The Second Class Passenger eBook

The Second Class Passenger by Perceval Gibbon

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THE SECOND-CLASS PASSENGER

The party from the big German mail-boat had nearly completed their inspection of Mozambique, they had walked up and down the main street, admired the palms, lunched at the costly table of Lazarus, and purchased “curios”—Indian silks, Javanese; knives, Birmingham metal-work, and what not—as mementoes of their explorations. In particular, Miss Paterson had invested in a heavy bronze image— apparently Japanese —concerning which she entertained the thrilling delusion that it was an object of local worship. It was a grotesque thing, massive and bulky, weighing not much less than ten or twelve pounds. Hence it was confided to the careful porterage of Dawson, an assiduous and favored courtier of Miss Paterson; and he, having lunched, was fated to leave it behind at Lazarus’ Hotel.

Miss Paterson shook her fluffy curls at him. They were drawing towards dinner, and the afternoon was wearing stale.

“I did so want that idol,” she said plaintively. She had the childish quality of voice, the insipidity of intonation, which is best appreciated in steamboat saloons. “Oh, Mr. Dawson, don’t you think you could get it back for me?”

“I’m frightfully sorry,” said the contrite Dawson. “I’ll go back at once. You don’t know when the ship goes, do you?”

Another of Miss Paterson’s cavaliers assured him that he had some hours yet. “The steward told me so,” he added authoritatively.

“Then I’ll go at once,” said Dawson, hating him.

“Mind, don’t lose the boat,” Miss Paterson called after him.

He went swiftly back up the wide main street in which they had spent the day. Lamps were beginning to shine everywhere, and the dull peace of the place was broken by a new life. Those that dwell in darkness were going abroad now, and the small saloons were filling. Dawson noted casually that evening was evidently the lively time of Mozambique. He passed men of a type he had missed during the day, men of all nationalities, by their faces, and every shade of color. They were lounging on the sidewalk in knots of two or three, sitting at the little tables outside the saloons, or lurking at the entrances of narrow alleys that ran aside from the main street every few paces. All were clad in thin white suits, and some wore knives in full sight, while there was that about them that would lead even the most innocent and conventional second-class passenger to guess at a weapon concealed somewhere. Some of them looked keenly at Dawson as he passed along; and although he met their eyes impassively, he—even he—was conscious of an implied estimate in their glance, as though they classified him with a look. Once he stepped aside to let a woman pass. She was large, flamboyantly

southern and calm. She lounged along, a cloak over her left arm, her head thrown back, a cigarette between her wide, red lips. She, too, looked at Dawson—looked down at him with a superb lazy nonchalance, laughed a little, and walked on. The loungers on the sidewalk laughed too, but rather with her than at Dawson.

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“I seem rather out of it here,” he told himself patiently, and was glad to enter the wide portals of Lazarus’ Hotel. A grand, swarthy Greek, magnificent in a scarlet jacket and gold braid, pulled open the door for him, and heard his mission smilingly.

“A brass-a image,” he repeated. “Sir, you wait-a in the bar, an’ I tell-a the boy go look.”

“You must be quick, then,” said Dawson, “’cause I’m in a hurry to get back.”

“Yais,” smiled the Greek. “Bimeby he rain-a bad.”

“Rain?” queried Dawson incredulously. The air was like balm.

“You see,” the Greek nodded. “This-a way, sir. I go look-a quick.”

Dawson waited in the bar, where a dark, sallow bar-man stared him out of countenance for twenty minutes. At the end of that time the image was forthcoming. The ugly thing had burst the paper in which it was wrapped, and its grinning bullet-head projected handily. The paper was wisped about its middle like a petticoat. Dawson took it thankfully from the Greek, and made suitable remuneration in small silver.

“Bimeby rain,” repeated the Greek, as he opened a door for him again.

“Well, I’m not made of sugar,” replied Dawson, and set off.

It was night now, for in Mozambique evening is but a brief hiatus between darkness and day. It lasts only while the sun is dipping; once the upper limb is under the horizon it is night, full and absolute. As Dawson retraced his steps the sky over him was velvet-black, barely punctured by faint stars, and a breeze rustled faintly from the sea. He had not gone two hundred yards when a large, warm drop of rain splashed on his back. Another pattered on his hat, and it was raining, leisurely, ominously.

Dawson pulled up and took thought. At the end of the main street he would have to turn to the left to the sea-front, and then to the left again to reach the landing-stage. If, now, there were any nearer turning to the left—if any of the dark alleys that opened continually beside him were passable—he might get aboard the steamer to his dinner in the second-class saloon with a less emphatic drenching than if he went round by the way he had come. Mozambique, he reflected, could not have only one street—it was too big for that. From the steamer, as it came to anchor, he had seen acre upon acre of flat roofs, and one of the gloomy alleys beside him must surely debouch upon the sea-front. He elected to try one, anyhow, and accordingly turned aside into the next.

With ten paces he entered such a darkness as he had never known. The alley was barely ten feet wide: it lay like a crevasse between high, windowless walls of houses. The warm, leisurely rain dropped perpendicularly upon him from an invisible sky, and presently, hugging the wall, he butted against a corner, and found, or guessed, that his

way was no longer straight. Underfoot there was mud and garbage that once gulfed him to the knee, and nowhere in all those terrible, silent walls on each side of him was there a light or a door, nor any sight of life near at hand. He might have been in a catacomb, companioned by the dead.

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The stillness and the loneliness scared and disturbed him. He turned on a sudden impulse to make his way back to the lights of the street.

But this was to reckon without the map of Mozambique—which does not exist. Ten minutes sufficed to overwhelm him in an intricacy of blind ways. He groped by a wall to a turning, fared cautiously to pass it, found a blank wall opposite him, and was lost. His sense of direction left him, and he had no longer any idea of where the street lay and where the sea. He floundered in gross darkness, inept and persistent. It took some time, many turnings, and a tumble in the mud to convince him that he was lost. And then the rain came down in earnest.

It roared, it pelted, it stamped on him. It was not rain, as he knew it: it was a cascade, a vehement and malignant assault by all the wetness in heaven. It whipped, it stung, it thrashed; he was drenched in a moment as though by a trick. He could see nothing, but groped blind and frightened under it, feeling along the wall with one hand, still carrying the bronze image by the head with the other. Once he dropped it, and would have left it, but with an impulse like an effort of self-respect, he searched for it, groping elbow-deep in the slush and water, found it, and stumbled on. Another corner presented itself; he came round it, and almost at once a light showed itself.

It was a slit of brightness below a door, and without a question the drenched and bewildered Dawson lifted the image and hammered on the door with it. A hum of voices within abated as he knocked, and there was silence. He hammered again, and he heard bolts being withdrawn inside. The door opened slowly, and a man looked out.

“I’ve lost my way,” flustered Dawson pitifully. “I’m wet through, and I don’t know where I am.” Even as he spoke the rain was cutting through his clothes like blades. “Please let me in;” he concluded. “Please let me in.”

The man was backed by the light, and Dawson could see nothing of him save that he was tall and stoutly made. But he laughed, and opened the door a foot farther to let him pass in.

“Come in,” he bade him. His voice was foreign and high. “Come in. All may come in to-night.”

Dawson entered, leading a trail of water over a floor of bare boards. His face was running wet, and he was newly dazzled with the light. But when he had wiped his eyes, he drew a deep breath of relief and looked about him. The room was unfurnished save for a littered table and some chairs, and a gaudy picture of the Virgin that hung on the wall. On each side of it was a sconce, in which a slovenly candle guttered. A woman was perched on a corner of the table, a heavy shawl over her head. Under it the dark face, propped in the fork of her hand, glowed sullenly, and her bare, white arm was like a menacing thing. Dawson bowed to her with an instinct of politeness. In a chair near

her a grossly fat man was huddled, scowling heavily under thick, fair brows, while the other man, he who had opened the door, stood smiling.

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The woman laughed softly as Dawson ducked to her, scanning him with an amusement that he felt as ignominy. But she pointed to the image dangling in his hand.

“What is that?” she asked.

Dawson laid it on the floor carefully. “It’s a curio,” he explained. “I was fetching it for a lady. An idol, you know.”

The fat man burst into a hoarse laugh, and the other man spoke to Dawson.

“An’ you?” he queried. “What you doing ‘ere, so late an’ so wet?”

“I was trying to take a short cut to the landing-stage,” Dawson replied. “Like a silly fool, I thought I could find my way through here. But I got lost somehow.”

The fat man laughed again.

“You come off the German steamer?” suggested the woman.

Dawson nodded. “I came ashore with some friends,” he answered, “from the second-class. But I left them to go back and fetch this idol, and here I am.”

The tall man who had opened the door turned to the woman.

“So we must wait a leetle longer for your frien’s,” he said.

She tossed her head sharply.

“Friends!” she exclaimed. “Mother of God! Would you walk about with your knives for ever? When every day other men are taken, can you ask to go free? Am I the wife of the Intendente?”

“No, nod the vife!” barked the stout man violently. “But if you gan’t tell us noding better than to stop for der police to dake us, vot’s der good of you?”

The woman shrugged her shoulders, and the shawl slipped, and showed them bare and white above her bodice.

“I have done all that one could do,” she answered sullenly, with defiant eyes. “Seven months you have done as you would, untouched. That was through me. Now, fools, you must take your turn—one month, three months, six months—who knows?—in prison. One carries a knife —one goes to prison! What would you have?”

“Gif der yong man a chair, Tonio,” said the fat man, and his companion reached Dawson a seat. He sat on it in the middle of the floor, while they wrangled around him. He

gathered that the two men anticipated a visit from the police very shortly, and that they blamed it on the woman, who might have averted it. Both the men accused her of their misfortune, and she faced them dauntlessly. She tried to bring them, it seemed, to accept it as inevitable, as a thing properly attendant on them; to show that she, after all, could not change the conditions of existence.

“You stabbed the Greek,” she argued once, turning sharply on the tall man.

“Well,” he began, and she flourished her hand as an ergo.

“Life is not spending money,” she even philosophized. “One pays for living, my friend, with work, with pain, with jail. Here you have to pay. I have paid for you, seven months nearly, with smiles and love. But the price is risen. It is your turn now.”

Dawson gazed at her fascinated. She spoke and gesticulated with a captivating spirit. Life brimmed in her. As she spoke, her motions were arguments in themselves. She put a case and demolished it with a smile; presented the alternative, left a final word unspoken, and the thing was irresistible. Dawson, perched lonely on his chair, experienced a desire to enter the conversation.

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The men were beyond conviction. “Why didn’t you”—do this or that? the tall man kept asking, and his fat comrade exploded, “Yea, vy?” They seemed to demand of her that she should accept blame without question; and to her answers, clear and ready, the fat man retorted with a gross oath.

