrick gave place with a laugh and sought other partners. In the middle of the evening Toby Carey strolled up to Averil and bent down in a conversational attitude. He was not dancing himself. She gave him a somewhat cold welcome.

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After a few commonplace words he took her fan from her hand and whispered to her behind it:

"There's a fellow on the veranda waiting to speak to you," he said. "Calls himself a friend."

Her heart leapt at the murmured words. She glanced hurriedly round. Everyone in the room was dancing. She had pleaded fatigue. She rose quietly and stepped to the window, Toby following.

She stood a moment on the threshold of the night and then passed slowly out. All about her was dark.

"Go on to the steps!" murmured Toby behind her. "I shall keep watch."

She went on with gathering speed. At the head of the veranda-steps she dimly discerned a figure waiting for her, a figure clothed in some white, muffling garment that seemed to cover the face. And yet she knew by all her bounding pulses whom she had found.

"Colonel Carlyon!" she said, and on the impulse of the moment she gave him both her hands.

His quiet voice answered her out of the strange folds. "Come into the garden a moment!" he said.

She went with him unquestioning, with the confidence of a child. He led her with silent, stealthy tread into the deepest gloom the compound afforded. Then he stopped and faced her with a question that sent a sudden tumult of doubt racing through her brain.

"Will you take a message to Fort Akbar for me, Averil?" he said. "A matter of life and death."

A message! Averil's heart stood suddenly-still. All the evil report that she had heard of this man raised its head like a serpent roused from slumber, a serpent that had hidden in her breast, and a terrible agony of fear took the place of her confidence.

Carlyon waited for her answer without a sign of impatience. Through her mind, as it were on wheels of fire, Steele's passionate words were running: "He lives on treachery. He would betray any one or all of us to death if it were to the interest of the Empire that we should be sacrificed." And again: "I would sooner tread barefoot on a scorpion than get entangled in Carlyon's web."

All this she would once have dismissed as vilest calumny. But Carlyon's abandonment of Derrick, and his subsequent explanation thereof, were terribly overwhelming

evidence against him. And now this man, this spy, wanted to use her as an instrument to accomplish some secret end of his.

A matter of life or death, he said. And for which of these did he purpose to use her efforts? Averil sickened at the possibilities the question raised in her mind. And still Carlyon waited for her answer.

"Why do you ask me?" she said at last, in a quivering whisper. "What is the message you want to send?"

"You delivered a message for me only yesterday without a single question," he said.

She wrung her hands together in the darkness. "I know. I know," she said; "but then I did not realize."

"You saved the camp from destruction," he went on. "Will you not do the same to-night?"

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"How shall I know?" she sobbed in anguish.

"What have they been telling you?"

The quiet voice came in strange contrast to the agitated uncertainty of her tones. Carlyon laid steady hands on her shoulders. In the dim light his eyes had leapt to blue flame, sudden, intense. She hid her face from their searching; ashamed, horrified at her own doubts—yet still doubting.

"Your friendship has stood a heavier strain than this," Carlyon said, with grave reproach.

But she could not answer him. She dared scarcely face her own thoughts privately, much less utter them to him.

What if he were urging the tribes to rise to give the Government a pretext for war? She had heard him say that peace had come too soon, that war alone could remedy the evil of constantly recurring outrages along that troublous Frontier.

What if he counted the lives of a few women and their gallant protectors as but a little price to pay for the accomplishment of this end?

What if he purposed to make this awful sacrifice in the interests of the Empire, and only asked this thing of her because no other would undertake it?

She lifted her face. He was still looking at her with those strange, burning eyes that seemed to pierce her very soul.

"Averil," he said, "you may do a great thing for the Empire to-night—if you will."

The Empire! Ah, what fearful things would he not do behind that mask! Yet she stood silent, bound by the spell of his presence.

Carlyon went on. "There is going to be a rising, but we shall hold our own, I hope without loss. You can ride a horse, and I can trust you. This message must be delivered to-night. There is not an officer at liberty. I would not send one if there were. Every man will be wanted. Averil, will you go for me?"

He was holding her very gently between his hands. He seemed to be pleading with her. Her resolution began to waver. They had shattered her idol, yet she clung fast to the crumbling shrine.

"You will not let them be killed?" she whispered piteously. "Oh, promise me!"

"No one belonging to this camp will be killed if I can help it," he said. "You will tell them at Fort Akbar that we are prepared here. General Harford is marching to join them from

Fort Wara. Whatever they may hear they must not dream of moving to join us till he reaches them. They are not strong enough. They would be cut to pieces. That is the message you are going to take for me. Their garrison is too small to be split up, and Fort Akbar must be protected at all costs. It is a more important post than this even."

"But there are women here," Averil whispered.

"They are under my protection," said Carlyon quietly. "I want you to start at once—before we shut the gates."

"Have they taken you by surprise, then?" she asked, with a sharp, involuntary shiver.

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"No," Carlyon said. "They have taken the Government by surprise. That's all." He spoke with strong bitterness. For he was the watchman who had awaked in vain.

A moment later he was drawing her with him along the shadowy path.

"You need have no fear," he whispered to her. "The road is open all the way. I have a horse waiting that will carry you safely. It is barely ten miles. You have done it before."

"Am I to go just as I am?" she asked him, carried away by his unfaltering resolution.

"Yes," said Carlyon, "except for this." He loosened the *chuddah* from his own head and stooped to muffle it about hers. "I have provided for your going," he said. "You will see no one. You know the way. Go hard!"

He moved on again. His arm was round her shoulders.

"And you?" she said, with sudden misgiving.

"I shall go back to the camp," he said, "when I have seen you go."

They went a little farther, ghostly, white figures gliding side by side. Wildly as her heart was beating, Averil felt that it was all strangely unreal, felt that the man beside her was a being unknown and mysterious, almost supernatural. And yet, strangely, she did not fear him. As she had once said to him, she believed he was a good man. She would always believe it. And yet was that awful doubt hammering through her brain.

They reached the bounds of the club compound and Carlyon stopped again. From the building behind them there floated the notes of a waltz, weird, dream-like, sweet as the earth after rain in summer.

"I want to know," Carlyon said steadily, "if you trust me."

She stretched up her hands like a child and laid them against his breast. She answered him with piteous entreaty in which passion strangely mingled.

"Colonel Carlyon," she whispered brokenly, "promise me that when this is over you will give it up! You were not made to spy and betray! You were made an honourable, true-hearted man—God's greatest and best creation. You were never meant to be twisted and warped to an evil use. Ah, tell me you will give it up! How can I go away and leave you toiling in the dungeons?"

"Hush!" said Carlyon. "You do not understand."

Later, she remembered with what tenderness he gathered her hands again into his own, holding them reverently. At the time she realized nothing but the monstrous pity of his wasted life.

"It isn't true!" she sobbed. "You would not sacrifice your friends?"

"Never!" said Carlyon sharply.

He paused. Then—"You must go, Averil," he said. "There are two sentries on the Buddhist road, and the password is 'Empire.' After that—straight to Akbar. The moon is rising, and no one will speak to you or attempt to stop you. You will not be afraid?"

"I trust you," she said very earnestly.

Ten minutes later, as the moon shot the first silver streak above the frowning mountains, a white horse flashed out on the road beyond the camp—a white horse bearing a white-robed rider.



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On the edge of the camp one sentry turned to another with wonder on his face.

"That messenger's journey will be soon over," he remarked. "An easy target for the black fiends!"

In the mountains a dusky-faced hillman turned glittering, awe-struck eyes upon the flying white figure.

"Behold!" he said. "The Heaven-sent rides to the moonrise even as he foretold. The time draws near."

And Carlyon, walking back in strange garb to join his own people, muttered to himself as he went: "One woman, at least, is safe!"

IX

A FIGHT IN THE NIGHT

An hour before daybreak the gathering wave broke upon the camp. It was Toby Carey who ran hurriedly in upon the dancers in the club-room when they were about to disperse and briefly announced that there was going to be a fight. He added that Carlyon was at the mess-house, and desired all the men to join him there. The women were to remain at the club, which was already surrounded by a party of Sikhs and Goorkhas. Toby begged them to believe they were in no danger.

"Where is Averil?" cried Mrs. Raymond distractedly.

"Carlyon has already provided for her safety," Toby assured her, as he raced off again.

Five minutes later Carlyon, issuing rapid orders in the veranda of the mess-house, turned at the grip of a hand on his shoulder, and saw Derrick, behind him, wild-eyed and desperate.

"What have you done with Averil?" the boy said through white lips.

"She is safe at Akbar," Carlyon briefly replied. Then, as Derrick instantly wheeled, he caught him swiftly by the arm.

"You wait, Dick!" he said. "I have work for you."

"Let me go!" flashed Derrick fiercely.

But Carlyon maintained his hold. He knew what was in the lad's mind.

"It can't be done," he said. "It would be certain death if you attempted it. We are cut off for the present."

He interrupted himself to speak to an officer who was awaiting an order then turned again to Derrick.

"I tell you the truth, Dick," he said, a sudden note of kindness in his voice. "She is safe. I had the opportunity—for one only. I took it—for her. You can't follow her. You have forfeited your right to throw away your life. Don't forget it, boy, ever! You have got to live for her and let the blackguards take the risks."

He ended with a faint smile, and Derrick fell back abashed, an unwilling admiration struggling with the sullenness of his submission.

Later, at Carlyon's order, he joined the party that had been detailed to watch over the club-house, the most precious and the safest position in the whole station. He chafed sorely at the inaction, but he repressed his feelings.

Carlyon's words had touched him in the right place. Though fiercely restless still, his manhood had been stirred, and gradually the strength, the unflinching resolution that had dominated Averil, took the place of his feverish excitement. Derrick, the impulsive and headstrong, became the mainstay as well as the undismayed protector of the women during that night scare of the Frontier.

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There was sharp fighting down in the camp. They heard the firing and the shouts; but with the sunrise there came a lull. The women turned white faces to one another and wondered if it could be over.

Presently Derrick entered with the latest news. The tribesmen had been temporarily beaten off, he said, but the hills were full of them. Their own losses during the night amounted to two wounded sepoys. Fighting during the day was not anticipated.

Carlyon, snatching hasty refreshment in a hut near the scene of the hottest fighting, turned grimly to Raymond, his second in command, as gradual quiet descended upon the camp.

"You will see strange things to-night," he said.

Raymond, whose right wrist had been grazed by a bullet, was trying clumsily to bandage it with his handkerchief.

"How long is it going to last?" he said.

"To-night will see the end of it," said Carlyon, quietly going to his assistance. "The rising has been brewing for some time. The tribesmen need a lesson, so does the Government. It is just a bubble—this. It will explode to-night. To be honest for once"—Carlyon smiled a little over his bandaging—"I did not expect this attack so soon. A Heaven-sent messenger has been among the tribesmen. They revere him almost as much as the great prophet himself. He has been listening to their murmurings."

Carlyon paused. Raymond was watching him intently, but the quiet face bent over his wound told him nothing.

"Had I known what was coming," Carlyon said, "so much as three days ago, the women would not now be in the station. As things are, it would have been impossible to weaken the garrison to supply them with an escort to Akbar."