“Excuse me, sir,” began Dawson, shocked. He was aching to be on the woman’s side.

“Vott” demanded the fat man.

“That’s hardly the way to speak to a lady,” said Dawson gravely.

The tall man burst into a clear laugh, and the fat man glared at Dawson. He flinched somewhat, but caught the woman’s eye and found comfort and reinforcement there. She, too, was smiling, but gratefully, and she gave him a courteous little nod of thanks.

“I don’t like to hear such language used to a lady,” he said, speaking manfully enough, and giving the fat man eyes as steady as his own. “No gentleman would do it, I’m sure.”

“Vot der hell you got to do mit it?” demanded the other ferociously, while his companion laughed.

The woman held up a hand. “Do not quarrel,” she said. “There is trouble enough already. Besides, they may be here any moment. Is there anything to get ready?”

“But vot der hell,” cried the fat man again. She turned on him.

“Fool! fool! Will you shout and curse all night, till the algemas are on you?”

“Yes; an’ you put dem on us,” the tall man interrupted.

She turned swiftly on him, poising her small head over her bare breasts with a superb scorn.

“Why do you lie?” she demanded hotly. “Why do you lie? Must you hide even from your own blame behind my skirts? Mother of God!”—an outstretched hand called the tawdry Virgin on the wall to witness— “you are neither man nor good beast—just——”

The tall man interrupted. “Don’ go, on!” he said quietly. “Don’ go on!” His eyes were shining, and he carried one hand beneath his coat. “Don’ dare to go on!”

“Dare!” The woman lifted her face insolently, brought up her bare arm with a slow sweep, and puffed once at an imaginary cigarette. There was so much of defiance in the action that Dawson, watching her, breathless, started to his feet with something hard and heavy in his hand. It was the image.

“Thief!” said the woman slowly, gazing under languorous eyelids at the white, venomous face of the tall man. “Thief and——” she leaned forward and said the word, the ultimate and supreme insult of the coast.

It was barely said when there flashed something in the man’s hand. He was poised on his toes, leaning forward a little, his arm swinging beside him. The woman flung both arms before her face and cried out; then leaned rapidly aside as a pointed knife whizzed past her head and struck twanging in the wall behind her. The man sprang forward, and the next instant the room was chaos, for Dawson, tingling to his extremities, stepped in and spread him out with a crashing blow on the head. The “idol” was his weapon.

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The stout German thundered an oath and heaved to his feet, fumbling at his hip and babbling broken profanity.

Dawson swung the image and stepped towards him.

“Keep still,” he cried, “or I’ll brain you!”

“Der hell!” vociferated the German, and fired swiftly at him. The room filled with smoke, and Dawson, staggering unhurt, but with his face stung with powder, did not see the man fall. As the German drew the revolver clear, the woman knifed him in the neck, and he collapsed on his face, belching blood upon the boards of the floor. The woman stood over him, the knife still in her hand, looking at Dawson with a smile.

“My God!” he said as he glanced about him. The tall man was lying at his feet, huddled hideously on the floor. The room stank of violence and passion. “My God!” and he stooped to the body.

The woman touched him on the shoulder. “Gome,” she said. “It’s no good. It was a grand blow, a king’s blow. ’You cannot help him.”

“But—but——” he flustered as he rose. The emergency was beyond him. He had only half a strong man’s equipment—the mere brawn. “Two men killed. I must get back to the ship.”

He saw the woman smiling, and caught at his calmness. There was comprehension in her eyes, and to be understood is so often to be despised. “You must come too,” he added, on an impulse, and stopped, appalled by the idea.

“To the ship?” she cried and laughed. “Oh, la la! But no! Still, we must go from here. The police will be here any minute, and if they find you——” She left it unsaid, and the gap was ominous.

The police! To mention them was to touch all that was conventional, suburban, and second-class in Dawson. He itched to be gone. A picture of Vine Street police court and a curtly aloof magistrate flashed across his mind, and a reminiscence of evening paper headlines, and his mind fermented hysterically.

The woman put back her knife in some secret recess of her clothes, and opened the door cautiously. “Now!” she said, but paused, and came back. She went to the picture of the Virgin and turned its face to the wall. “One should not forget respect,” she observed apologetically. “These things are remembered. Now come.”

No sooner were they in the gloomy alley outside than the neighborhood of others was known to them. There was a sound of many feet ploughing in the mud, and a suppressed voice gave a short order. The woman stopped and caught Dawson’s arm.

“Hush!” she whispered. “It is the police. They have come for the men. They will be on both sides of us. Wait and listen.”

Dawson stood rigid, his heart thumping. The darkness seemed to surge around him with menaces and dangers. The splashing feet were nearer, coming up on their right, and once some metal gear clinked as its wearer scraped against the wall. He could smell men, as he remembered afterwards. The woman beside him retained her hold on his arm, and remained motionless till it seemed that the advancing men must run into them.

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“Come quietly,” she whispered at length, putting warm lips to his ear. Her hand dropped along his arm till she grasped his fingers. She led him swiftly away from the place, having waited till the police should be so near that the noise they made would drown their own retreat.

On they went, then, as before, swishing through the foulness underfoot, and without speaking. Only at times the woman’s hold on his hand would tighten, and, meeting with no response, would slacken again, and she would draw him on ever more quickly.

“Where are we going?” he ventured to ask.

“We are escaping,” she answered, with a brief tinkle of laughter. “If you knew from what we are escaping, you would not care where. But hurry, always!”

Soon, however, she paused, still holding his hand. Again they heard footsteps, and this time the woman turned to him desperately.

“There is a door near by,” she breathed. “We must find it, or——” again the unspoken word. “Feel always along the wall there. Farther, go farther. It should be here.”

They sprang on, with hands to the rough plaster on the wall, till Dawson encountered the door, set level with the wall, for which they sought.

“Push,” panted the woman, heaving at it with futile hands. Even in the darkness he could see the gleam of her naked arms and shoulders. “Push it in.”

Dawson laid his shoulder to it, his arms folded, and shoved desperately till his head buzzed. As he eased up he heard the near feet of the menacing police again.

“You must push it in!” cried the woman. “It is the only way. If not—”

“Here, catch hold of this,” said Dawson, and she found the bronze image in her hands. “Let me come,” he said, and standing back a little, he flung his twelve stone of bone and muscle heavily on the door. It creaked, and some fastening within broke and fell to the ground.

Once again he assaulted it, and it was open. They passed rapidly within, and closed it behind them, and with the woman’s hand guiding, Dawson stumbled up a long, narrow, sloppy stair that gave on to the flat roof of the building. Above them was sky again. The rain had passed, and the frosty stars of Mozambique shone faintly. He took a deep breath as he received the image from the hands of the woman.

“You hear them?” she said, and he listened with a shudder to the passing of the men below.

“But we must go on,” she said. “We are not safe yet. Over the wall to the next roof. Come!”

They clambered over a low parapet, and dropped six feet to another level. Dawson helped the woman up the opposite wall, and she sat reconnoitering on the top.

“Come quietly,” she warned him, and he clambered up beside her and looked down at the roof before them. In a kind of tent persons appeared to be sleeping; their breath was plainly to be heard.

“You must walk like a rat,” she whispered, smiling, and lowered herself. He followed. She was crouching in the shadow of the wall, and drew him down beside her. Somebody had ceased to sleep in the tent, and was gabbling drowsily, in a monotonous sing-song.

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“If they see us,” she whispered to him, “they will think you have come here after the women.”

“But we could say——” he began.

“There will be nothing to say,” she interrupted. “Hush! There he comes.”

Out of the tent crawled a man, lean and black and bearded, with a sheet wrapped around him. He stood up and looked around, yawning. The woman nestled closer to Dawson, who gripped instinctively on the bronze image. The man walked to the parapet on their left and looked over, and then walked back to the tent and stood irresolutely, muttering to himself. Squatted under the wall, Dawson found room amid the race of his disordered thoughts to wonder that he did not instantly see them.

He was coming towards them, and Dawson felt the bare shoulder that pressed against his arm shrug slightly. The man was ten paces away, walking right on to them, and looking to the sky, when, with throbbing temples and tense lips, Dawson rose, ran at him, and gripped him. He had the throat in the crutch of his right hand, and strangled the man’s yell as it was conceived. They went down together, writhing and clutching, Dawson uppermost, the man under him scratching and slapping at him with open hands. He drew up a knee and found a lean chest under it, drove it in, and choked his man to silence and unconsciousness.

“Take this, take this,” urged the woman, bending beside him. She pressed her slender-bladed knife on him. “Just a prick, and he is quite safe!”

Dawson rose. “No,” he said. “He’s still enough now. No need to kill him.” He looked at the body and from it to the woman. “Didn’t I get him to rights?” he asked exultantly.

She raised her face to his.

“It was splendid,” she said. “With only the bare hands to take an armed man——”

“Armed!” repeated Dawson.

“Surely,” she answered. “That, at least, is always sure. See,” she pulled the man’s sheet wide. Girt into a loin-cloth below was an ugly, broad blade. “Yes, it was magnificent. You are a man, my friend.”

“And you,” he said, thrilled by her adulation and, the proximity of her bare, gleaming bosom, “are a woman.”

“Then——” she began spiritedly; but in a heat of cordial impulse he took her to him and kissed her hotly on the lips.

“I was wondering when it would come,” she said slowly, as he released her. “When you spoke to the German about the bad word, I began to wonder. I knew it would come. Kiss me again, my friend, and we will go on.”

“Are we getting towards the landing-stage?” he asked her, as the next roof was crossed. “I mustn’t miss my boat, you know.”

“Oh, that!” she answered. “You want to go back?”

“Well, of course,” he replied, in some surprise. “That’s what I was trying to do when I knocked at your door. I’ve missed my dinner as it is.”

“Missed your dinner!” she repeated, with a bubble of mirth. “Ye-es; you have lost that, but,”—she came to him and laid a hand on his shoulder, speaking softly—“but you have seen me. Is it nothing, friend, that you have saved me?”

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He had stopped, and she was looking up to him, half-smiling, half-entreating, wholly alluring. He looked down into her dark face, with a sudden quickening about the heart.

“And all this fighting,” she continued, as though he were to be convinced of something. “You conquer men as though you were bred on the roofs of Mozambique. You fight like—like a hero. It is a rush, a blow, a tumble, and you have them lying at your feet. And when you remember all this, will you not be glad, friend—will you not be glad that it was for me?”

He nodded, clearing his throat huskily. Her hand on his shoulder was a thing to charm him to fire.

“I’d fight—I’d fight for you,” he replied uneasily, “as long as—as long as there was any one to fight.”

He was feeling his way in speech, as best he could, past conventionalities. There had dawned on him, duskily and half-seen, the unfitness of little proprieties and verbose frills while he went to war across the roofs with this woman of passion.

“You would,” she said fervently, with half-closed eyes. “I know you would.”

She dropped her hand, and stood beside him in silence. There was a long pause. He guessed she was waiting for the next move from him, and he nerved himself to be adequate to her unspoken demand.

“You lead on,” he said at last unsteadily.

“Where?” she asked breathlessly.

He did not speak, but waved an open hand that gave her the freedom of choice. It was his surrender to the wild spirit of the Coast, and he grasped the head of the brass image the tighter when he had done it. She and Fate must guide now; it rested with him only to break opposing heads.

She smiled and shivered. “Come on, then,” she said, and started before him.

They traversed perhaps a score of roofs enclosed with high parapets, on to each of which he lifted her, hands in her armpits, swinging her cleanly to the level of his face and planting her easily and squarely on the coping. He welcomed each opportunity to take hold of her and put out the strength of his muscles, and she sat where he placed her, smiling and silent, while he clambered up and dropped down on the other side.

At length a creaking wooden stair that hung precariously on the sheer side of a house brought them again to the ground level. It was another gloomy alley into which they descended, and the darkness about him and the mud underfoot struck Dawson with a

sense of being again in familiar surroundings. The woman's hand slid into his as he stood, and they started along again together.

The alley seemed to be better frequented than that of which he already had experience. More than once dark, sheeted figures passed them by, noiseless save for the underfoot swish in the mud, and presently the alley widened into a little square, at one side of which there was a fresh rustle of green things. At the side of it a dim light showed through a big open door, from which came a musical murmur of voices, and Dawson recognized a church.

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“The Little Garden of St. Sebastien,” murmured the woman, and led him on to cross the square. A figure that had been hidden in the shadow now lounged forth; and revealed itself to them as a man in uniform. He stood across their way, and accosted the woman briefly in Portuguese.

Dawson stood fidgeting while she spoke with him. He seemed to be repeating a brief phrase over and over again, harshly and irritably; but she was cajoling, remonstrating, arguing, as he had seen her argue in that ill-fated room an hour back.

“What’s the matter with him?” demanded Dawson impatiently.

“He says he won’t let me go,” answered the woman, with a tone of despair in her voice.

“The devil he won’t! What’s he got to do with it?”

“Oh, these little policemen, they always arrest me when they can,” she replied, with a smile.

“Here, you!” cried Dawson, addressing himself to the man in uniform— “you go away. Voetsaak, see! You mind your own business, and get out.”

The officer drawled something in his own tongue, which was, of course, unintelligible to Dawson, but it had the effect of annoying him strangely.

“You little beast!” he said, and knocked the man down with his fist.

“Run,” hissed the woman at his elbow—“run before he can get up. No, not that way. To the church and out by another way!”

She caught his hand, and together they raced across the square and in through the big door.

There were a few people within, most sleeping on the benches and along the floor by the walls. In the chancel there were others, masked by the lights, busy with some offices. A wave of sudden song issued from among them as Dawson and the woman entered, and gave way again to the high, nervous voice of a map that stood before the altar. All along the sides of the church was shadow, and the woman speedily found a little arched door.

“Come through the middle of it,” she whispered urgently to Dawson, as she packed her loose skirts together in her hand—“cleanly through the middle; do not rub the wall as you come.”

He obeyed and followed her, and they were once more in the darkness of an alley.

“It was the door of the lepers,” she explained, as she let her skirts swish down again. “See, there is the light by the sea!”

The wind came cleanly up the alley, and soon they were at its mouth, where a lamp flickered in the breeze. Dawson drew a deep breath, and tucked the image under his arm. His palm was sore with the roughness of its head.

“Some one is passing,” said the woman in a low tone. “Wait here till they are by.”

Footsteps were approaching along the front, and very soon Dawson heard words and started.

“What is it!” whispered the woman, her breath on his neck.

“Listen!” he answered curtly.

The others came within the circle of the lamp—a girl and two men.

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“I do hope he’s found my idol,” the girl was saying.

Dawson stepped into the light, and they turned and saw him.

“Why, here he is,” exclaimed Miss Paterson shrilly.

He raised his hat to the woman who stood at the entrance to the alley—raised it as he would have raised it to a waitress in a bun-shop, and went over to the people from the second-class saloon.

“I found it,” he said, lifting the image forward, and brushing with his hand at the foulness of blood and hair upon it. “But I was almost thinking I should miss the boat.”

II

THE SENSE OF CLIMAX

It was in the fall of the year that Truda Schottelius on tour came to that shabby city of Southern Russia. Nowadays, the world remembers little of her besides her end, which stirred it as Truda Schottelius could always stir her audience; but in those days hers was a fame that had currency from Paris to Belgrade, and the art of drama was held her debtor.

It was soon after dawn that she looked from her window in the train, weary with twelve hours of traveling, and saw the city set against the pale sky, unreal and remote like a scene in a theatre, while about it the flat land stretched vacant and featureless. The light was behind it, and it stood out in silhouette like a forced effect, and Truda, remarking it, frowned, for of late she found herself impatient of forced effects. She was a pale, slender, brown-haired woman, with a small clear, pliant face, and some manner of languor in all her attitudes that lent them a slow grace of their own and did not at all impair the startling energy she could command for her work. While she looked out at the city there came a tap at the door of her compartment, and her maid entered with tea. Behind her, a little drawn in that early hour, came Truda’s manager, Monsieur Vaucher.

“Madame finds herself well?” he asked solicitously, but shivering somewhat. “Madame is in the mood for further triumphs?”

Truda gave him a smile. Monsieur Vaucher was a careful engineer of her successes, a withered little middle-aged Parisian, who had grown up in the mechanical service of great singers and actors. There was not a tone in his voice, not a gesture in his repertory, that was not an affectation; and, with it all, she knew him for a man of sterling loyalty and a certain simplicity of heart.

“We are on the point of arriving,” went on Monsieur Vaucher. “I come to tell Madame how the ground lies in this city. It is, you see, a place vexed with various politics, an arena of trivialities. In other words, Madame, the best place in the world for one who is —shall we say?—detached.”

Truda laughed, sipping her warm tea.

“Politics have never tempted me, my friend,” she replied.

Monsieur Vaucher bowed complaisantly.

“Your discretion is frequently perfect,” he said. “And if I suggest that here is an occasion for a particular discretion, it is only because I have Madame’s interests at heart. Now, the chief matters of dispute here are——”

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Truda interrupted him. “Please!” she said. “It does not matter at all. And think! Politics before breakfast. I am surprised at you, Monsieur Vaucher.”

The little man shrugged. “It is as Madame pleases,” he said. “However, here we are at the station; I will go to make all ready.”

Truda had a wide experience of strange towns, and preserved yet some interest in making their acquaintance. At that early hour the streets were sparsely peopled; the city was still at its toilet. A swift carriage, manned by a bulky coachman of that spacious degree of fatness which is fashionable in Russia, bore her to her hotel along wide monotonous ways, flanked with dull buildings. It was all very prosaic, very void of character; it did not at all engage her thoughts, and it was in weariness that she gained her rooms and disposed herself for a day of rest before the evening’s task.

Another woman might have gathered depression and the weakness of melancholy from this dullness of arrival, following on the dullness of travel; but a great actress is made on other lines. A large audience was gathered in the theatre that night to make acquaintance with her, for her coming was an event of high importance. Only one box was empty—that of the Governor of the city, a Russian Prince whom Truda had met before; it was understood that he was away, and could not return till the following day.

But for the rest the house was full; its expectancy made itself felt like an atmosphere till the curtain went up and the play began to shape itself. Audiences, like other assemblies of people, have their racial characteristics; it was the task of Truda to get the range, as it were—to find the measure of their understanding; and before the first act was over she had their sympathy. The rest was but the everyday routine of the stage, that grotesque craft wherein delicate emotions are handled like crowbars, and only the crude colors of life are visible. It was a success—even a great success, and nobody save Truda had an inkling that there was yet something to discover in the soul of a Russian audience.

At her coming forth, the square was thick with people under the lights, and those nearest the stage-door cheered her as she passed to her carriage. But Truda was learned in the moods of crowds, and in her reception she detected a perfunctory note, as though the people who waved and shouted had turned from graver matters to notice her. She saw, as the carriage dashed away, that the crowd was strongly leavened with uniforms of police; there was not time to see more before a corner was turned and the square cut off from view. She sat back among her cushions with a shrug directed at those corners in her affairs which always shut off the real things of life.

The carriage went briskly towards her hotel, traversing those wide characterless streets which are typical of a Russian town. The pavements were empty, the houses shuttered and dark; save for the broad back of the coachman perched before her, she sat in a solitude. Thus it was that the sound which presently she heard moved her to quick

attention, the noise of a child crying bitterly in the darkness. She sat up and leaned aside to look along the bare street, and suddenly she called to the coachman to halt. When he did so, the carriage was close to the place whence the cry came.

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“What is it? What is it?” called Truda, in soft Russian, and stepped down to the ground. Only that shrill weeping answered her.

She picked her way to the pavement, where something lay huddled against the wall of the house, and the coachman, torpid on his box behind the fidgety horses, started at her sharp exclamation.

“Come here!” she called to him. “Bring me one of the lamps. Here is a horrible thing. Be quick!”

He was nervous about leaving his horses, but Truda’s tone was compelling. With gruntings and ponderously he obeyed, and the carriage-lamp shed its light over the matter in hand. Under the wall, with one clutching hand outspread as though to grip at the stones of the pavement, lay the body of a woman, her face upturned and vacant. And by it, still crying, crouched a child, whose hands were closed on the woman’s disordered dress. Truda, startled to stillness, stood for a space of moments staring; the unconscious face on the ground seemed to look up to her with a manner of challenge, and the child, surprised by the light, paused in its weeping and cowered closer to the body.

“Murder?” said Truda hoarsely. It was a question, and the coachman shuffled uneasily.

“I think,” he stammered, while the lamp swayed in his gauntleted hand and its light traveled about them in wild curves—“I think, your Excellency, it is a Jew.”

“A Jew!” Truda stared at him. “Yes.” He bent to look closer at the dead woman, puffing with the exertion. “Yes,” he repeated, “a Jew. That is all, your Excellency.”

He seemed relieved at the discovery. Truda was still staring at him, in a cold passion of horror.

“My God!” she breathed; then turned from him with a shudder and knelt beside the child. “Go back to the carriage! Wait!” she bade him, with her back turned, and he was fain to obey her with his best speed. There, ere his conventional torpor claimed him again, he could hear her persuading and comforting the child in a voice of gentle murmurs, and at last she returned, carrying the child in her arms, and bade him drive on. As he went, the murmuring voice still sounded, gentle and very caressing.