Raymond stifled a deep curse in his throat. Had they but known indeed!

Carlyon went on in his deliberate way: "I shall leave you in command here to-night. I have other work to do. General Harford will be here at dawn. The attacking force will be on the east of the camp. You will crush them between you! You will stamp them down without mercy. Let them see the Empire is ready for them! They will not trouble us again for perhaps a few years."

Again he paused. Raymond asked no question. Better than most he knew Carlyon of the Frontier.

"It will be a hard blow," Carlyon said. "The tribesmen are very confident. Last night they watched a messenger ride eastwards on a white horse. It was an omen foretold by the Heaven-sent when he left them to carry the message through the hills to other tribes."

Raymond gave a great start. "The girl!" he said.

For a second Carlyon's eyes met his look. They were intensely blue, with the blueness of a flame.

"She is safe at Akbar," he said, returning without emotion to the knotting of the bandage. "The road was open for the messenger. The horse was swift. There is one woman less to take the risk."

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"I see," said Raymond quietly. He was frowning a little, but not at Carlyon's strategy.

"The rest," Carlyon continued, "must be fought for. The moon is full to-night. The Great Fakir will come out of the hills in his zeal and lead the tribes himself. Guard the east!"

Raymond drew a sharp breath. But Carlyon's hand on his shoulder silenced the astounded question on his lips.

"We have got to protect the women," Carlyon said. "Relief will come at dawn."

X

SAVED A SECOND TIME

All through the day quiet reigned. An occasional sword-glint in the mountains, an occasional gleam of white against the brown hillside; these were the only evidences of an active enemy.

The women were released from durance in the club-house, with strict orders to return in the early evening.

Derrick went restlessly through the camp, seeking Carlyon. He found him superintending the throwing-up of earthworks. The most exposed part of the camp was to be abandoned. Derrick joined him in silence. Somehow this man's personality attracted him strongly. Though he had defied him, quarrelled with him, insulted him, the spell of his presence was irresistible.

Carlyon paid small attention to him till he turned to leave that part of the camp's defences. Then, with a careless hand through Derrick's arm, he said:

"You will have your fill of stiff fighting to-night, boy. But, remember, you are not to throw yourself away."

As evening fell, the attack was resumed, and it continued throughout the night. Tribesmen charged up to the very breastworks themselves and fell before the awful fire of the defenders' rifles. Death had no terrors for them. They strove for the mastery with fanatical zeal. But they strove in vain. A greater force than they possessed, the force of discipline and organized resistance—kept them at bay. Behind the splendid courage of the Indian soldiers were the resource and the resolution of a handful of Englishmen. The spirit of the conquering race, unquenchable, irresistible, weighed down the balance.

In the middle of the night Captain Raymond was hit in the shoulder and carried, fainting, to the closely guarded club-house, where his wife was waiting.

The command devolved upon Lieutenant Steele, who took up the task undismayed. Down in the hastily dug trenches Toby Carey was fiercely holding his men to their work.

And Derrick Rose was with him, unrestrained for that night at least.

“Relief at dawn!” Toby said to him once.

And Derrick responded with a wild laugh.

“Relief be damned! We can hold our own without it.”

* * * * *

Relief came with the dawn, at a moment when the tribesmen were spurring themselves to the greatest effort of all, sustained by the knowledge that their Great Fakir was among them.

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General Harford, with guides, Sikhs, Goorkhas, came down like a hurricane from the south-east, cut off a great body of tribesmen from their fellows, and drove them headlong, with deadly force, upon the defences they had striven so furiously to take.

The defenders sallied out to meet them with fixed bayonets. The brief siege, if siege it could be called, was over.

In the early light Derrick found himself fighting, fighting furiously, sword to sword. And the terrible joy of the conflict ran in his blood like fire.

“Ah!” he gasped. “It’s good! It’s good!”

And then he found another fighting beside him—a mighty fighting man, grim, terrible, silent. They thrust together; they withdrew together; they charged together.

Once an enemy seized Derrick’s sword and he found himself vainly struggling against the awful, wild-faced fanatic’s sinewy grasp. He saw the man’s upraised arm, and knew with horrible certainty that he was helpless, helpless.

Then there shot out a swift, rescuing hand. A straight and deadly blow was struck. And Derrick, flinging a laugh over his shoulder, beheld a man dressed as a tribesman fall headlong over his enemy’s body, struck to the earth by another swordsman.

Like lightning there flashed through his brain the memory of a man who had saved his life more than a year before on this same tumultuous Frontier—a man in tribesman’s dress, with blue eyes of a strange, keen friendliness. He had it now. This was the Secret Service man. Derrick planted himself squarely over the prostrate body, and there stood while the fight surged on about him to the deadly and inevitable end.

XI

THE SECRET OUT

“All Carlyon’s doing!” General Harford said a little later. “He has pulled the strings throughout, from their very midst. Carlyon the ubiquitous, Carlyon the silent, Carlyon the watchful! He has averted a horrible catastrophe. The Indian Government must be made to understand that he is a servant worth having. They say he personally led the tribesmen to their death. They certainly walked very willingly into the trap arranged for them. Now, where is Carlyon?”

No one knew. In the plain outside the camp wounded men were being collected. The General was relieved to hear that Carlyon was not among them. He sat down to make his report, a highly eulogistic report, of this man’s splendid services. And then he went to late breakfast at the club-house.



In the evening Averil rode back to the station with an escort. The terrible traces of the struggle were not wholly removed. They rode round by a longer route to avoid the sight.

Seddon was the first of her friends who saw her. He was standing inside the mess-house. He went hurriedly forward and gave her brief details of the fight. Then, while they were talking, Derrick himself came running up. He greeted her with less of his boyish effusion than was customary.

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"How is the Secret Service man?" he asked abruptly of Seddon. "Is he badly damaged?"

The latter looked at him hard for a second.

"You can come in and see him," he said, and led the way into the mess.

Averil and Derrick followed him hand in hand. In a few low words the boy told her of his old friend's reappearance.

"He has saved my life twice over," he said.

"He has saved more lives than yours," Seddon remarked abruptly, over his shoulder.

He led the way "to the little ante-room where, stretched on a sofa, lay Derrick's Secret Service man. He was dressed in white, his face half covered with a fold of his head-dress. But the eyes were open—blue, alert, beneath drooping lids. He was speaking, softly, quickly, as a man asleep.

"The women must be protected," he said. "Let the blackguards take the risks!"

Averil started forward with a cry, and in a moment was kneeling by his side. The strange eyes were turned upon her instantly. They were watchful still and exceeding tender—the eyes of the hero she loved. They faintly smiled at her. To his death he would keep up the farce. To his death he would never show her the secret he had borne so long.

"Ah! The message!" he said, with an effort. "You gave it?"

"There was no need of a message," Averil cried. "You invented it to get me away, to make me escape from danger. You knew that otherwise I would not have gone. It was your only reason for sending me."

He did not answer her. The smile died slowly out. His eyes passed to Derrick. He looked at him very earnestly, and there was unutterable pleading in the look.

The boy stooped forward. Shocked by the sudden discovery, he yet answered as it were involuntarily to the man's unspoken wish. He knelt down beside the girl, his arm about her shoulders. His voice came with a great sob.

"The Secret Service man and Carlyon of the Frontier in one!" he said. "A man who does not forsake his friends. I might have known."

There was a pause, a great silence. Then Carlyon of the Frontier spoke softly, thoughtfully, with grave satisfaction it seemed. He looked at neither of them, but beyond them both. His eyes were steady and fearless.

“A blackguard—a spy—yet faithful to his friends—even so,” he said; and died.

The boy and girl were left to each other. He had meant it to be so—had worked for it, suffered for it. In the end Carlyon of the Frontier had done that which he had set himself to do, at a cost which none other would ever know—not even the girl who had loved him.

The Penalty

I

“Now then, you fellows, step out there! Step out like the men you are! Left—right! Left—right! That’s the way! Holy Jupiter! Call those chaps savages! They’re gentlemen, every jack one of ’em. That’s it, my hearties! Salute the old flag! By Jove, Monty, a British squad couldn’t have done it better!”

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The speaker pushed back his helmet to wipe his forehead. He was very much in earnest. The African sun blazing down on his bronzed face revealed that. The blue eyes glittered out of the lean, tanned countenance. They were full of resolution, indomitable resolution, and good British pluck.

As the little company of black men swung by, with the rhythmic pad of their bare feet, he suddenly snatched out his sword and waved it high in the smiting sunlight.

"Halt!" he cried.

They stood as one man, all gleaming eyes and gleaming teeth. They were all a good head taller than the Englishman who commanded them, but they looked upon him with reverence, as a being half divine.

"Now, cheer, you beggars, cheer!" he cried. "Three cheers for the King! Hip, hip—"

"Hooray!" came in hoarse chorus from the assembled troop. It sounded like a war cry.

"Hip, hip—" yelled the Englishman again.

And again "Hooray!" came the answering yell.

"Hip, hip—" for the third time from the man with the sword.

And for the third time, "Hooray!" from the deep-chested troopers halted in the blazing sunshine.

The British officer turned about with an odd smile quivering at the corners of his mouth. There was an almost maternal tenderness about it.

He sheathed his sword.

"You beauties!" he murmured softly. "You beauties!" Then aloud, "Very good, sergeant! Dismiss them! Come along, Monty! Let's go and have a drink."

He linked his arm in that of the silent onlooker, and drew him into the little hut of rough-hewn timber which was dignified by the name, printed in white letters over the door, of "Officers' Quarters."

"What do you think of them?" he demanded, as they entered. "Aren't they soldiers? Aren't they men?"

"I think, Duncannon," the other answered slowly, "that you have worked wonders."



“Ah, you’ll tell the Chief so? Won’t he be astounded? He swore I should never do it; declared they’d knife me if I tried to hammer any discipline into them. Much he knows about it! Good old Chief!”

He laughed boyishly, and again wiped his hot face.

“On my soul, Monty, it’s been no picnic,” he declared. “But I’d have sacrificed five years’ pay, and my step as well, gladly—gladly—sooner than have missed it. Here you are, old boy! Drink! Drink to the latest auxiliary force in the British Empire! Damn’ thirsty climate, this.”

He tossed his helmet aside, and sat down on the edge of the table—a lithe, spare figure, brimming with active strength.

“I’ve literally coaxed those chaps into shape,” he declared. “Oh, yes, I’ve bullied ’em too—cursed ’em right and left; but they never turned a hair—knew it was all for their good, and took it lying down. I’ve taught ’em to wash too, you know. That was the hardest job of all. I knocked one great brute all round the parade-ground one day, just to show I was in earnest. He went off afterwards, and blubbed like a baby. But in the evening I found him squatting outside, quite naked, and as clean as a whistle. To quote the newspapers, I was profoundly touched. But I didn’t show it, you bet. I whacked him on the shoulder, and told him to be a man.”

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He broke off to laugh at the reminiscence; and Montague Herne gravely set down his glass, and turned his chair with its back to the sunlight.

"Do you know you've been here eighteen months?" he said.

Duncannon nodded.

"I feel as if I'd been born here. Why?"