Truda paused to make no explanations at all when the hotel was reached, but passed through the hall and up to her own rooms with the frightened child in her arms. But what the coachman had to say, when questioned, presently brought her manager knocking at her door. He was hot and nervous, and Truda met him with the splendid hauteur she could assume upon occasion to quell interference with her actions. Behind

her, upon a couch, the child was lying wrapped in a shawl, looking on the pair of them and Truda's hovering maid with great almond eyes set in a little smooth swarthy face.

"Madame, Madame!" cried M. Vaucher. "What is this I hear? How are we to get on in Russia—in Russia of all places—if you go in the face of public opinion like this?"

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“I do not know,” replied Truda very calmly. She took a chair beside the child, leaving him standing, and put a long white hand on the little tumbled head.

“It is incredible!” he said. “Incredible! And at such a time as this, too. What do you propose to do with the child?”

“I do not know,” answered Truda again.

“It will be claimed,” he said, biting his nails. “These Jews are never short of relatives.”

“If it is claimed by a relative, that will be the end of the matter,” replied Truda. “If not—-we shall see.”

“Then let us hope it will be claimed,” he said quickly. He gazed absently at the child, and shook his head. “Ah, Madame,” he said, “if only one could cut an actress’s heart out! The worst of them is, they are all woman, even the greatest.”

Truda smiled a little. “That is inconvenient, no doubt,” she suggested.

“Inconvenient!” He hoisted his shoulders in a mighty shrug. “It is devastating, Madame. See now! Here is this city—a beastly place, it is true, but with much money, and very busy exterminating Jews. Which will you, Madame—its money or its Jews? You see the choice! But I will weary you no longer; the child will assuredly be claimed.”

He bowed and took his departure; it was not well, he knew, for any manager to push Truda Schottelius too far. Therefore he went to make it known that a Jewish baby of two or thereabouts was to be had for the asking, at the hotel; and Truda went to work to make her newly-found responsibility comfortable. For that night she experienced what a great artist must often miss—something with a flavor more subtle than the realization of a strong role, than passion, than success. It was when the baby was sleeping in her own bed, its combed head dinting one of her own white pillows, that she looked across to her deft, tactful maid.

“I believe I have found a new sensation, Marie,” she remarked.

The maid smiled. “I had little sisters,” she answered inconsequently.

“Yes?” said Truda. “I had nothing—not even a little sister.”

The new sensation remained with her that night, for the baby slumbered peacefully in her arms; and several times she awoke to bend above it and wonder, with happiness and longing, over the miracle of that little dependent life cast away on the shores of the world. By morning its companionship had so wrought in her that she could have given the manager a clear answer if he had come again to ask what she proposed to do with

the child in the event of no one claiming it. But he did not come. Instead, there came a big red-haired young Jew, asserting that he was the child's uncle.

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Truda was at breakfast in her room when he arrived and was shown in; opposite to her at the table, the baby was making the most of various foods. It greeted him with shouts and open welcome; no further proof was needed to establish his claim. Truda, delicate and fragile in a morning wrapper, a slender vivid exotic of a woman, shaped as though by design to the service of art, looked up to scan him. He stood just within the door, his peaked cap in his hand, great of stature, keen-faced, rugged, with steady eyes that took her in unwinkingly. The pair of them made a contrast not the less grotesque because in each there was strength. For some moments neither spoke, while the baby gurgled happily.

Truda sighed. “She knows you,” she said. “She is a dear little thing.”

The Jew nodded. “She is dear to us,” he said. “And we are very grateful to you, Excellency.”

He was still watching her with a shrewd scrutiny, as though he made an estimate of her worth.

“That was her mother?” asked Truda. “The dead woman in the street, I mean?”

“Yes,” answered the man. “That was her mother. Her father went the same way six months ago, but in another street.”

Truda’s lips parted, but she said nothing.

“Ah, perhaps your Excellency does not understand?” suggested the man. The cynical humor in his face had no resemblance to mirth. “They were Jews, you see—Jews.”

“Judenhetze?” asked Truda. She had heard of old of that strange fever that seizes certain peoples and inflames them with a rabid lust for Jewish blood.

“Yes,” answered the Jew. “That is what they call it. But a local variety. Here it is not sudden passion, but a thing suggested to the mob, and guided by police and officers. It is an expedient of politics.”

He spoke with a restraint that was more than any, emphasis.

“And therefore,” he went on, “the kindness of your Excellency is the greater, since you saved the child not from law-breakers, but from authority itself.”

“I have done nothing,” said Truda. “The child is a dear little thing. I—I wish she were mine.”

“She, too, is a Jew,” said the other.

“I know,” answered Truda. The steadiness of his gaze was an embarrassment by now. She flushed a little under it.

“I am wondering,” she said, “if nothing can be done. I think—I believe—that the world does not know of this persecution. Perhaps I could say a word—in some high quarter ——”

“Why should you concern yourself?” asked the Jew evenly. “Why should you take this trouble?”

“Why?” Truda looked up at him, doubtful of his meaning.

He nodded. “Why?” he repeated. “It cannot be good for Truda Schottelius to stand on the side of Jews?”

“What do you mean?” demanded Truda.

He continued to look at her steadily, but made no answer. She rose from her chair and took one step towards him; then paused. A tense moment of silence passed, and Truda Schottelius sighed.

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“How did you know?” she asked, in a matter-of-fact tone.

The big young man smiled. “How did I know that you, too, were a Jew— is that what you mean?” Truda nodded. “Ah, Excellency, there is an instinct in this thing, and, besides, who but a Jew is a great artist nowadays? Believe me, there is not one of us from whom you could hide it.”

“Is it as plain as that?” asked Truda.

“As plain as that,” he replied. She laughed frankly, meeting his eyes with unabashed mirth, till he perforce smiled in sympathy.

“Then,” she cried, “what, does it matter? Here I am, a Jewess. I cannot hide it. The first Jewish baby that cries for me wins me over; and there are worse things—yes, many worse things—than being knocked on the head by a drunken Christian. You didn’t know that, did you?”

“I do not doubt what you say,” he answered.

“You do not doubt!” repeated Truda, with quick contempt. “I tell you it is so, and I know. Yes!” For a moment her face darkened as though with memories. “But,” she went on, “I have a place. I have a name. What I say will be heard.”

“Yes,” said the Jew simply. “What you say will be heard.”

She nodded two or three times slowly. “Wait!” she said. “I know the Governor of this place; he is by way of being a friend of mine. And beyond him there are greater men all easy of access—to me. And beyond them is the sentiment of Europe, the soft hearts of the world, easiest and nearest of all. I tell you, something can be done; presently there will be a reckoning with these gentle Christians.”

She had stirred him at last. “And you will acknowledge that you are a Jewess?” he asked.

She laughed. “I will boast of it,” she cried. “And now, this is the time to take the baby away, while I am nerved for sacrifices. Soon I shall have nothing left at all.”

The young Jew looked over to the child, who was getting new effects out of a spoon and a dish of jam. “The child is in good hands,” he said. “We shall know she is safe with you.”

“Ah!” Truda turned to him with a light in her wonderful eyes. “I shall not fail you, if it were only for this.”

“I am sure you will not fail your own people,” he answered; “you do not come of traitors.”

He patted the baby's cheek with a couple of big fingers and turned to the door.

"You do not come of traitors," he repeated, and then Truda was alone again with the child. But she did not go to it at once, to make sure of its company. She stood where the Jew had left her, deep in thought. And the manner of her thinking was not one of care; for the first time she seemed to taste a sense of freedom.

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Of the wrath and bewilderment of her manager there is no need to speak; a long experience of famous actresses and singers had not exhausted that expert's capacity for despair. His pessimism gained some color that evening, when Truda had to face a house that was plainly willing to be unsympathetic; applause came doubtfully and in patches, till she gained a hold of them and made herself their master by main force of personality. Monsieur Vaucher, the manager, was still a connoisseur of art. Years of feeling the public pulse through the box-office had not stripped him of a certain shrewd perception of what was fine and what was mean in drama; and he chuckled and wagged his head in the wings as minute by minute the spell of Truda's genius strengthened, till there came that tenseness of silence in the great theatre which few actors live to know, and Truda, vibrant, taut-nerved, and superb, plucked at men's hearts as if they had been harp-strings. It was not till the curtain was down that the spell broke, and then crash upon crash roared the tumultuous applause of the audience.

It was Vaucher who rushed forward, as Truda came from the stage, to kiss her hand extravagantly.

"Ah! Madame!" he cried, looking up to her with his shrewd face working; "it is not for me to guide you. Do as you will by day, but be a genius at night. At this rate you could unman an army."

Truda smiled and withdrew her hand.

"That was Prince Sarasin in the great box," she said. "Presently he will send his card in."

Vaucher nodded. "That was he," he said. "He is Governor of this town. Madame will receive him? Or not?"

"Oh yes; let him in to me," she answered. "He is an old friend of mine."

Vaucher bowed. "What a happiness for him, then!" he said gravely, and opened the door of her dressing-room for her.

Prince Sarasin lost no time in making Truda's word good. By the time she was ready to receive him, he was waiting for admission. He strode in, burly in his uniform, and bowed to her effusively, full of admiration. He was a great dark Russian, heavy and massive, with a big petulant face not without intelligence, and Truda had known him of old in Paris. She looked at him now with some anxiety, trying to gauge his susceptibility. He had the spacious manners of a man of action, smiled readily and with geniality; but Truda realized that she had never before made him a request, and the real character of the man was still to find.

“Superb! Magnificent!” he was saying. “You have ripened, my friend; your power has grown to maturity. It is people like you who make epochs.”

“Sit down!” she bade him. “I am a little tired, as you may think. Your town is hard on one’s nerves, Prince.”

“Hard!” He laughed as he drew a chair towards her and seated himself. “It is death to the intelligence. It is suffocation to one’s finer nature. It has a dullness that turns men into vegetables. I have been here now for three years, and till to-night I have not felt a thrill.”

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“No?” Truda spoke lightly of design. “But you are the Governor, are you not? You are aloof, far above thrills. Why, it was only last night, while I was driving home, that I found a dead woman in the street.”

“I know,” he said. “And a live baby; I heard all about it. If you had been an hour later they would have been cleaned away. I am sorry if you were shocked.”

“Shocked?” repeated Truda. “I was not thinking of that.” She shivered a little, and gathered her big cloak more closely about her. “But I had not heard—I did not know—-what the Judenhetze really was. And I think the world does not know, or it would not tolerate it.”

“Eh?” The prince stared at her. “But it has upset you,” he said soothingly. “You must forget it. It is not well to dwell on these things.”

The big mirror against the wall, bright with lights, reflected the pair of them sitting face to face in the attitude of intimacy. The Prince, bearded and big, felt protective and paternal, for Truda, muffled in her great cloak, looked very small and feminine just then.

His tone, so consoling and smooth, roused her; she sat up.

“Prince,” she said, “you could stop it.”

“The Judenhetze, you mean?” He made a gesture of resignation. “You are wrong, dear lady. I can do nothing. It does not rest with me.”

“You mean, there are higher powers who are responsible?” she demanded.

“We will not talk politics,” suggested the Prince. “But roughly that is what I mean.”

She scanned him seriously. “Yes,” she said; “I thought that was so. And you can do nothing? I see.”

“But why,” asked the Prince—“why let yourself be troubled, dear lady? This is a pitiful business, no doubt; it has thrust itself on you by an accident; you are moved and disturbed. But, after all, the Jews are not our friends.”

The courage to deal forthrightly was not lacking to her. As she sat up again, the fur cloak slipped, and her bare shoulders gleamed above it. Her face was grave with the gravity of a serious child.

“I am a Jewess,” she said.

“Eh? What?” The Prince smiled uncertainly.

“I am a Jewess,” repeated Truda. “The Jews are my friends. And if you can do nothing, there is something I can do.”

He smiled still, but now there was amusement in his smile. He was not at all disconcerted.

“Do you know,” he said, “I had almost guessed it? There is something in you—I noticed it again to-night, in your great scene—that suggests it. A sort of ardor, a glow, as it were; something burning and poignant. Well, if all the Jews were like you there would be no Judenhetze.”

She put the futile compliment from her with a movement of impatience.

“You can still do nothing?” she asked

“My powers are where they were, Madame,” he answered.

“Then,” she said slowly, “it rests with me.” She gathered her cloak about her again. “I am tired, as you see,” she said wearily—“tired and a little strained. I will beg you to excuse me.”

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He rose to his feet at once and bowed formally.

“At least,” he said, “such a matter is not to interrupt our friendship, Madame.”

“It is for you to say,” she answered, smiling faintly. He laughed, pressed her hand, and bade her good-night, leaving her with more matter for thought than he could have suspected.

There was real cheering for her that night when she left the theatre. Truda had been cheered before in many cities; but that night she took note of it, looking with attention at the thrusting crowd collected to applaud her. It filled the square, restless as a sea under the tall lamps; rank upon rank of shadow-barred faces showed themselves, vociferous and unanimous—a crowd in a good temper. She bowed in acknowledgment of the shouts, but her face was grave, for she was taking account of what it meant to be alone amid an alien multitude, sharing none of its motives and emotions. The fat coachman edged his horses through the men that blocked the way, till there was space to go ahead, and the cheers, steady and unflagging, followed her out of sight.

The baby was in bed when she arrived at her hotel; Truda paid a brief visit to its side, then ordered that her manager should be summoned, and sat down to write a note. It was to the big young Jew, the baby’s uncle; she had a shrewd notion that Monsieur Vaucher would be able to lay hands on him. The note was brief: “I fear there will be more persecutions. The Governor can do nothing. When there is another attack on our people send to me. Send to me without fail, for I have one resource left.”

“You can find the man?” she demanded of Vaucher.

The little hardened Frenchman was still under the spell of her acting.

“Madame,” he said grandly, “I can do anything you desire. He shall have the note to-night.”

Poor Monsieur Vaucher, the charred remains of a man of sentiment, preserving yet a spark or two of the soft fire! Could he have known the contents of that note and their significance, with what fervor of refusal he would have cast it back at her! But he knew nothing, save that Truda’s acting restored to him sometimes for an hour or two the emotions of his youth, and he was very much her servant. It was in the spirit of devotion and service that he called a droshky, and fared out to the crooked streets of the Jewish quarter to do his errand. It was a fine soft night, with a clear sky of stars, and Monsieur Vaucher enjoyed the drive. And as he went, jolting over the cobbles of the lesser streets, he suffered himself to recall the great scene of that night’s play—a long slow situation of a woman at bay, opposing increasing odds with increasing spirit—and experienced again his thrill.

“Ah,” he murmured over his cigar; “the Schottelius, she has the sense of climax!”

And so he duly delivered the note and returned to the hotel and bed, a man content with the conduct of his own world.

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Things went well with Truda and Vaucher and all the company for the next two days. Never had she been so amenable to those who charged themselves with her interests, never so generally and mildly amiable to those who had to live at her orders. But none of those who came in contact with her failed to observe a new note in her manner. It was not that she was softer or gentler; rather it seemed that she was more remote, something absent and thoughtful, with a touch of raptness that lent the true air of inspiration to her acting. Her spare time she spent with the baby—she and Marie, her maid, playing with it, making a plaything of it, ministering to it, and obeying it. It had never cried once since Truda had taken it in her arms, but adapted itself with the soundest skill to its surroundings and companions.

“I found it ten years too late,” said Truda once.

Her maid looked at her curiously.

“It is surprising that Madame should not have found one before,” she said.

Those two days were placid and full of peace, quiet with the lull of emptiness. But in them Truda did not forget. She was realizing herself, and her capacity to deal with a situation that would not be devised to show her talents. She felt that she stood, for the first time, on the threshold of brisk, perilous, actual life, of that life which was burlesqued, exaggerated, in the plays in which she acted. It was expectancy that softened her eyes and lit her face with dreams—expectancy and exhilaration.

She was about to be born into the world.

The summons came suddenly on the evening of the second day. Even as she drove to the theatre, Truda had noted how the streets were uneasy, how men stood about in groups and were in the first stages of drunkenness. The play that night was that harrowing thing La Tosca; she was dressed for her part when the word came, written on a scrap of paper: “It is to-night. I am waiting at the stage door.” She pondered for a few moments over it, then reached for her cloak and drew it on over her brilliant stage dress.

“Find Vaucher,” she said to her maid. “Tell him I cannot play to-night. He must put on my understudy. Say I am ill.”

The maid, startled out of her composure, threw up her hands.

“But, Madame——!” she cried.

Truda waved her aside. “Lose no time,” she ordered. “Tell Vaucher I am ill. And then go back to the baby.”

She wasted no more words on the woman, but swept forth from the room and down the draughty ill-lit passage to the stage-door. Its guardian, staggered at her appearance, let her out; on the pavement outside, muffled to the eyes like a man that evades observation, was the big young Jew. He was gazing out over the square; her fingers on his arm made him look round with a start.

“I am here,” she said. “Now tell me.”

With eyes that glanced about warily while he spoke, he told her quickly, in low tones of haste.

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“There is a mob gathering again at the market,” he said. “Two spirit-shops have been broken open. That is how it begins always. Some Jews who were found in the street were beaten to death; soon they will move down to the Jewish streets, and then”—his breath came harsh through set teeth—“then murder and looting—the old programme. Now I have told you; can you do anything?”

“Let us find a droshky,” said Truda, “and go to the Jewish quarter.”

“A droshky!” He stared at her. “Do you think any driver will take us there to-night?”

“Then we can walk,” said Truda; “show the way. If we stay here any longer, I shall be seen and prevented.”

He hesitated an instant; then set off sharply, so that now and again she had to run a few paces to keep up with him. He took her round by the back of the theatre and into a muddle of streets that led thence. The quiet of the night closed about them; Truda was embarked upon her purpose.

“How can you help?” asked the young man again. “Tell me what you will do?”

“Me?” said Truda. “For to-night I can do nothing; I am not an army. But I think that after to-night there will be no more Judenhetze in this city. That is what I think. For, after all, I am the Schottelius; people know me and set a value on me, and if harm comes to me there will be a reckoning.”

He was looking down sideways on her as she spoke.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“All!” cried Truda, and braced herself to subdue his doubts. “All! It is enough, and more than enough. Have I come so far without knowing what will rouse my audience?” She slowed her steps, and he slowed to keep by her side. She lifted her clear face proudly. “I tell you,” she said, “the part I am to play to-night will move Europe to its core. Paris! Berlin! Vienna! Even cautious prim London! I have them under my hand; even to-morrow they will be asking an account, crying for the heads of the wrongdoers on a charger. And you ask me if that is all!”

“You do not know,” he said. “To-night, it is not a play; it is life and death.”

“But to-morrow it is life!” she retorted. “Let us go on; we must not be late.”

They came by roundabout ways at last to that little groups of streets, beyond the jail and the markets, where the Jews had their homes. Here were tall brick houses overshadowing narrow streets ill-lit by infrequent lamps, little shops closely shuttered, courtyards with barred gates. Over the roofs there rose against the sky the clustered

spires and domes of a typical Russian church, flanking the quarter on the south. The streets were empty; they met no one; and the young man led her to a courtyard in which, perhaps, a couple of hundred Jews were gathered, waiting. His knock brought a face to the top of the wall, and after a parley the great gate was opened wide enough to let them slip through. When they were in, Truda touched her companion.

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“Would I be here for a fancy?” she whispered. “Believe what I say: after this there shall be no Judenhetze.”

The courtyard was a large one, penned between a couple of houses, and separated from the street by the wall which the great gate pierced. From it half a dozen doors led into the houses, each a possible road of escape when the hour should come. Truda looked about her calmly.

The people were standing about in large groups—men, women, and children—and they spoke in whispers among themselves. But all of them were listening; each sound from without stiffened them to scared attention. From somewhere distant there traveled a dull noise of shouts and singing, a confused blatancy of far voices; and as it swelled and sank and swelled again, a tremor ran over that silent waiting throng like a wind-ripple on standing crops. Overhead the sky shone with pin-point stars; a breath of air stirred about them faintly; all seemed keyed to that tense furtive quiet of the doomed Jews. Not a child cried, not a woman sobbed; they had learned, direfully enough, the piteous art of the oppressed—the knack of silence and concealment.

It was by slow degrees that the distant shoutings came nearer; the mob had yet to unite in purpose and ferocity. Truda, listening, and marking its approach, could almost tell by the violence of its noise how it wound through the streets, staggering drunkenly, waving bludgeons, working itself to the necessary point of brutal fury. And always it grew nearer. Its note changed and deepened, till it sank to a long snarling drone; she, wise in the moods of men in the mass, a practicer on the minds of multitudes, knew the moment was at hand; this was the voice of human beings with the passions of beasts. The noise dwindled as the mob poured through an alley, and then broke out again, loud and daunting, as it emerged. It was near at hand; now there was added to its voice the drum of its footsteps on cobble-paved streets, and suddenly, brief and agonizing, a wild outcry of shrieks as some wretched creature was found out of hiding and the bludgeons beat it out of human semblance. All round Truda there was a stir among the Jews; a child wrought beyond endurance whimpered and was gagged under an apron; the howl of the mob startled her ears as it poured along the street outside the great gate.