"Most fellows," proceeded Herne, ignoring the question, "would have been clamouring for leave long ago. Why, you have scarcely heard your own language all this time."

"I have though," said Duncannon quickly. "That's another thing I've taught 'em. They picked it up wonderfully quickly. There isn't one of 'em who doesn't know a few sentences now."

"You seem to have found your vocation in teaching these heathen to sit up and beg," observed Herne, with a dry smile.

Duncannon turned dusky red under his tan.

"Perhaps I have," he said, with a certain, doggedness.

Herne, with his back to the light, was watching him.

"Well," he said finally, "we've served our turn. The battalion is going Home!"

Duncannon gave a great start.

"Already?"

"After two years' service," the other reminded him grimly.

Duncannon fell silent, considering, the matter with bent brows.

"Who succeeds us?" he asked at length.

Herne shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know?" There was sudden, sharp anxiety in Duncannon's voice. He got off the table with a jerk. "You must know," he said.

Herne sat motionless, but he no longer looked the other in the face.

"You've taught 'em to fight," he said slowly. "They are men enough to look after themselves now."

"What?" Duncannon flung the word with violence. He took a single stride forward, standing over Herne in an attitude that was almost menacing. His hands were clenched. "What?" he said again.

Herne leaned back, and felt for his cigarette-case.

"Take it easy, old chap!" he said. "It was bound to come, you know. It was never meant to be more than a temporary occupation among these friendlies. They have been useful to us, I admit. But we can't fight their battles for them for ever. It's time for them to stand on their own legs. Have a smoke!"

Duncannon ignored the invitation. He turned pale to the lips. For a space of seconds he said nothing whatever. Then at length, slowly, in a voice that was curiously even, "Yes, I've taught 'em to fight," he said. "And now I'm to leave 'em to be massacred, am I?"

Herne shrugged his shoulders again, not because he was actually indifferent, but because, under the circumstances, it was the easiest answer to make.

Duncannon went on in the same dead-level tone:

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“Yes, they’ve been useful to us, these friendlies. They’ve made common cause with us against those infernal Wandis. They might have stayed neutral, or they might have whipped us off the ground. But they didn’t. They brought us supplies, and they brought us mules, and they helped us along generally, and hauled us out of tight corners. They’ve given us all we asked for, and more to it. And now they are going to pay the penalty, to reap our gratitude. They’re going to be left to themselves to fight our enemies—the fellows we couldn’t beat—single-handed, without experience, without a leader, and only half trained. They are going to be left as a human sacrifice to pay our debts.”

He paused, standing erect and tense, staring out into the blinding sunlight. Then suddenly, like the swift kindling of a flame, his attitude changed. He flung up his hands with a wild gesture.

“No, I’m damned!” he cried violently. “I’m damned if they shall! They are my men—the men I made. I’ve taught ’em every blessed thing they know. I’ve taught ’em to reverence the old flag, and I’m damned if I’ll see them betrayed! You can go back to the Chief, and tell him so! Tell him they’re British subjects, staunch to the backbone! Why, they can even sing the first verse of the National Anthem! You’ll hear them at it to-night before they turn in. They always do. It’s a sort of evening hymn to them. Oh, Monty, Monty, what cursed trick will our fellows think of next, I wonder? Are we men, or are we reptiles, we English? And we boast—we boast of our national honour!”

He broke off, breathing short and hard, as a man desperately near to collapse, and leaned his head on his arm against the rough wall as if in shame.

Herne glanced at him once or twice before replying.

“You see,” he said at length, speaking somewhat laboriously, “what we’ve got to do is to obey orders. We were sent out here not to think but to do. We’re on Government service. They are responsible for the thinking part. We have to carry it out, that’s all. They have decided to evacuate this district, and withdraw to the coast. So”—again he shrugged his shoulders—“there’s no more to be said. We must go.”

He paused, and glanced again at the slight, khaki-clad figure that leaned against the wall.

After a moment, meeting with no response, he resumed.

“There’s no sense in taking it hard, since there is no help for it. You always knew that it was an absolutely temporary business. Of course, if we could have smashed the Wandis, these chaps would have had a better look-out. But—well, we haven’t smashed them.”

“We hadn’t enough men!” came fiercely from Duncannon.

“True! We couldn’t afford to do things on a large scale. Moreover, it’s a beastly country, as even you must admit. And it isn’t worth a big struggle. Besides, we can’t occupy half the world to prevent the other half playing the deuce with it. Come, Bobby, don’t be a fool, for Heaven’s sake! You’ve been treated as a god too long, and it’s turned your head. Don’t you want to get Home? What about your people? What about——”

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Duncannon turned sharply. His face was drawn and grey.

"I'm not thinking of them," he said, in a choked voice. "You don't know what this means to me. You couldn't know, and I can't explain. But my mind is made up on one point. Whoever goes—I stay!"

He spoke deliberately, though his breathing was still quick and uneven. His eyes were sternly steadfast.

Herne stared at him in amazement.

"My good fellow," he said, "you are talking like a lunatic! I think you must have got a touch of sun."

A faint smile flickered over Duncannon's set face.

"No, it isn't that," he said. "It's a touch of something else—something you wouldn't understand."

"But—heavens above!—you have no choice!" Herne exclaimed, rising abruptly. "You can't say you'll do this or that. So long as you wear a sword, you have to obey orders."

"That's soon remedied," said Duncannon, between his teeth.

With a sudden, passionate movement he jerked the weapon from its sheath, held it an instant gleaming between his hands, then stooped and bent it double across his knee.

It snapped with a sharp click, and instantly he straightened himself, the shining fragments in his hands, and looked Montague Herne in the eyes.

"When you go back to the Chief," he said, speaking very steadily, "you can take him this, and tell him that the British Government can play what damned dirty trick they please upon their allies. But I will take no part in it. I shall stick to my friends."

And with that he flung the jingling pieces of steel upon the table, took up his helmet, and passed out into the fierce glare of the little parade-ground.

II

"Oh, is it our turn at last? I am glad!"

Betty Derwent raised eyes of absolute honesty to the man who had just come to her side, and laid her hand with obvious alacrity upon his arm.



"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself," he said.

"I'm not!" she declared, with vehemence. "It's perfectly horrid. I hope you're not wanting to dance, Major Herne? For I want to sit out, and—and get cool, if possible."

"I want what you want," said Herne. "Shall we go outside?"

"Yes—no! I really don't know. I've only just come in. I want to get away—right away. Can't you think of a quiet corner?"

"Certainly," said Herne, "if it's all one to you where you go."

"I should like to run away," the girl said impetuously, "right away from everybody—except you."

"That's very good of you," said Herne, faintly smiling.

The hand that rested on his arm closed with an agitated pressure.

"Oh, no, it isn't!" she assured him. "It's quite selfish. I—I am like that, you know. Where are we going?"

"Upstairs," said Herne.

"Upstairs!" She glanced at him in surprise, but he offered no explanation. They were already ascending.

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But when they had mounted one flight of stairs, and were beginning to mount a second, the girl's eyes flashed understanding.

"Major Herne, you're a real friend in need!"

"Think so?" said Herne. "Perhaps—at heart—I am as selfish as you are."

"Oh, I don't mind that," she rejoined impulsively. "You are all selfish, every one of you, but—thank goodness!—you don't all want the same thing."

Montague Herne raised his brows a little.

"Quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure," said Betty vigorously. "I always know." She added with apparent inconsequence, "That's how it is we always get on so well. Are you going to take me right out on to the ramparts? Are you sure there will be no one else there?"

"There will be no one where we are going," he said.

She sighed a sigh of relief.

"How good! We shall get some air up there, too. And I want air—plenty of it. I feel suffocated."

"Mind how you go!" said Herne. "These stairs are uneven."

They had come to a spiral staircase of stone. Betty mounted it light-footed, Herne following close behind.

In the end they came to an oak door, against which the girl set her hand.

"Major Herne! It's locked!"

"Allow me!" said Herne.

He had produced a large key, at which Betty looked with keen satisfaction.

"You really are a wonderful person. You overcome all difficulties."

"Not quite that, I am afraid." Herne was smiling. "But this is a comparatively simple matter. The key happens to be in my charge. With your permission, we will lock the door behind us."

"Do!" she said eagerly. "I have never been at this end of the ramparts. I believe I shall spend the rest of the evening here, where no one can follow us."

“Haven’t you any more partners?” asked Herne.

She showed him a full card with a little grimace.

“I have had such an awful experience. I am going to cut the rest.”

He smiled a little.

“Rather hard on the rest. However——”

“Oh, don’t be silly!” she said impatiently. “It isn’t like you.”

“No,” said Herne.

He spoke quietly, almost as if he were thinking of something else. They had passed through the stone doorway, and had emerged upon a flagged passage that led between stone walls to the ramparts. Betty passed along this quickly, mounted the last flight of steps that led to the battlements, and stood suddenly still.

A marvellous scene lay spread below them in the moonlight—silent land and whispering sea. The music of the band in the distant ballroom rose fitfully—such music as is heard in dreams. Betty stood quite motionless with the moonlight shining on her face. She looked like a nymph caught up from the shimmering water.

Impulsively at length she turned to the man beside her.

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"Shall I tell you what has been happening to me to-night?"

"If you really wish me to know," said Herne.

She jerked her shoulder with a hint of impatience.

"I feel as if I must tell someone, and you are as safe, as any one I know. I have danced with six men so far, and out of those six three have asked me to marry them. It's been almost like a conspiracy, as if they were doing it for a wager. Only, two of them were so horribly in earnest that it couldn't have been that. Major Herne, why can't people be reasonable?"

"Heaven knows!" said Herne.

She gave him a quick smile.

"If I get another proposal to-night I shall have hysterics. But I know I am safe with you."

Herne was silent.

Betty gave a little shiver.

"You think me very horrid to have told you?"

"No," he answered deliberately, "I don't. I think that you were extraordinarily wise."

She laughed with a touch of wistfulness.

"I have a feeling that if I quite understood what you meant, I shouldn't regard that as a compliment."

"Very likely not." Herne's dark face brooded over the distant water. He did not so much as glance at the girl beside him, though her eyes were studying him quite frankly.

"Why are you so painfully discreet?" she said suddenly. "Don't you know that I want you to give me advice?"

"Which you won't take," said Herne.

"I don't know. I might. I quite well might. Anyhow, I should be grateful."

He rested one foot on the battlement, still not looking at her.

"If you took my advice," he said, "you would marry."

"Marry!" she said with a quick flush. "Why? Why should I?"



"You know why," said Herne.

"Really I don't. I am quite happy as I am."

"Quite?" he said.

She began to tap her fingers against the stonework. There was something of nervousness in the action.

"I couldn't possibly marry any one of the men who proposed to me to-night," she said.

"There are other men," said Herne.

"Yes, I know, but—" She threw out her arms suddenly with a gesture that had in it something passionate. "Oh, if only I were a man myself!" she said. "How I wish I were!"

"Why?" said Herne.

She answered him instantly, her voice not wholly steady.

"I want to travel. I want to explore. I want to go to the very heart of the world, and—and learn its secrets."

Herne turned his head very deliberately and looked at her.