Then came confusion, a chaos of voices, of ringing blows upon the gate, screams and moans, the shrill sound of the glee that goes with open murder, and a sudden light that shot up against the sky from a house on fire. The crowd of Jews in the courtyard thinned as some slipped swiftly into the dark doorways to be ready for flight, startled by a tattoo of blows on the gate that broke out abruptly. Truda stood fast where she was, listening with a kind of detachment. The blows on the gate increased; she could even hear, among the other sounds, the heavy breathing of those who strove to break a way in. Men came running

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to aid them, and the stout gate bent under their efforts. It was fastened within by an iron bar lying in sockets across it; with an interest that was almost idle she saw how these sockets, one by one, were yielding and let the bar go loose. One broke off with a sharp crack, and sent the rest of the Jews racing to the dark doorways. Truda loosened her cloak and let it fall about her feet, and stood up alone, vivid in the dancing light of the burning house, in saffron and white. She moved deliberate hands over her hair and patted a loose strand into its place. Another rending crash; she set her hand on her hip and stood still. The door yielded and sprang back. There was a raw yell, and the mob was in.

Prince Sarasin was again in his box when Monsieur Vaucher, broken in spirit and looking bleak and old, came before the curtain to announce that owing to circumstances—unforeseen circumstances—of a—a peculiar nature, Madame Schottelius would be unable to appear that night, and her place would be taken, *etc*. The announcement was not well received, and nobody was less pleased than the Prince. He knit his heavy brows in a scowl as poor Vaucher sidled back to obscurity, and thought rapidly. His thoughts, and what he knew of the night's programme in the Jewish quarter of his city, carried him round to the stage door, with his surprised aide-de-camp at his heels.

Monsieur Vaucher, tearful and impotent, was at his service.

"Never before has she played me such a trick," he lamented. "Ill! Why, I have known her go on and make a success when she was ill enough to keep another woman in bed. It is a trick; she is not even at the hotel. No one knows where she is."

The Governor, his last interview with Truda fresh in his recollection, asked curt questions. He was a man of direct mind. In less time than one might have supposed from the condition of poor Vaucher, he had elicited some outstanding facts—the note which Truda had sent to the Jewish quarter among them. The keeper of the stage-door added the little he knew. Prince Sarasin turned to his aide.

"Dragoons," he ordered. "Half a squadron. I shall be at the barracks in ten minutes, when they must be ready. Go at once."

The aide-de-camp, who knew the Prince, recognized that this was an occasion for speed. When the Prince, mounted, arrived at the barracks, the dragoons were drawn up-awaiting him. He moved them off towards the Jewish quarter at the trot. The streets echoed their hoof-beats, and little time elapsed before they were on the skirts of the mob. The Prince spurred alongside a watching police-officer.

“A lady!” repeated the officer, in amazement. “I have seen no lady, your Excellency. But the principal—er—disorder is in the street behind the church. The Jews are making no resistance at all.”

The Prince pushed on, and came with his dragoons at the rear of the mob. With a fine Russian callousness he thrust into it, his horses clearing a way for themselves and bowling men to right and left. The street was in darkness and resounded with violence. Standing in his stirrups and peering ahead, the Prince realized that he might ride Truda down without ever seeing her.

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He leaned back and caught his aide-de-camp by the arm.

“We must have light,” he shouted. “Dismount a dozen men and fire a house.”

At the order, men swung from their saddles, and in a few minutes the house was ablaze; its windows, red with fire, cast a dancing glow on the tumult of the street. They pressed on, the fire sparkling on their accoutrements, and on the housetops cowering Jews broke into tremblings at a wild hope that here was salvation. The Prince peered anxiously about, unconcerned at all the savagery that was unloosened to each side of him. He did not pause to aid a woman dragged shrieking from a doorway by the hair, nor look back at that other scream when a dragoon, unmanned and overwrought, reined from the ranks and cut her assailant down.

At one point the crowd was thick about the gate of a walled courtyard, thundering on it with crowbars and axes; here, again, the Prince paused to look sharply among them, lest somewhere there might be a brown head and a pale clear-cut face that he sought. Even as he tightened his bridle, the gate gave rendingly; he turned his head as the mob, roaring, poured in. For the space of perhaps a second he sat motionless and stricken, but it was long enough to see what he never forgot—a woman, composed, serene, bright against her dark background in the shifting light of the burning house, gay in saffron and white. Then the mob surged before her and hid her, and his voice returned to him.

“Charge!” he roared, and tore his sword out.

The dragoons, eager enough, followed him; the courtyard overflowed with them as their great horses thundered in at the gate, and the long swords got to their work on that packed and cornered throng. There were swift bitter passages as the troopers cleared the place— episodes such as only Jews knew till then, ghastly killings of men who crawled among the horses’ feet and were hunted out to be slaughtered. And in the middle of it, the Prince was on his knees, holding up a brown head in the crook of his arm, seeing nothing of the butchery at his elbow.

It was when the killing was done, and the dragoons were clearing the street, that there arrived on tiptoe Monsieur Vaucher, searching through tears for Madame. When he saw her he ceased to weep, but stood looking down, with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Dead?” he asked abruptly.

The Prince glanced up. “Yes,” he answered.

“Ah!” Monsieur Vaucher pondered. “Who killed her?” he asked presently.

“Look!” said the Prince, and motioned with one hand to the dragoons’ leavings, the very silent citizens who lay about on the flagstones.

“Ah!” said Vaucher again. “And to-morrow the world will ask for an account. It is not wise to destroy a great genius like this, here in a corner of your dirty town. That is what you have to learn.”

“Yes,” said the Prince. “We shall learn something now. She gave her life to teach it. There will be no more Judenhetze in this city.”

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“Her life to teach it,” repeated Monsieur Vaucher. “She gave her life.” His composure failed him suddenly, and he fell on his knees on the other side of what had been Truda Schottelius, weeping openly.

“She never failed,” he said. “She never failed. A great artist, Monsieur, the Schottelius! She—she had the sense of climax!”

From the windows of the houses above them, scared curious Jews looked down uncomprehendingly.

III

THE TRADER OF LAST NOTCH

In Manicaland, summer wears the livery of the tropics. At the foot of the hills north of Macequece every yard of earth is vocal with life, and the bush is brave with color. Where the earth shows it is red, as though a wound bled. The mimosas have not yet come to flower, but amid their delicate green—the long thorns, straight or curved like claws, gleam with the flash of silver. Palms poise aloft, brilliant and delicate, and under foot, flowers are abroad. The flame-blossom blazes in scarlet. The sangdieu burns in sullen vermilion. Insects fill the world with the noise of their business—spiders, butterflies, and centipedes, ants, beetles, and flies, and mysterious entities that crawl nameless under foot. A pea-hen shrieks in the grass, and a kite whistles aloft. A remote speck in the sky denotes a watchful vulture, alert for any mishap to the citizens of the woods, and a crash of twigs may mean anything from a buck to a rhinoceros. There is a hectic on the face of nature.

The trader of Last Notch went homewards to his store through such a maze of urgent life, and panted in the heat. He had been out to shoot guinea-fowl, had shot none and expended all his cartridges, and his gun, glinting in the strong light as he walked, was heavy to his shoulder and hot to his hand. His mood was one of patient protest, for the sun found him an easy prey and he had yet some miles to go. Where another man would have said: “Damn the heat,” and done with it, John Mills, the trader, tasted the word on his lips, forbore to slip it, and counted it to himself for virtue. He set a large value on restraint, which, in view of his strength and resolute daring, was perhaps not wholly false. He was a large man, more noticeable for a sturdy solidness of proportion than for height, and his strong face was won to pleasantness by a brown beard, which he wore “navy fash.” His store, five big huts above the kloof known as Last Notch, was at the heart of a large Kafir population; and the natives, agriculturists by convention and warriors between whiles, patronized him very liberally. The Englishmen and Portuguese of the country held him in favor, and he enjoyed that esteem which a strong quiet man, who has proved himself to have reserves of violence, commonly wins from turbulent neighbors.

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He was trying for a short cut home, and purposed to wade the Revue river wherever he should strike it. Over the low bush about him he could see his hills yet a couple of hours off, and he sighed for thirst and extreme discomfort. No one, he knew, lived thereabouts—no one, at least, who was likely to have whisky at hand, though, for the matter of that, he would have welcomed a hut and a draught of Kafir itywala. His surprise was the greater, then, when there appeared from the growth beside his path as white a man as himself, a tall, somewhat ragged figure—but rags tell no news at all in Manicaland— who wore a large black moustache and smiled affably on him.

He noted that the stranger was a fine figure of a man, tall and slim, with clear dark eyes and tanned face, and he saw, too, that he wore a heavy Webley on his right hip. The newcomer continued to smile as Mills scanned him over, and waited for the trader to speak first.

“Hullo!” said Mills at length.

“’Ullo!” replied the stranger, smiling still. He had a capital smile, and Mills was captivated into smiling in sympathy.

“Who may you be?” he asked agreeably; “didn’t expect to meet no white men about here. Where’s your boys?”

The tall man waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the coast, as though to imply that he had carriers somewhere in that part of the world.

“Yais,” he said pleasantly. “An’ you are Jone Mills, eh?”

“That’s me,” said Mills promptly, lowering the butt of his gun to the ground and resting both hands on the muzzle. The stranger started slightly, but did not cease to smile.

“I don’t seem to know you,” pondered Mills. “I can’t fix you at all.”

“Ah, but you will. Le’ me see. Was it Beira, eh?”

Mills shook his head decidedly. “I never was in Beira,” he said.

“Not Beira?” queried the stranger. “Oh, but surelee. No? Well, Mandega’s, per’aps?”

“Mandega’s? Yes, I was there for a bit. I had a block of claims on the ditch, next to old Jimmy Ryan’s.”

“Ah yais,” said the tall man eagerly. “I know ‘im. An’ there you shoot the Intendente, not? That was ver’ fine. I see you coom down all quiet, an’ shoot ’im in the ‘ead. It was done ver’ naice, eh!”

Mills's face darkened. "He was robbin' me, the swine," he answered. "He'd been robbin' me for six months. But that's nobody's business but mine, and anyhow I didn't shoot him in the head. It was in the chest. An' now, who the blazes are you?"

"You do' know me?" smiled the stranger; "but I know you. Oh, ver' well. I see you ver' often. You see. My name is Jacques."

"Jack what?" demanded Mills.

"Not Jack—Jacques. Tha's all. All the people call me Frenchy, eh? You don' remember?"

"No," said Mills thoughtfully; "but then I seen a good many chaps, and I'd be like to forget some o' them. You doin' anything round here?"