"And then?" he said.

Half defiantly her eyes met his.

"I would find Bobby Duncannon," she said, "and bring him back."

Herne stood up slowly.

"I thought that was it," he said.

"And why shouldn't it be?" said Betty. "I have known him for a long time now. Wouldn't you do as much for a pal?"

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Herne was silent for a moment. Then:

"You would be wiser to forget him," he said. "He will never come back."

"I shall never forget him," said Betty almost fiercely.

He looked at her gravely.

"You mean to waste the rest of your life waiting for him?" he asked.

Her hands gripped each other suddenly.

"You call it waste?" she said.

"It is waste," he made answer, "sheer, damnable waste. The boy was mad enough to sacrifice his own career—everything that he had—but it is downright infernal that you should be sacrificed too. Why should you pay the penalty for his madness? He was probably killed long ago, and even if not—even if he lived and came back—you would probably ask yourself if you had ever met him before."

"Oh, no!" Betty said. "No!"

She turned and looked out to the water that gleamed so peacefully in the moonlight.

"Do you know," she said, her voice very low, scarcely more than a whisper, "he asked me to marry him—five years ago—just before he went. It was my first proposal. I was very young, not eighteen. And—and it frightened me. I really don't know why. And so I refused. He said he would ask me again when I was older, when I had come out. I remember being rather relieved when he went away. It wasn't till afterwards, when I came to see the world and people, that I realized that he was more to me than any one else. He—he was wonderfully fascinating, don't you think? So strong, so eager, so full of life! I have never seen any one quite like him." She leaned her hands suddenly against a projecting stone buttress and bowed her head upon them. "And I—refused him!" she said.

The low voice went out in a faint sob, and the man's hands clenched. The next instant he had crossed the space that divided him from the slender figure in its white draperies that drooped against the wall.

He bent down to her.

"Betty, Betty," he said, "you're crying for the moon, child. Don't!"

She turned, and with a slight, confiding movement slid out a trembling hand.

"I have never told anyone but you," she said.

He clasped the quivering fingers very closely.

"I would sell my soul to see you happy," he said. "But, my dear Betty, happiness doesn't lie in that direction. You are sacrificing substance to shadow. Won't you see it before it's too late, before the lean years come?" He paused a moment, seeming to restrain himself. Then, "I've never told you before," he said, his voice very low, deeply tender. "I hardly dare to tell you now, lest you should think I'm trading on your friendship, but I, too, am one of those unlucky beggars that want to marry you. You needn't trouble to refuse me, dear. I'll take it all for granted. Only, when the lean years do come to you, as they will, as they must, will you remember that I'm still wanting you, and give me the chance of making you happy?"



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"Oh, don't!" sobbed Betty. "Don't! You hurt me so!"

"Hurt you, Betty! I!"

She turned impulsively and leaned her head against him.

"Major Herne, you—you are awfully good to me, do you know? I shall never forget it. And if—if I were not quite sure in my heart that Bobby is still alive and wanting me, I would come to you, if you really cared to have me. But—but—"

"Do you mean that, Betty?" he said. His arm was round her, but he did not seek to draw her nearer, did not so much as try to see her face.

But she showed it to him instantly, lifting clear eyes, in which the tears still shone, to his.

"Oh, yes, I mean it. But, Major Herne, but——"

He met her look, faintly smiling.

"Yes," he said. "It's a pretty big 'but,' I know, but I'm going to tackle it. I'm going to find out if the boy is alive or dead. If he lives, you shall see him again; if he is dead—and this is the more probable, for it is no country for white men—I shall claim you for myself, Betty. You won't refuse me then?"

"Only find out for certain," she said.

"I will do that," he promised.

"But how? How? You won't go there yourself?"

"Why not?" he said.

Something like panic showed in the girl's eyes. She laid her hands on his shoulders.

"Monty, I don't want you to go."

"You would rather I stayed?" he said. He was looking closely into her eyes.

She endured the look for a little, then suddenly the tears welled up again.

"I can't bear you to go," she whispered. "I mean—I mean—I couldn't bear it if—if——"

He took her hands gently, and held them.

"I shall come back to you, Betty," he said.

“Oh, you will!” she said very earnestly. “You will!”

“I shall,” said Montague Herne; and he said it as a man whose resolution no power on earth might turn.

III

No country for white men indeed! Herne grimly puffed a cloud of smoke into a whirl of flies, and rose from the packing-case off which he had dined.

Near by were the multitudinous sounds of the camp, the voices of Arabs, the grunting of camels, the occasional squeal of a mule. Beyond lay the wilderness, mysterious, silent, immense, the home of the unknown.

He had reached the outermost edge of civilization, and he was waiting for the return of an Arab spy, a man he trusted, who had pushed on into the interior. The country beyond him was a dense tract of bush almost impenetrable; so far as he knew, waterless.

In the days of the British expedition this had been an almost insuperable obstacle, but Herne was in no mood to turn back. Behind him lay desert, wide and barren under the fierce African sun. He had traversed it with a dogged patience, regardless of hardship, and, whatever lay ahead of him, he meant to go on. Hidden deep below the man's calm aspect there throbbed a fierce impatience. It tortured him by night, depriving him of rest.

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Very curiously, the conviction had begun to take root in his soul also that Bobby Duncannon still lived. In England he had scouted the notion, but here in the heart of the desert everything seemed possible. He felt as if a voice were calling to him out of the mystery towards which he had set his face, a voice that was never silent, continually urging him on.

Wandering that night on the edge of the bush, with the camp-fires behind him, he told himself that until he knew the truth he would never turn back.

He lay down at last, though his restlessness was strong upon him, compelling his body at least to be passive, while hour after hour crawled by and the wondrous procession of stars wheeled overhead.

In the early morning there came a stir in the camp, and he rose, to find that his messenger had returned. The man was waiting for him outside his tent. The orange and gold of sunrise was turning the desert into a wonderland of marvellous colour, but Herne's eyes took no note thereof. He saw only his Arab guide bending before him in humble salutation, while in his heart he heard a girl's voice, low and piteous, "Bobby is still alive and wanting me."

"Well, Hassan?" he questioned. "Any news?"

The man's eyes gleamed with a certain triumph.

"There is news, *effendi*. The man the *effendi* seeks is no longer chief of the Zambas. They have been swallowed up by the Wandis."

Herne groaned. It was only what he had expected, but the memory of the boy's face with its eager eyes was upon him. The pity of it! The vast, irretrievable waste!

"Then he is dead?" he said.

The Arab spread out his hands.

"Allah knows. But the Wandis do not always slay their prisoners, *effendi*. The old and the useless ones they burn, but the strong ones they save alive. It may be that he lives."

"As a slave!" Herne said.

"It is possible, *effendi*." The Arab considered a moment. Then, "The road to the country of the Wandis is no journey for *effendis*," he said. "The path is hard to find, and there is no water. Also, the bush is thick, and there are many savages. But beyond all are the mountains where the Wandis dwell. It is possible that the chief of the Zambas has been



carried to their City of Stones. It is a wonderful place, *effendi*. But the way thither, especially now, even for an Arab——”

“I am going myself,” Herne said.

“The *effendi* will die!”

Herne shrugged his shoulders.

“Be it so! I am going!”

“But not alone, *effendi*.” A speculative gleam shone in the Arab’s wary eyes. He was the only available guide, and he knew it. The Englishman was mad, of course, but he was willing to humour him—for a consideration.

Herne saw the gleam, and his grim face relaxed.

“Name your price, Hassan!” he said. “If it doesn’t suit me—I go alone.”

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Hassan smiled widely. Certainly the Englishman was mad, but he had a sporting fancy for mad Englishmen, a fancy that kept his pouch well filled. He had not the smallest intention of letting this one out of his sight.

"We will go together, *effendi*," he said. "The price shall not be named between us until we return in peace. But the *effendi* will need a disguise. The Wandis have no love for the English."

"Then I will go as your brother," said Herne.

The Arab bowed low.

"As traders in spice," he said, "we might, by the goodness of Allah, pass through to the Great Desert. But we could not go with a large caravan, *effendi*, and we should take our lives in our hands."

"Even so," said the Englishman imperturbably. "Let us waste no time!"

It had been his attitude throughout, and it had had its effect upon the men who had travelled with him. They had come to look upon him with reverence, this mad Englishman, who was thus calmly preparing to risk his life for a man whose bones had probably whitened in the desert years before. By sheer, indomitable strength of purpose Herne was accomplishing inch by inch the task that he had set himself.

A few days more found him traversing the wide, scrub-grown plateau that stretched to the mountains where the Wandis had their dwelling-place. The journey was a bitter one, the heat intense, the difficulties of the way sometimes wellnigh insurmountable. They carried water with them, but the need for economy was great, and Herne was continually possessed by a consuming thirst that he never dared to satisfy.

The party consisted of himself, Hassan, an Arab lad, and five natives. The rest of his following he had left on the edge of civilization, encamped in the last oasis between the desert and the scrub, with orders to await his return. If, as the Arab had suggested, he succeeded in pushing through to the farther desert, he would return by a more southerly route, giving Wanda as wide a berth as possible.

Thus ran his plans as, day after day, he pressed farther into the heart of the unknown country that the British had abandoned in despair over three years before. They found it deserted, in some parts almost impenetrable, so dense was the growth of bush in all directions. And yet there were times when it seemed to Herne that the sense of emptiness was but a superficial impression, as if unseen eyes watched them on that journey of endless monotony, as if the very camels knew of a lurking espionage, and sneered at their riders' ignorance.

This feeling came to him generally at night, when he had partially assuaged the torment of thirst that gave him no peace by day, and his mind was more at leisure for speculation. At such times, lying apart from his companions, wrapt in the immense silence of the African night, the conviction would rise up within him that every inch of their progress through that land of mystery was marked by a close observation, that even as he lay he was under *surveillance*, that the dense obscurity of the bush all about him was peopled by stealthy watchers whose vigilance was never relaxed.

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He mentioned his suspicion once to Hassan; but the Arab only smiled.

"The desert never sleeps, *effendi*. The very grass of the *savannah* has ears."

It was not a very satisfactory explanation, but Herne accepted it. He put down his uneasiness to the restlessness of nerves that were ever on the alert, and determined to ignore it. But it pursued him, none the less; and coupled with it was the voice that called to him perpetually, like the crying of a lost soul.

They were drawing nearer to the mountains when one day the Arab lad, Ahmed, disappeared. It happened during the midday halt, when the rest of the party were drowsing. No one knew when he went or how, but he vanished as if a hand had plucked him off the face of the earth. It seemed unlikely that he would have wandered into the bush, but this was the only conclusion that they could come to; and they spent the rest of the day in fruitless searching.

Herne slept not at all that night. The place seemed to be alive with ghostly whisperings, and he could not bring himself to rest. He spent the long hours revolver in hand, waiting with a dogged patience for the dawn.

But when it came at last, in a sudden tropical stream of light illuminating all things, he knew that, his vigilance notwithstanding, he had been tricked. The morning dawned upon a deserted camp. The natives had fled in the night, and only Hassan and the camels remained.

Hassan was largely contemptuous.