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The man who called himself Jacques held up a finger. “Ah, you wan’ to know, eh? Well, I don’ tell you. I fin’ anything, I don’ tell all the people; I don’ blow the gaff. I sit still, eh? I lie low, eh? I keep ’im all for me, eh? You see?”

“Well, of course,” agreed Mills; “struck a pocket, I suppose. I shouldn’t have thought you’d have found much here. But then, of course, you’re not going to give your game away. Where’s your camp? I could do with a drink.”

“Back there,” said the Frenchman, pointing in the direction whence Mills had come. “‘Bout five miles. You don’ wan’ to come, eh? Too far, eh?”

“Yes, I reckon it’s too far,” replied Mills. “I’m not more than four miles from my own kia now. You goin’ on?”

“Yais,” agreed the Frenchman. “I go a leetle bit. Not too far, eh!”

They moved on through the bush. Mills shifted his; gun from shoulder to shoulder, and suffered still from heat and sweat. His taller companion went more easily, striding along as Mills thought, glancing at him, “like a fox.” The warmth appeared not to distress him in the least.

“By Jove,” exclaimed the trader. “You’re the build of man for this blooming country. You travel as if you was born to it. Don’t the heat trouble you at all?”

“Oh no,” answered the Frenchman carelessly. “You see, I come from a ‘ot country. In France it is ver’ often ‘ot. But you don’ like it, eh?”

“No,” said the trader, with emphasis. “I was after pea-hen, or you wouldn’t see me out this time o’ the day. English chaps can’t stand it.”

“Eh?”

“English chaps can’t stand it, I said,” repeated Mills. “They mos’ly lie up till it’s cooler.”

“Ah yais.”

They were now nearing the river. A steam rose over the bushes and spiraled into the air, and the hum of water going slowly was audible. A few minutes of walking brought them to its banks. The stream flowed greasily and dark, some forty yards wide, but in the middle it forked about a spit of sand not more than ten paces broad. It was a very Lethe of a river, running oilily and with a slumberous sound, and its reputation for crocodiles was vile.

Mills sat down and began to pull off his boots.

“As well here as anywhere,” he said. “I’ll try it, anyhow.”

“I go back now,” said the Frenchman. “Some day I come up an’ see you, eh? You like that?”

“Come along any time,” replied Mills cheerfully as he slung his boots across his shoulders. “You don’t think that island’s a quicksand, eh?”

The Frenchman turned and stared at it. “I do’ know,” he answered. “Per’aps. You goin’ to try, eh?”

“Yes, I’ll have a shot at it. You can mos’ly trust yourself on ’em if you walk light an’ quick. But we’ll see.”

The Frenchman watched him as he waded out. The black water reached no higher than his knees, but the ground was soft under foot, and he floundered anxiously.

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“It sucks at you,” he called. “It’s all greasy.”

He moved on, and came to the sand island.

“It’s better here,” he called. “I’ll be all right now.”

The Frenchman jumped to his feet.

“Look out!” he shouted, gesticulating violently. “You go down; walk off ’im!”

Mills glanced down, and saw that the creeping sand had him knee-deep. He dragged his right foot forth and plunged forward, but with the action his left leg sank to the crutch, and he only kept his balance with a violent effort.

The Frenchman danced on the bank. “Throw you’ gun down,” he shouted. “Throw you’ boots down. You’ in to the waist now. Push yo’self back to the water. Push hard.”

He wrung his hands together with excitement.

Mills threw down his gun, and the sand swallowed it at once. He turned his head to the man at the bank.

“It’s no good, chum,” he said quietly. “I reckon you better take a shot at me with that revolver.”

The sand was in his armpits. The Frenchman ceased to jump and wring his hands, and smiled at him oddly. Mills, in the midst of his trouble, felt an odd sense of outraged propriety. The smile, he reflected, was ill-timed—and he was sinking deeper.

“What you grinning at?” he gasped. “Shoot, can’t you?”

“I coom pull you out,” said the Frenchman, fumbling at the buckle of his belt, and he forthwith stepped into the water.

He waded swiftly to within five feet of the sinking man, and flung him the end of the belt. Mills failed to catch it, and the Frenchman shifted his feet cautiously and flung again.

“Now,” he shouted as the trader gripped it, “catch ’old tight,” and he started to drag him bodily forwards.

“Careful,” cried Mills; “you’re sinking!”

The Frenchman stepped free hastily, and strained on the belt again. Mills endeavored to kick with his entombed legs, and called a warning as his rescuer sunk in the sands. Thus they wrestled, and at length Mills found his head in the water and his body free.

He rose, and they waded to the bank.

“Of all the quicksands I ever saw,” said the trader slowly, as he sat down and gazed at the place that had so nearly been his grave, “that one’s the worst.”

“‘Orrid,” agreed the Frenchman, smiling amicably. “You was ver’ near buried, eh?”

“Yes,” said the trader thoughtfully. “I suppose anyone ’ud say you saved my life, Frenchy.”

“Yea,” replied the other.

“Exactly,” said Mills. “Well there’s my hand for you, Frenchy. You done me a good turn. I’ll do as much for you one of these days.”

“Eh?” said the Frenchman as he shook hands.

“You’ve got a nasty habit of saying ‘Eh?’” retorted the trader. “I said I’d do as much for you one of these days. Comprenny?”

“Oh yais,” smiled the Frenchman. “I think you will. Tha’s all right.”

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“Well,” said Mills, “I wish you’d come up and see me at my kia. Sure you can’t come now?”

“Yais, I coom now,” answered the other.

Mills stared. “’Fraid you can’t trust me to go alone, are you?” he queried. “’Cause, if so ——”

“Tha’s all right,” interrupted the Frenchman. “I coom now.”

“Right you are,” said Mills heartily. “Come along then!”

They strode off in the direction of the drift, Mills going thoughtfully, with an occasional glance at his companion. The Frenchman smiled perpetually, and once he laughed out.

“What’s the joke?” demanded the trader.

“I think I do a good piece of business to-day,” replied the Frenchman.

“H’m, yes,” continued Mills suspiciously.

It was a longish uphill walk to the trader’s store, and the night fell while they were yet on the way. With the darkness came a breeze, cool and refreshing; the sky filled with sharp points of light, and the bush woke with a new life. The crackle of their boots on the stiff grass as they walked sent live things scattering to left and right, and once a night-adder hissed malevolently at the Frenchman’s heel. They talked little as they went, but Mills noticed that now and again his companion appeared to check a laugh. He experienced a feeling of vague indignation against the man who had saved his life; he was selfish in not sharing his point of view and the thoughts which amused him. At times reserve can be the most selfish thing imaginable, and one might as well be reticent on a desert island as in Manicaland. Moreover, despite the tolerant manners of the country, Mills was conscious of something unexplained in his companion—something which engendered a suspicion on general grounds.

The circle of big dome-shaped huts which constituted the store of Last Notch came into view against a sky of dull velvet as they breasted the last rise. The indescribable homely smell of a wood-fire greeted the nostrils with the force of a spoken welcome. They could hear the gabble of the Kafirs at their supper and the noise of their shrill, empty laughter.

“That’s home,” said Mills, breaking a long silence.

“Yais,” murmured the Frenchman; “‘ome, eh? Yais. Ver’ naice.”

“You may say what you like,” continued the trader aggressively. “Home is something. Though never so ’umble, ye know, there’s no place like home.”

“Tha’s all right,” assented the other gaily. “I know a man name’ Albert Smith, an’ ’e sing that in the jail at Beira. Sing all the night till I stop ’im with a broom. Yais.”

Mills grunted, and they entered the skoff kia—the largest of the huts, sacred to the uses of a dining-room. It contained two canvas chairs, a camp table, a variety of boxes to sit upon, and some picture-paper illustration on the mud wall. A candle in a bottle illuminated it, and a bird in the thatch overhead twittered volubly at their presence. Some tattered books lay in the corner.

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They washed in the open air, sluicing themselves from buckets, and dressed again in clean dungarees in another hut.

“Skoff (food) ’ll be ready by now,” said Mills; “but I think a gargle’s the first thing. You’ll have whisky, or gin?”

The Frenchman pronounced for whisky, and took it neat. Mills stared.

“If I took off a dose like that,” he observed, “I should be as drunk as an owl. You know how to shift it!”

“Eh?”

“Gimme patience,” prayed the trader. “You bleat like a yowe. I said you can take it, the drink. Savvy? Wena poosa meningi sterrik. Have some more?”

“Oh yais,” smiled the guest. “Ver’ good w’isky, eh?”

He tossed off another four fingers of the liquor, and they sat down to their meal. The food was such as most tables in Manicaland offered. Everything was tinned, and the menu ran the gamut of edibles from roast capon (cold) to pate de foie gras in a pot. When they had finished Mills passed over his tobacco and sat back. He watched the other light up and blow a white cloud, and then spoke.

“Look here, Frenchy,” he said, looking at him steadily; “I don’t quite cotton to you, and I think it proper you should say a bit more than you have said.”

“Eh!” queried the other, smiling.

Mills glowered, but restrained himself. “I want to know who you are, and I guess I mean to know too, so out with it!”

“Ah yais,” replied the Frenchman, and removed his pipe from his mouth. He trimmed the bowl fastidiously with his thumb, smiling the while. Of a sudden he looked up, and the smile was gone. He gave Mills back a look as purposeful as his own.

“I’m the man that save’ you in the river,” he said meaningly.

“Well,” began the trader hotly, but stopped.

“That’s true,” he answered thoughtfully, as though speaking to himself. “Yes, that’s true. You’ve got me, Frenchy.”

“Yais,” went on the Frenchman, leaning forward across the table, and speaking with an emphasis that was like an insult. “You sink there in the sand. I stop and save you. I stop, you see, although the men from Macequece coom after me and want to kill me.”

“But I don’ run away; I don’ say to you, ‘I can’ stop. You go down; you die.’ I don’ say that. I stop. I save you. An’ now you say to me, ’Frenchy, ’oo the ‘ell are you?’ Yais.”

Mills shrugged protestingly. The appeal was to the core of his nature; the demand was one he could not dishonor.

“I didn’t say just that,” he urged. “But what are the chaps from Macequece after you for?”

“Tha’s all right,” replied the Frenchman with a wave of his hand. “You say, ‘Frenchy, I don’ like you. Dam’ you, Frenchy!’ Ver’ well. The men coom, you give me to them. They shoot me. Tha’s all right; yais!”

He replaced his pipe and commenced again to smoke with an expression of weary indifference.

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“I’m not that sort,” said Mills. “I’m open to admit I didn’t quite take to you—at first. I can’t say fairer than that. But tell me what you done to rile the chaps. Did you kill a bloke, or what?”