"Let them go!" he said. "We are but a day's journey from Wanda. We will go forward alone, *effendi*. The chief of the Wandis will not slay two peaceful merchants who desire only to travel through to the Great Desert."

And so, with the camels strung together, they went forward. There was no attempt at concealment in their progress. The path they travelled was clearly defined, and they pursued it unmolested. But ever the conviction followed Herne that countless eyes were upon them, that through the depths of the bush naked bodies slipped like reptiles, hemming them in on every side.

They had travelled a couple of hours, and the sun was climbing unpleasantly high, when, rounding a curve of the path, they came suddenly upon a huddled figure. It looked at first sight no more than a bundle of clothes kicked to one side, too limp and tattered to contain a human form. But neither Herne nor his companion was deceived. Both knew in a flash what that inanimate object was.

Hassan was beside it in a moment, and Herne only waited to draw his revolver before he followed.



It was the boy, Ahmed, still breathing indeed, but so far gone that every gasp seemed as if it must be his last. Hassan drew back the covering from his face, and, in spite of himself, Herne shuddered; for it was mutilated beyond recognition. The features were slashed to ribbons.

“Water, *effendi!*” Hassan’s voice recalled him; and he turned aside to procure it.

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It was little more than a tepid drain, but it acted like magic upon the dying boy. There came a gasping whisper, and Hassan stooped to hear.

When, a few minutes later, he stood up, Herne knew that the end had come; knew, too, by the look in the Arab's eyes that they stood themselves on the brink of that great gulf into which the boy's life had but that instant slipped.

"The Wandis have returned from a great slaughter," Hassan said. "Their Prophet is with them, and they bring many captives. The lad wandered into the bush, and was caught by a band of spies. They tortured him, and let him go, *effendi*. Thus will they torture us if we go forward any longer." He caught at the bridle of the nearest camel. "The lust of blood is upon them," he said. "We will go back."

"Not so," Herne said. "If we go back we die, for the water is almost gone. We must press forward now. There will be water in the mountains."

Hassan glanced at him sideways. He looked as if he were minded to defy the mad Englishman, but Herne's revolver was yet in his hand, and he thought better of it. Moreover, he knew, as did Herne, that their water supply was not sufficient to take them back. So, without further discussion, they pressed on until the heat compelled them to halt.

It had seemed to Herne the previous night that he could never close his eyes again, but now as he descended from his camel, an intense drowsiness possessed him. For a while he strove against it, and managed to keep it at bay; but the sight of Hassan, curled up and calmly slumbering, soon served to bring home to him the futility of watchfulness. The Arab was obviously resigned to his particular fate, whatever that might be, and, since sleep had become a necessity to him, it seemed useless to combat it. What, after all, could vigilance do for him in that world of hostility? The odds were so strongly against him that it had become almost a fight against the inevitable. And he was too tired to keep it up. With a sigh, he suffered his limbs to relax and lay as one dead.

IV

HE awoke hours after with an inarticulate feeling that someone wanted him, and started up to the sound of a rifle shot that pierced the stillness like a crack of thunder. In a second he would have been upon his feet, but, even as he sprang, something else that was very close at hand sprang also, and hurled him backwards. He found himself fighting desperately in the grip of an immense savage, fighting at a hopeless disadvantage, with the man's knees crushing the breath out of his body, and the man's hands locked upon his throat.

He struggled fiercely for bare life, but he was powerless to loosen that awful, merciless pressure. The barbaric face that glared into his own wore a devilish grin, inexpressibly malignant. It danced before his starting eyes like some hideous spectre seen in delirium, intermittent, terrible, with blinding flashes of light breaking between. He felt as if his head were bursting. The agony of suffocation possessed him to the exclusion of all else. There came a sudden glaze in his brain that was like the shattering of every faculty, and then, in a blood-red mist, his understanding passed.

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It seemed to him when the light reeled back again that he had been unconscious for a very long time. He awoke to excruciating pain, of which he seemed to have been vaguely aware throughout, and found himself bound hand and foot and slung across the back of a camel. He dangled helplessly face downwards, racked by cramp and a fiery torment of thirst more intolerable than anything he had ever known.

Darkness had fallen, but he caught the gleam of torches, and he knew that he was surrounded by a considerable body of men. The ground they travelled was stony and ascended somewhat steeply. Herne swung about like a bale of goods, torn by his bonds, flung this way and that, and utterly unable to protect himself in any way, or to ease his position.

He set his teeth to endure the torture, but it was so intense that he presently fainted again, and only recovered consciousness when the agonizing progress ceased. He opened his eyes, to find the camel that had borne him kneeling, and he himself being bundled by two brawny savages on to the ground. He fell like a log, and so was left. But, bound though he was, the relief of lying motionless was such that he presently recovered so far as to be able to look about him.

He discovered that he was lying in what appeared to be a huge amphitheatre of sand, surrounded by high cliffs, ragged and barren, and strewn with boulders. Two great fires burned at several yards' distance, and about these, a number of savages were congregated. From somewhere behind came the trickle of water, and the sound goaded him to something that was very nearly approaching madness. He dragged himself up on to his knees. His thirst was suddenly unendurable.

But the next instant he was flat on his face in the sand, struck down by a blow on the back of the neck that momentarily stunned him. For a while he lay prone, gritting the sand in his teeth; then again with the strength of frenzy he struggled upwards.

He had a glimpse of his guard standing over him, and recognized the savage who had nearly strangled him, before a second crashing blow brought him down. He lay still then, overwhelmed in darkness for a long, long time.

He scarcely knew when he was lifted at last and borne forward into the great circle of light cast by one of the fires. He felt the glare upon his eyeballs, but it conveyed nothing to him. Over by the farther fire some festivity seemed to be in progress. He had a vague vision of leaping, naked bodies, and the flash of knives. There was a good deal of shouting also, and now and then a nightmare shriek. And then came the torment of the fire, great heat enveloping him, thirst that was anguish.

He turned upon his captors, but his mouth was too dry for speech. He could only glare dumbly into their evil faces, and they glared back at him in fiendish triumph. Nearer to

the red glow they came, nearer yet. He could hear the crackle of the licking flames. They danced giddily before his eyes.

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Suddenly the arms that bore him swung back. He knew instinctively that they were preparing to hurl him into the heart of the fire, and the instinct of self-preservation rushed upon him, stabbing him to vivid consciousness. With a gigantic effort he writhed himself free from their hold.

He fell headlong, but the strength of madness had entered into him. He fought like a man possessed, straining at his bonds till they cracked and burst, forcing from his parched throat sounds which in saner moments he would not have recognized as human, struggling, tearing, raging, in furious self-defence.

He was hopelessly outmatched. The odds were such as no man in his senses could have hoped to combat with anything approaching success. Almost before his bonds began to loosen, his enemies were upon him again. They hoisted him up, fighting like a maniac. They tightened his bonds unconcernedly, and prepared for a second attempt.

But, before it could be made, a fierce yell rang suddenly from the cliffs above them, echoing weirdly through the savage pandemonium, arresting, authoritative, piercingly insistent.

What it portended Herne had not the vaguest notion, but its effect upon the two Wandis who held him was instant and astounding. They dropped him like a stone, and fled as if pursued by furies.

As for Herne, he wriggled and writhed from the vicinity of the fire, still working at his bonds, his one idea to reach the water that he knew was running within a stone's throw of him. It was an agonizing progress, but he felt no pain but that awful, consuming thirst, knew no fear but a ghastly dread that he might fail to reach his goal. For a single mouthful of water at that moment he would have bartered his very soul.

His breathing came in great gasps. The sweat was running down his face. His heart beat thickly, spasmodically. His senses were tottering. But he clung tenaciously to the one idea. He could not die with his thirst unquenched. If he crawled every inch of the way upon his stomach, he would somehow reach the haven of his desire.

There came the padding of feet upon the sand close to him, and he cursed aloud and bitterly. It was death this time, of course. He shut his eyes and lay motionless, waiting for it. He only hoped that it might be swift; that the hellish torture he was suffering might be ended at a blow.

But no blow fell. Hands touched him, severed his bonds, dragged him roughly up. Then, as he staggered, powerless for the moment to stand, an arm, hard and fleshless as the arm of a skeleton, caught him and urged him forward. Irresistibly impelled, he left the glare of the fire, and stumbled into deep shadow.



Ten seconds later he was on his knees by a natural basin of rock in which clear water brimmed, plunged up to the elbows, and drinking as only a man who has known the thirst of the desert can drink.

V

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He turned at last from that exquisite draught with the water running down his face. His Arab dress hung about him in tatters. He was bruised and bleeding in a dozen places. But the man's heart of him was alive again and beating strongly. He was ready to sell his life as dearly as he might.

He looked round for the native who had brought him thither, but it seemed to him that he was alone, shut away by a frowning pile of rock from the great amphitheatre in which the Wandis were celebrating their return from the slaughter of their enemies. The shouting and the shrieking continued in ghastly tumult, but for the moment he seemed to be safe.

The moon was up, but the shadows were very deep. He seemed to be standing in a hollow, with sheer rock on three sides of him. The water gurgled away down a narrow channel, and fell into darkness. With infinite caution he crept forward to peer round the jutting boulder that divided him from his enemies.

The next instant sharply he drew back. A man armed with a long, native spear was standing in the entrance.

He was still a prisoner, then; that much was certain. But his guard was single-handed. He began to consider the possibility of overpowering him. He had no weapon, but he was a practised wrestler; and they were so far removed from the yelling crowd about the fire that a scuffle in that dark corner was little likely to attract attention.

It was fairly obvious to him why he had been rescued from the fire. Doubtless his gigantic struggles had been observed by the onlooker, and he was considered too good a man to burn. They would keep him for a slave, possibly mutilate him first.

Again, stealthily, he investigated the position round that corner of rock. The man's back was turned towards him. He seemed to be watching the doings of the distant tribesmen. Herne freed himself from his ragged garment, and crept nearer. His enemy was of no great stature. In fact, he was the smallest Wandi that he had yet seen. He questioned with himself if he could be full grown.

Now or never was his chance, though a slender one at that, even if he escaped immediate detection. He gathered himself together, and sprang upon his unsuspecting foe.

He aimed at the native weapon, knowing the dexterity with which this could be shortened and brought into action, but it was wrenched from him before he could securely grasp it.

The man wriggled round like an eel, and in a moment the point was at his throat. Herne flung up a defending arm, and took it through his flesh. He knew in an instant that he

was outmatched. His previous struggles had weakened him, and his adversary, if slight, had the activity of a serpent.

For a few breathless seconds they swayed and fought, then again Herne was conscious of that deadly point piercing his shoulder. With a sharp exclamation, he shifted his ground, trod on a loose stone, and sprawled headlong backward.

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He fell heavily, so heavily that all the breath was knocked out of his body, and he could only lie, gasping and helpless, expecting death. His enemy was upon him instantly, and he marvelled at the man's strength. Sinewy hands encompassed his wrists, forcing his arms above his head. In the darkness he could not see his face, though it was close to his own, so close that he could feel his breathing, quick and hard, and knew that it had been no light matter to master him.

He himself had wholly ceased to fight. He was bleeding freely from the shoulder, and a dizzy sense of powerlessness held him passive, awaiting his deathblow.

But still his adversary stayed his hand. The iron grip showed no sign of relaxing, and to Herne, lying at his mercy, there came a fierce impatience at the man's delay.

"Curse you!" he flung upwards from between his teeth. "Why can't you strike and have done?"

His brain had begun to reel. He was scarcely in full possession of his senses, or he had not wasted his breath in curses upon a savage who was little likely to understand them. But the moment he had spoken, he knew in some subtle fashion that his words had not fallen on uncomprehending ears.

The hands that held him relaxed very gradually. The man above him seemed to be listening. Herne had a fantastic feeling that he was waiting for something further, waiting as it were to gather impetus to slay him.

And then, how it happened he had no notion, suddenly he was aware of a change, felt the danger that menaced him pass, knew a surging darkness that he took for death; and as his failing senses slid away from him he thought he heard a voice that spoke his name.

VI

"BE still, *effendi*!"

It was no more than a whisper, but it pierced Herne's understanding as a burst of light through a rent curtain.

He opened his eyes wide.

"Hassan!" he said faintly.

"I am here, *effendi*." Very cautiously came the answer, and in the dimness a figure familiar to him stooped over Herne.



Herne tried to raise himself and failed with a groan. It was as if a red-hot knife had stabbed his shoulder.

"What happened?" he said.

"The *effendi* is wounded," the Arab made answer. "We are the prisoners of the Mullah. The Wandis would have slain us, but he saved us alive. Doubtless they will mutilate us presently as they are mutilating the rest."

Herne set his teeth.

"What is this Mullah like?" he asked, after a moment.

"A man small of stature, *effendi*, but very fierce, with the visage of a devil. The Wandis fear him greatly. When he looks upon them with anger they flee."

Herne's eyes were striving to pierce the gloom.

"Where on earth are we?" he said.

"It is the Mullah's dwelling-place, *effendi*, at the gate of the City of Stones. None may enter or pass out without his knowledge. His slaves brought me hither while the *effendi* was lying insensible. He cut my bonds that I might bandage the *effendi's* shoulder."

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Again Herne sought to raise himself, and with difficulty succeeded. He could make out but little of his surroundings in the gloom, but it seemed to him that he was close to the spot where he had received his wound, for the murmur of the spring was still in his ears, and in the distance the yelling of the savages continued. But he was faint and dizzy from pain and loss of blood, and his investigations did not carry him very far. For a while he retained his consciousness, but presently slipped into a stupor of exhaustion, through which all outside influences soon failed to penetrate.

He dreamed after a time that Betty Derwent and he were sailing alone together on a stormy sea, striving eternally to reach an island where the sun shone and the birds sang, and being for ever flung back again into the howling waste of waters till, in agony of soul, they ceased to strive.

Then came the morning, all orange and gold, shining pitilessly down upon him, and he awoke to the knowledge that Betty was far away, and he was tossing alone on a sea that yet was no sea, but an endless desert of sand. Intense physical pain dawned upon him at the same time, pain that was anguish, thrilling through every nerve, so that he pleaded feverishly for death, not knowing what he said.

No voice answered him. No help came. He rocked on and on in torment through the sandy desolation, seeing strange visions dissolve before his eyes, hearing sounds to which his tortured brain could give no meaning. In the end, he lost himself utterly in the mazes of delirium, and all understanding ceased.

Long, long afterwards he came back as it were from a great journey, and knew that Hassan was waiting upon him, ministering to him, tending him as if he had been a child. He was too weak for speech, almost too weak to open his eyes, but the life was still beating in his veins. It was the turn of the tide.

Wearily he dragged himself back from the endless waste in which he had wandered, back to sanity, back to the problems of life. Hassan smiled upon him as a mother upon her infant, being not without cause for self-congratulation on his own account.

"The *effendi* is better," he said. "He will sleep and live."

And Herne slept, as a child sleeps, for many hours.

He awoke towards sunset to hear sounds that made him marvel—the cheerful clatter of a camp, the voices of men, the protests of camels.

It took him back to that last evening he had spent in contact with civilization, the evening he had finally set himself to conquer the unknown, in answer to a voice that called. How much of that mission had he accomplished, he asked himself? How far was he even yet from his goal?

He gazed with drawn brows at the narrow walls of the tent in which he lay, and presently, a certain measure of strength returning to him, he raised himself on his sound arm and looked about him.

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On the instant he perceived the faithful Hassan watching beside him. The Arab beamed upon him as their eyes met.

"All is well, *effendi*," he said. "By the mercy of Allah, we have reached the Great Desert, and are even now in the company of El Azra, the spice merchant. We shall travel with his caravan in safety."

"But how on earth did we get here?" questioned Herne.

Hassan was eager to explain.

"We escaped by night from Wanda three days ago, the Prophet of the Wandis himself assisting us. You were wounded, *effendi*, and without understanding. The Prophet of the Wandis bore you on his camel. It was a journey of many dangers, but Allah protected us, and guided us to this oasis, sending also El Azra to our succour. It is a strong caravan, *effendi*. We shall be safe with him."

But here Herne suddenly broke in upon his complacency.

"It was not my intention to leave Wanda," he said, "till I had done what I went to do. I must go back."

"*Effendi!*"

"I must go back!" he reiterated with force. "Do you think, because I have been beaten once, I will give up in despair? I should have thought you would have known me better by now."

"But, *effendi*, there is nothing to be gained by going back," Hassan pleaded. "The man you seek is dead, and we are already fifty miles from Wanda."

"How do you know he is dead?" Herne demanded.

"From the mouth of the Wandis Prophet himself, *effendi*. He asked me whence you came and wherefore, and when I told him, he said, 'The man is dead.'"

"Is this Prophet still with us?" Herne asked.

"Yes, *effendi*, he is here. But he speaks no tongue save his own. And he is a terrible man, with the face of a devil."

"Bring him to me!" Herne said.

"He will come, *effendi*; but he will only speak of himself. He will not answer questions."

“Enough! Fetch him!” Herne ordered. “And you remain and interpret!”

But when Hassan was gone, his weakness returned upon him, and the bitterness of defeat made itself felt. Was this the end of his long struggle, to be overwhelmed at last by the odds he had so bravely dared? It was almost unthinkable. He could not reconcile himself to it. And yet at the heart of him lurked the conviction that failure was to be his portion. He had attempted the impossible. He had offered himself in vain; and any further sacrifice could only end in the same way. If Bobby Duncannon were indeed dead, his task was done; but he had felt so assured that he still lived that he could not bring himself to expel the belief. It was the lack of knowledge that he could not endure, the thought of returning to the woman he loved empty-handed, of seeing once more the soul-hunger in her eyes, and being unable to satisfy it.

No, he could not face it. He would have to go back, even though it meant to his destruction, unless this Mad Prophet could furnish him with proof incontestable of young Duncannon’s death. He glanced with impatience towards the entrance. Why did the man delay?

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He supposed the fellow would want *backsheesh*, and that thought sent him searching among his tattered clothing for his pocket-book. He found it with relief; and then again physical weakness asserted itself, and he leaned back with closed eyes. His shoulder was throbbing with a fiery pain. He wondered if Hassan knew how to treat it. If not, things would probably get serious.

The buzzing of a multitude of flies distracted his thoughts from this, and he began to long ardently for a smoke. He roused himself to hunt for his cigarette-case; but he sought in vain and finally desisted with a groan.

It was at this point that the tent-flap was drawn aside, admitting for a moment the marvellous orange glow of the sinking sun, and a man attired as an Arab came noiselessly in.

VII

Herne lay quite still, regarding his visitor with critical eyes.

The latter stood with his back to the western glow. His face was more than half concealed by one end of his turban. He made no advance, but stood like a brazen image, motionless, inscrutable, seeming scarcely aware of the Englishman's presence.

It was Herne who broke the silence. The light was failing very rapidly. He raised his voice with a touch of impatience.

"Hassan, where are you?"

At that the stranger moved, as one coming out of a deep reverie.

"There is no need to call your servant," he said, halting slightly over the words. "I speak your language."

Herne opened his eyes in surprise. He knew that many of the Wandis had come in contact with Englishmen, but few of them could be said to have a knowledge of the language. He saw at a glance that the man before him was no ordinary Wandi warrior. His build was too insignificant, more suggestive of the Arab than the negro. His hands were like the hands of an Egyptian mummy, dark of hue and incredibly bony. He wished he could see the fellow's face. Hassan's description had fired his curiosity.

"So," he said, "you speak English, do you? I am glad to hear it. And you are the Mullah of Wanda, the man who saved my life?"

He received no reply whatever from the man in the doorway. It was as if he had not spoken.

Herne frowned. It seemed likely to be an unsatisfactory interview after all. But just as he was about to launch upon a fresh attempt, the man spoke, in a slow, deep voice that was not without a certain richness of tone.

“You came to Wanda—my prisoner,” he said. “You left because I do not kill white men, and they are not good slaves. But if you return to Wanda you will die. Therefore be wise, and go back to your people, as I go to mine!”

Herne raised himself to a sitting position. His shoulder was beginning to hurt him intolerably, but he strove desperately to keep it in the background of his consciousness.

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"Why don't you kill white men?" he said.

But the question was treated with a silence that felt contemptuous.

The glow without was fading swiftly, and the darkness was creeping up like a curtain over the desert. The weird figure standing upright against the door-flap seemed to take on a deeper mystery, a silence more unfathomable.

Herne began to feel as if he were in a dream. If the man had not spoken he would have wondered if his very presence were but hallucination.

He gathered his wits for another effort.

"Tell me," he said, "do you never use white men as slaves?"

Still that uncompromising silence.

Herne persevered.

"Three years ago, before the Wandis conquered the Zambas, there was a white man, an Englishman, who placed himself at their head, and taught them to fight. I am here to seek him. I shall not leave without news of him."

"The Englishman is dead!" It was as if a mummy uttered the words. The speaker neither stirred nor looked at Herne. He seemed to be gazing into space.

Herne waited for more, but none came.

"I want proof of his death," he said, speaking very deliberately. "I must know beyond all doubt when and how he died."

"The Englishman was burned with the other captives," the slow, indifferent voice went on. "He died in the fire!"

"What?" said Herne, with violence. "You devil! I don't believe it! I thought you did not kill white men!"

"He was not as other white men," came the unmoved reply. "The Wandis feared his magic. Fire alone can destroy magic. He died slowly but—he died!"

"You devil!" Herne said again.

His hand was fumbling feverishly at his bandaged shoulder. He scarcely knew what he was doing. In his impotent fury he sought only for freedom, not caring how he obtained

it. Never in the whole of his life had he longed so overpoweringly to crush a man's throat between his hands.

But his strength was unequal to the effort. He sank back, gasping, half-fainting, yet struggling fiercely against his weakness. Suddenly he was aware of the blood welling up to his injured shoulder. He knew in an instant that the wound had burst out afresh; knew, too, that the bandage would be of no avail to check the flow.

"Fetch Hassan!" he jerked out.

But the man before him made no movement to obey.

"Are you going to stand by, you infernal fiend, and watch me die?" Herne flung at him.

A thick mist was beginning to obscure his vision, but it seemed to him that those last words of his took effect. Undoubtedly the man moved, came nearer, stooped over him.

"Go!" Herne gasped. "Go!"

He could feel the blood soaking through the bandage under his hand, spreading farther every instant.

This was to be the end, then, to lie at the mercy of this madman till death came to blot out all his efforts, all his hopes. He made a last feeble effort to stanch that deadly flow, failed, sank down exhausted.

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It was then that a voice came to him out of the gathering darkness, quick and urgent, speaking to him, as it were, across the gulf of years:

“Monty, Monty, lie still, man! I’ll see to you!”

That voice recalled Herne, renewed his failing faculties, galvanized him into life. The man with the mummy’s hands was bending over him, stripping away the useless bandage, fashioning it anew for the moment’s emergency. In a few seconds he was working at it with pitiless strength, twisting and twisting again till the tension told, and Herne forced back a groan.

But he clung to consciousness with all his quivering strength, bewildered, unbelieving still, yet hovering on the edge of conviction.

“Is it really you, Bobby?” he whispered. “I can’t believe it! Let me look at you! Let me see for myself!”

The man beside him made no answer. He had snatched up the first thing he could find, a fragment of a broken tent-peg, to tighten the pressure upon the wound.

But, as if in response to Herne’s appeal, he freed one hand momentarily, and pushed back the covering from his face. And in the dim light Herne looked, looked closely; then shut his eyes and sank back with an uncontrollable shudder.

“Merciful Heaven!” he said.

VIII

“Monty, I say! Monty!”

Again the gulf of years was bridged; again the voice he knew came down to him. Herne wrestled with himself, and opened his eyes.

The man in Arab dress was still kneeling by his side, the skeleton hands still supported him, but the face was veiled again.

He suppressed another violent shudder.

“In Heaven’s name,” he said, “what are you?”

“I am a dead man,” came the answer. “Don’t move! I will call your man in a moment, but I must speak to you first. Do you feel all right?”

“Bobby!” Herne said.

"No, I am not Bobby. He died, you know, ages ago. They cut him up and burned him. Don't move. I have stopped the bleeding, but it will easily start again. Lean back—so! You needn't look at me. You will never see me again. But if I hadn't shown you—once, you would never have understood. Are you comfortable? Can you listen?"

"Bobby!" Herne said again.

He seemed incapable of anything but that one word, spoken over and over, as though trying to make himself believe the incredible.

"I am not Bobby," the voice reiterated. "Put that out of your mind for ever! He belonged to another life, another world. Don't you believe me? Must I show you—again? Do you really want to talk with me face to face?"

"Yes," Herne said, with abrupt resolution. "I will see you—talk with you—as you are."

There was a brief pause, and he braced himself to face, without blenching, the thing that a moment before, his soldier's training notwithstanding, had turned him sick with horror. But he was spared the ordeal.

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"There is no need," said the familiar voice. "You have seen enough. I don't want to haunt you, even though I am dead. What put it into your head to come in search of me? You must have known I should be long past any help from you."

"I—wanted to know," Herne said. He was feeling curiously helpless, as if, in truth, he were talking with a mummy. All the questions he desired to put remained unuttered. He was confronted with the impossible, and he was powerless to deal with it.

"What did you want to know? How I died? And when? It was a thousand years ago, when those damned Wandis swallowed up the Zambas. They took me first—by treachery. Then they wiped out the entire tribe. The poor devils were lost without me. I always knew they would be—but they made a gallant fight for it." A thrill of feeling crept into the monotonous voice, a tinge of the old abounding pride, but it was gone on the instant, as if it had not been. "They slaughtered them all in the end," came in level, dispassionate tones, "and, last of all, they killed me. It was a slow process, but very complete. I needn't harrow your feelings. Only be quite sure I am dead! The thing that used to be my body was turned into an abomination that no sane creature could look upon without a shudder. And as for my soul, devils took possession, so that even the Wandis were afraid. They dare not touch me now. I have trampled them, I have tortured them, I have killed them. They fly from me like sheep. Yet, if I lead, they follow. They think, because I have conquered them, that I am invincible, invulnerable, immortal. They cringe before me as if I were a god. They would offer me human sacrifice if I would have it. I am their talisman, their mascot, their safeguard from defeat, their luck—a dead man, Herne, a dead man! Can't you see the joke? Why don't you laugh?"

Again the grim voice thrilled as if some fiendish mirth stirred it to life.

Herne moved and groaned, but spoke no word.

"What? You don't see it? You never had much sense of humour. And yet it's a good thing to laugh when you can. We savages don't know how to laugh. We only yell. That is all you wanted to know, is it? You will go back now with an easy mind?"

"As if that could be all!" Herne muttered.

"That is all. And count yourself lucky that I haven't killed you. It was touch and go that night you attacked me. You may die yet."

"I may. But it won't be your fault if I do. Great Heaven, I might have killed you!"

"So you might." Again came that quiver of dreadful laughter. "That would have been the end of the story for everyone, for you wouldn't have got away without me. But that was no part of the program. Even you couldn't kill a dead man. Feel that, if you don't

believe me!" Suddenly one of the shrivelled, mummy hands came down to his own. "How much life is there in that?"

Herne gripped the hand. It was cold and clammy; he could feel every separate bone under the skin. He could almost hear them grind together in his hold. He repressed another shudder; and even as he did it, he heard again the bitter cry of a woman's wrung heart, "Bobby is still alive and wanting me."

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Would she say that when she knew? Would she still reach out her hands to this monstrous wreck of humanity, this shattered ruin of what had once been a tower of splendid strength? Would she feel bound to offer herself? Was her love sufficient to compass such a sacrifice? The bare thought revolted him.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the voice that seemed to him like a mocking echo of Bobby's ardent tones. "Why don't you speak?"

A great struggle was going on in Herne's soul. For Betty's sake—for Betty's sake—should he hold his peace? Should he take upon himself a responsibility that was not his? Should he deny this man the chance that was his by right—the awful chance—of returning to her? The temptation urged him strongly; the fight was fierce. But—was it because he still grasped that bony hand?—he conquered in the end.

"I haven't told you yet why I came to look for you," he said.

"Is it worth while?" The question was peculiarly deliberate, yet not wholly cynical.

Desperately Herne compelled himself to answer.

"You have got to know it, seeing it was not for my own satisfaction—primarily—that I came."

"Why then?" The brief query held scant interest; but the hand he still grasped stirred ever so slightly in his.

Herne set his teeth.

"Because—someone—wanted you."

"No one ever wanted me," said the Wandī Mullah curtly.

But Herne had tackled his task, and he pursued it unflinching.

"I came for the sake of a woman who once—long ago—refused to marry you, but who has been waiting for you—ever since."

"A woman?" Undoubtedly there was a savage note in the words. The shrunken fingers clenched upon Herne's hand.

"Betty Derwent," said Herne very quietly.

Dead silence fell in the darkened tent—the silence of the desert, subtle, intense, in a fashion terrible. It lasted for a long time; so long a time that Herne suffered himself at last to relax, feeling the strain to be more than he could bear. He leaned among his

pillows, and waited. Yet still, persistently, he grasped that cold, sinuous hand, though the very touch of it repelled him, as the touch of a reptile provokes instinctive loathing. It lay quite passive in his own, a thing inanimate, yet horribly possessed of life.

Slowly at last through the darkness a voice came:

“Monty!”

It was hardly more than a whisper; yet on the instant, as if by magic, all Herne’s repulsion, his involuntary, irrepressible shrinking, was gone. He was back once more on the other side of the gulf, and the hand he held was the hand of a friend.

“My dear old chap!” he said very gently.

Vaguely he discerned the figure by his side. It sat huddled, mummy-like but it held no horrors for him any longer. They were not face to face in that moment—they were soul to soul.

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"I say—Monty," stumbingly came the words, "you know—I never dreamed of this. I thought she would have married—long ago. And she has been waiting—all these years?"

"All these years," Herne said.

"Do you think she has suffered?" There was a certain sharpness in the question, as if it were hard to utter.

And Herne, pledged to honesty, made brief reply:

"Yes."

There followed a pause; then:

"Will it grieve her—very badly—to know that I am dead?" asked the voice beside him.

"Yes, it will grieve her." Herne spoke as if compelled.

"But she will get over it, eh?"

"I believe so." Herne's lips were dry; he forced them to utterance.

The free hand fastened claw-like upon his arm.

"You'll tell me the straight truth, man," said Bobby's voice in his ear. "What if I—came to life?"

But Herne was silent. He could not bring himself to answer.

"Speak out!" urged the voice—Bobby's voice, quick, insistent, even imploring. "Don't be afraid! I haven't any feelings left worth considering. She wouldn't get over that, you think? No woman could!"

Herne turned in desperation, and faced his questioner.

"God knows!" he said helplessly.

Again there fell a silence, such a silence as falls in a death-chamber at the moment of the spirit's passing. The darkness was deepening. Herne could scarcely discern the figure by his side.

The hand upon his arm had grown slack. All vitality seemed to have gone out of it. It was as though the spirit had passed indeed. And in the stillness Herne knew that he was recrossing the gulf, that his friend—the boy he had known and loved—was receding rapidly, rapidly behind the veil of years, would soon be lost to him for ever.

The voice that spoke to him at length was the voice of a stranger.

“Remember,” it said, “Bobby Duncannon is dead—has been dead for years! Let no woman waste her life waiting for him, for he will never return! Let her marry instead the man who wants her, and put the empty years behind! In no other way will she find happiness.”

“But you?” Herne groaned. “You?”

The hand he held had slipped from his grasp. Through the dimness he saw the man beside him rise to his feet. A moment he stood; then flung up his arms above his head in a fierce gesture of renunciation that sent a stab of recollection through Herne.

“I! I go to my people!” said the Prophet of the Wandis. “And you—will go to yours.”

It was final, and Herne knew it; yet his heart cried out within him for the friend he had lost. Suddenly he found he could not bear it.

“Bobby! Bobby!” he burst forth impulsively. “Stop, man, stop and think! There must be some other way. You can’t—you shan’t—go back!”

He hardly knew what he said, so great was his distress. The gulf was widening, widening, and he was powerless. He knew that it could never be bridged again.

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"It's too big a forfeit," he urged very earnestly. "You can't do it. I won't suffer it. For Betty's sake—Bobby, come back!"

And then, for the last time, he heard his friend's voice across the ever-widening gulf.

"For Betty's sake, old chap, I am a dead man. Remember that! It's you who must go back to her. Marry her, love her, make her—forget!"

For an instant those mummy hands rested upon him, held him, caressed him; it was almost as if they blessed him. For an instant the veil was lifted; they were comrades together. Then it fell....

There came a quiet movement, the sound of departing feet.

Herne turned and blindly searched the darkness. Across the gulf he cried to his friend to return to him.

"Bobby, come back, lad, come back! We'll find some other way."

But there came no voice in answer, no sound of any sort. The desert had received back its secret. He was alone....

IX

"Now, don't bother any more about me!" commanded Betty Derwent, establishing herself with an air of finality on the edge of the trout stream to which she had just suffered herself to be conducted by her companion. "I am quite capable of baiting my own hook if necessary. You run along up-stream and have some sport on your own account!"

The companion, a very young college man, looked decidedly blank over this kindly dismissal. He had been manoeuvring to get Betty all to himself for days, but, since everybody seemed to want her, it had been no easy matter. And now, to his disgust, just as he was congratulating himself upon having gained his end and secured a *tete-a-tete* that, with luck, might last for hours, he was coolly told to run along and amuse himself while she fished in solitude.

"I say, you know," he protested, "that's rather hard lines."

"Don't be absurd!" said Betty. "I came out to catch fish, not to talk. And you are going to do the same."

"Oh, confound the fish!" said the luckless one.

Nevertheless, he yielded, seeing that it was expected of him, and took himself off, albeit reluctantly.

Betty watched him go, with a faint smile. He was a nice boy undoubtedly, but she much preferred him at a distance.

She sat down on the bank above the trout-stream, and took a letter from her pocket. It had reached her the previous day, and she had already read it many times. This fact, however, did not deter her from reading it yet again, her chin upon her hand. It was not a lengthy epistle.

“DEAR BETTY,” it said, “I am back from my wanderings, and I am coming straight to you; but I want you to get this letter first, in time to stop me, if you feel so inclined. It is useless for me to attempt to soften what I have to say. I can only put it briefly, just because I know—too well—what it will mean to you.

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Betty, the boy is dead, has been dead for years. How he died and exactly when, I do not know; but I have certified the fact of his death beyond all question. He died at the hands of the Wandis, when his own men, the Zambas, were defeated. So much I heard from the Wandi Mullah himself, and more than that I cannot tell you. My dear, that is the end of your romance, and I know that you will never weave another. But, that notwithstanding, I am coming—now, if you will have me—later, if you desire it—to claim you for myself. Your happiness always has and always will come first with me, and neither now nor hereafter shall I ever ask of you more than you are disposed to give.—Ever yours,”

“MONTAGUE HERNE.”

Very slowly Betty’s eyes travelled over the paper. She read right to the end, and then suffered her eyes to rest for a long time upon the signature. Her fishing-rod lay forgotten on the ground beside her. She seemed to be thinking deeply.

Once, rather suddenly, she moved to look at the watch on her wrist. It was drawing towards noon. She had sent no message to delay him. Would he have travelled by the night train? But she dismissed that conjecture as unlikely. Herne was not a man to do anything headlong. He would give her ample time. She almost wished—she checked the sigh that rose to her lips. No, it was better as it was. A man’s ardour was different from a boy’s; and she—she was a girl no longer. Her romance was dead.

A slight sound beside her, a footstep on the grass! She turned, looked, sprang to her feet. The vivid colour rushed up over her face.

“You!” she gasped, almost inarticulately.

He had come by the night train after all.

He came up to her quite quietly, with that leisureliness of gait that she remembered so well.

“Didn’t you expect me?” he said.

She held out a hand that trembled.

“Yes, I—I knew you would come; only, you see, I hardly thought you would get here so soon.”

“But you meant me to come?” he said.

His hand held hers closely, warmly, reassuringly. He looked into her face.



For a few seconds she evaded the look with a shyness beyond her control; then resolutely she mastered herself and met his eyes.

“Yes, I meant you to come. I am glad you are back. I—” She broke off suddenly, gazing at him in consternation. “Monty,” she exclaimed, “you never told me you had been ill!”

He smiled at that, and her agitation began to subside.

“I am well again, Betty,” he said.

“Oh, but you don’t look it,” she protested. “You look—you look as if you had suffered—horribly. Have you?”

He passed the question by. “At least, I have managed to come back again,” he said, “as I promised.”

“I—I am thankful to see you again,” she faltered her shyness returning upon her. “I’ve been—desperately anxious.”



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"On my account?" said Herne.

She bent her head. "Yes."

"Lest I shouldn't come back?"

"Yes," she said again.

"But I told you I should," He was still holding her hand, trying to read her downcast face.

"Oh, I knew you would if you could," said Betty. "Only—I couldn't help thinking—of what you said about—about sacrificing substance to—shadow. It—was very wrong of me to send you."

She spoke unevenly, with obvious effort. She seemed determined that he should not have that glimpse into her soul which he so evidently desired.

"My dear Betty," he said, "I went on my own account as much as on yours. I think you forget that. Or are you remembering—and regretting—it?"

She had begun to tremble. He laid a steadying hand upon her shoulder.

"No," she said faintly. Then swiftly, impulsively, she raised her face. "Major Herne, I—I want to tell you something—before you say any more."

"What is it, Betty?" he said.

"Just this," she made answer, speaking very quickly. "I—I am not good enough for you. I haven't been—straight with you. I've been realizing it more and more ever since you went away. I—I'm quite despicable. I've been miserable about it—wretched—all the time you have been away."

Herne's face changed. A certain grimness came into it.

"But, my dear girl," he said, "you never pretended to be in love with me."

She drew a sharp breath of distress.

"I know," she said. "I know. And I let you go to that dreadful place, though I knew—before you went—that, whatever happened, it could make no difference to me. But I hadn't the courage to tell you the truth. After what passed between us that night, I felt—I couldn't. And so—and so—I let you go, even though I knew I was deceiving you. Oh, do forgive me if you can! I've had my punishment. I have been nearly mad with anxiety lest any harm should come to you."

"I suppose I ought to be grateful for that," Herne said. He still looked grim, but there was no anger about him. He had taken his hand from her shoulder, but he still held her trembling fingers in his quiet grasp. "Don't fret!" he said. "Where's the use? I shall get over it somehow. If you are quite sure you know your own mind, there is no more to be said." He spoke with no shadow of emotion. His eyes looked into hers with absolute steadiness. He even, after a moment, very faintly smiled. "Except good-bye!" he said. "And perhaps the sooner I say that the better."

But at this point Betty broke in upon him breathlessly, almost incoherently.

"Major Herne, I—I don't understand. You—you can say good-bye, of course—if you wish. But—it will be by your own choice if you do."

"What?" he said.

She snatched her hand suddenly from him.

"I suppose you mean to punish me, to make me pay for my—idiocy. You—you think—"

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"I think that either you or I must be mad," said Herne.

"Then it's you!" flung back Betty half hysterically. "To imagine for one moment that I—that I meant—that!"

"Meant what?" A sudden note of sternness made itself heard in Herne's voice. He moved a step forward, and took her shoulders between his hands, looking at her closely, unsparingly. "Betty," he said, "let us at least understand one another! Tell me what you meant just now!"

She faced him defiantly

"I didn't mean anything."

He passed that by.

"Why did you ask my forgiveness?"

She made a sharp gesture of repudiation.

"What was there to forgive?" he insisted.

"I—I am not going to tell you," said Betty, with great distinctness.

Again he overlooked her open defiance.

"You are afraid. Why?"

"I'm not!" said Betty almost fiercely.

"You are afraid," he repeated deliberately, "afraid of my finding out—something. Betty, look at me!"

Her face was scarlet. She turned it swiftly from him.

"Let me go!"

"Look at me!" he repeated.

She began to pant. She was quivering between his hands like a wild thing caught.

"Major Herne, it isn't fair of you! Let me go!"

"Never, Betty!" He spoke with sudden decision; but all the grimness had gone from his face. "You may as well give in, for I have you at my mercy. And I will be merciful if you do, but not otherwise."

"How dare you?" gasped Betty almost inarticulately.

"I dare do many things," said Montague Herne, with a smile that was not all mirthful.

"How long have you left off crying for the moon? Tell me!"

"I won't tell you anything!" protested Betty.

"Yes, you will. I have got to know it. If you will only give in like a wise woman, you will find it much easier."

His voice held persuasion this time. For a little she made as if she would continue to resist him; then impulsively she yielded.

"Oh, Monty!" she said, with a sob; and the next moment was in his arms.

He held her close.

"Come!" he said. "You can tell me now."

"I—don't know," whispered Betty, her face hidden. "You—frightened me by being so ready to go away again. I couldn't help wondering if it had been just kindness that prompted you to come to me. It—I suppose it wasn't?" A startled note of interrogation sounded in her voice. She was trembling still.

"Betty, Betty!" he said.

"Forgive me!" she whispered back, "You see, I couldn't have endured that, because I—love you. No, wait; I haven't finished. I want you to know the truth. I've been sacrificing substance to shadow, reality to dreams, all my life—all my life. But that night—the night I took you into my confidence—you opened my eyes. I began to see what I was doing. But I hadn't the courage to tell you so, and it seemed not quite fair to Bobby so I held my peace."

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"I let you go. But I knew—I knew before you went—that even if you found him, even if you brought him back, even if he cared for me still, I should have nothing to give him. My feeling for him was just a dream from which I had awakened. Oh, Monty, I was yours even then; and I kept it back. That was why I wanted your forgiveness."

Breathlessly she ended, and in silence he heard her out. He was holding her very closely to him, but his eyes looked beyond her, as though they searched a far horizon.

"Do you understand?" whispered Betty at last.

He moved, and the look in his eyes changed. It was as if the horizon narrowed.

"I understand," he said.

She lifted her face, with a gesture half shy, half confiding.

"Are you going to forgive me, Monty? I—I've paid a big price for my foolishness—bigger than you will ever know. I kept asking myself—asking myself—whatever I should do if you—if you brought him back."

"Poor child!" he said. "Poor little Betty!"

She clung to him suddenly.

"Oh, wasn't I an idiot? And yet, somehow, I feel so treacherous. Monty—Monty, you're sure he is dead?"

"Yes, he is dead," said Herne deliberately.

She drew a deep breath.

"I'm so thankful he never knew!" she said. "I—I don't suppose he really cared, do you? Not enough to spoil his life?"

"God knows!" said Montague Herne very gravely.

* * * * *

"Hullo!" said Betty's fellow-sportsman, making his appearance some time later. "Getting on for grub-time, eh? How have you got on? Why, I thought you came out to fish, and not to talk! Who on earth——"

"My *fiance*," said Betty quickly.

"Your—Hullo! Why, it's Major Herne! Delighted to see you! Had no idea you were in this country. Thought you were hunting big game somewhere in Africa."

"I was," said Herne. "I—had no luck. So I came home."

"Where—presumably—you found it! Congratulations! Betty, I'm pleased!"

"How nice of you!" said Betty.

"Yes, it is rather, all things considered. How ever, I suppose even I must regard it as a blessing in disguise. Perhaps, when you are married, you will kindly leave off breaking all our hearts for nothing!"

"Perhaps you will leave off being so foolish as to let them be broken," returned Betty, with spirit.

"Ah, perhaps! Not very likely though I fear. Hearts are tender things—eh, Major Herne? And when someone like Betty comes along there is sure to be some damage done. It's the penalty we have to pay for being only human."

"Ah, well, you soon get over it," said Betty quickly.

"How do you know that? I may perhaps, if I'm lucky; but there are exceptions to every rule. Some of us go on paying the penalty all our lives."

A moment's silence followed the light words. Betty apparently had nothing to say.

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And then: “And some of us don’t even know the meaning of the word!” said Montague Herne.