“Jone Mills,” said the Frenchman “Jone Mills shoot the Intendente at Mandega’s. Kill ‘im dead. Dead as pork. They don’ chase Jone Mills. They don’ wan’ to shoot Jone Mills. No. Frenchy—po’ ol’ Frenchy—’e shoot a man in Macequece. Shoot ’im dead. Dead as pork. Then they all coom after ‘im. Wan’ to shoot ‘im. An’ po’ ol’ Frenchy, ’e stop to pull Jone Mills out of the river. ’E save Jone Mills. Jone squeak an’ say, ‘Shoot me quick befo’ I choke.’ But Frenchy stop an’ pull ‘im out. Yais. An’ then they shoot Frenchy. Yais!” He blew a huge volume of smoke and lay back serenely.

“Look ’ere, Frenchy,” cried Mills, stretching his hand across the table, “I’m in this. They won’t catch you here, old son. Savvy? There’s my hand for you.”

“Eh?”

“There’s my hand, I’m tellin’ you. Shake hands, old son. You may be a hard case, but you did save my life, and it’s up to me to see you through. We’ll be able to call quits then.”

The Frenchman rose with a serious face, and the two shook hands over the candle. The Frenchman held Mills’s hand a moment longer.

“I know you,” he said. “You do’ know me. I trust you, Jone. I know yo’ a good man.”

He sat back again, and Mills turned matters over. In that rough community no man would own himself devoid of gratitude. “I’ll do as much for you” was the common acknowledgment of a favor. It appeared to Mills that his new acquaintance might be a precious scoundrel, but that point was not at present in issue, and there remained a debt to be satisfied before he could raise it. The knowledge that Frenchy had shot a man did not trouble him in the least, so long as the accompanying circumstances and the motive were in accordance with the simple standards of Manicaland. Here came in the doubt, engendered by nothing more concrete or citable than a trifle of mystery in the man’s manner, and some undefined quality that disagreed with the trader. He glanced over to him; the Frenchman was blowing rings of smoke and smiling at them. There was nothing in his face but innocent and boyish amusement.

“Gad, you’re a cool hand!” exclaimed Mills. “How d’you reckon we better work it?”

“I do’ know,” replied the other indifferently.

“You don’t, eh? Well, d’you think they’ll follow you all night?”

“I don’ think,” said the Frenchman, with confidence and a swelling of his chest—“I don’ think they wan’ to meet me in the night. Not ver’ naice eh? Leetle dangerous.”

“H’m. You’ve got a bit of an opinion of yerself, anyhow. If that’s all right, it’ll be time enough to clear by daylight. Did you bolt just as you are—no niggers, no skoff, no anything?”

“No time,” was the answer. “So I coom out-with-out everything. Just like this.”

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“I can get you a couple of niggers,” mused Mills, “an’ you’ll want a gun. Then, with skoff for a fortnight, you ought to be up at the Mazoe before they find your spoor. What do you think?”

“I think i’s ver’ naice,” smiled the other.

“Then we’ll hamba lala” (go to sleep), said Mills rising. “I don’t know how you feel, but I’m just done up.”

A bed was soon fixed for the Frenchman, who retired with a light-hearted “goo’ night.” Mills, keeping full in view his guest’s awkward position, and the necessity for packing him off at daylight, determined not to sleep. He went out of the kraal and listened to the night. It spoke with a thousand voices; the great factory of days and nights was in full swing; but he caught no sound of human approach, and returned to the huts to prepare his guest’s kit for the departure. He found and partially cleaned an old rifle, and unpacked a generous donation of cartridges. Meal for the carriers, blankets and tinned meats for the Frenchman, were all at hand. Candles, a lantern, matches, gin, a pannikin, a pair of pots, and so on, soon completed the outfit. Packing is generally an interesting operation, and Mills was an expert in it. He forgot most of his perplexity and ill-ease as he adjusted the bundles and measured the commodities. He had the whole of the gear spread out on the floor of the skoff kia when a voice accosted him.

“You needn’t bother no more, Jack,” it said softly.

A man tiptoed in. He was short and lightly built, and carried a sporting rifle in his hand. His reddish moustache was draggled with dew and his clothes were soaked in it. He looked at Mills with gleeful blue eyes.

“Where’s Frenchy?” he asked softly.

Mills labored to express surprise. “What’re you talkin’ about?” he demanded loudly.

“Don’t shout, blast yer!” whispered the other vehemently. “We saw yer go up ’ere together, Jack, and nobody ain’t gone away since. There’s five of us, Jack, and we want that swine—we want ’im bad.”

“What for?” asked Mills desperately, without lowering his voice.

The other made an impatient gesture for silence, but his words were arrested by a clamor in the yard. There were shouts and curses and the sound of blows.

“We’ve got him, Charley,” shouted some one triumphantly.

The smaller man rushed out, and Mills followed swiftly. There was a blackness of moving forms in the open, and some one struck a match. The man called Charley

stepped forward. Mills saw the face and hand of a man standing upright, brilliantly illuminated by the flame of the match; and on the ground three men, who knelt on and about a prostrate figure. One was busy with some cord. In the background stood Mills's Kafirs. The match burned down to the holder's fingers, and he dropped it.

"Well, Dave," said Mills, "what's the meanin' o' this game o' yours— comin' to a man's kia in the middle o' the night and ropin' his mate out o' bed?"

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The man who had lit the match laughed. “That you, Jack?” he said. “Well, you wouldn’t be so ready to call this bloke ‘mate’ if you knew what he’d been up to.”

“The—swine!” commented Charley.

“Get a lantern,” commanded Mills to the Kafirs. “What d’you mean?” he asked of the tall man.

“He shot a woman,” said Dave. The tone was eloquent of the speaker’s rage and disgust.

Mills stared open-mouthed. “A woman!” he gasped.

“A woman,” replied Dave. “Shot her, as bold as the devil, on the street, in the daytime, and did a bolt for the bush. Every man that could put foot to the ground is out after him.”

A kafir arrived then with the lantern Mills had designed for the Frenchman, and by its light he was able to see the faces of the men. They were all known to him. The man who was cording the prisoner’s arms had seen his daring work at Mandega’s. He knelt on the prostrate form as he worked, and the Frenchman’s face showed like a waxen mask on the ground. Blood was running from a deep cut on his cheek.

“I save yo’ life, Jone,” he gasped.

“Shut up!” snapped one of the men, and struck him on the mouth.

“Here,” protested Mills; “go slow, can’t you, There’s no call to bang him about.”

They stared at him with astonishment. “Why, man,” exclaimed Charley, “didn’t we tell you he shot a woman?”

“What’s that he said about savin’ your life?” demanded Dave.

“He did,” explained Mills. He told them the story, and they listened without sympathy.

“It was a bloomin’ plucky thing to do,” concluded the trader. “I’d ha’ bin dead by now but for him, and I owe ’im one for it.”

“Oh, nobody’s sayin’ he isn’t plucky,” said the man who had ’been tying the Frenchman’s arms, as he rose to his feet. “He’s the dare-devillist swine alive, but he’s done with it now.”

Dave came round and clapped Mills on the shoulder.

“It’s worked you a bit soft, old man,” he said. “Why, hang it all, you wouldn’t have us let him go after shooting a woman, would you?”

“Oh! stow it,” broke in one of the others. “If it wasn’t that ’e’s got to go back to Macequece to be shot, I’d blow his head off now.”

“I’m not asking you to let him go,” cried Mills. “But give the bloke a chance, give ’im a run for it. Why, I wouldn’t kill a dog so; it’s awful—an’—an’—he saved my life, chaps; he saved my life.”

“But he shot a woman,” said Charley.

That closed the case—the man had committed the ultimate crime. Nothing could avail him now. He had shot a woman—he must suffer.

“Jone,” moaned the Frenchman—the cords were eating into his flesh— “Jone, I saved yo’ life.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me?” cried Mills passionately; “why couldn’t you trust me? I could ha’ got you away.”

“That’ll do,” interrupted Dave, thrusting Mills aside. “We’ll trouble you for a drink and a bite, old boy, an’ then we’ll start back.”

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Mills led the way to the skoff kia in silence. There was food and drink still on the table, and the men sat down to it at once. The Frenchman lay in the middle of the kraal, bound; his captors' weapons lay at their feet. He was as effectually a prisoner as if their five barrels were covering him. Mills stood moodily watching the men eat, his brain drumming on the anguished problem of the Frenchman's life or death without effort or volition on his part.

"Got any more poosa, old boy?" asked Dave, setting down the whisky-bottle empty.

"Yes," said Mills thoughtfully. "Plenty." He shouted for a boy, and one came running.

"Go to the store-hut," ordered Mills slowly, "and bring a bottle of whisky." He spoke the "kitchen-Kafir" that every one in Manicaland understands.

"Yes, bass," said the native.

"But first," said Mills, still speaking slowly and quietly, "take a knife and cut loose the man on the ground. Quick!" The last word was a shout.

Dave sprang to his feet and stood motionless. The others were arrested in the action of rising or reaching their weapons. From the wall beside him Mills had reached a revolver and held them covered. The barrel moved over them, presenting its black threatful mouth to one after the other. It moved in jerks, but not without purpose. It held them all subject, and the first movement doomed.

"Jack!" cried Dave.

"Shut up!" commanded Mills. "Don't move now. For God's sake don't move. I'll shoot the first one that does."

"He shot a woman," they protested.

"He saved my life," said Mills. "Are you'all right, Frenchy?"

"Yais," came the answer, and with it the ghost of a laugh.

Mills did not look round, and the steady remorseless barrel still sailed to and fro across the faces of the men in the hut.

"Clear out, then," he shouted. "I'll only give you five minutes. You shot a woman. And, Frenchy——"

"Yais, Jone."

"This makes us quits, see?"

“Ver’ good, Jone. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Frenchy.”

Dave ripped out a curse and shifted slightly. The barrel sprang round to him, and he froze into stillness.

“Don’t do that again, Davy,” warned Mills.

“You’ll catch it hot for this,” snarled one of them.

“Very like,” replied the trader.

He counted a liberal five minutes by guess. He dared not look away from his men. At last he spoke.

“It was up to me, boys,” he said with a sigh. “I couldn’t do no less. If it ’ad been a man ‘e shot I’d ha’ kept you here all day. But I’ve done enough, I reckon, seein’ it was a woman.”

He dropped the revolver to the ground.

“Now!” he said.

They sat round and stared at him. For full a minute no one spoke. Mills gave them back their eyes gloomily, leaning with folded arms against the wall. Then Dave drew a long breath, a very sigh.

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“Well, Jack,” he said, shaking his head, “I didn’t think it of you—I didn’t indeed. A skunk like that! a woman-shooter, and a Frenchman! You didn’t use to be like this.”

“We’re quits now, him and me,” answered Mills. “He saved my life, and I’m satisfied. So if you’ve got anything to say—or do—then get it over.”

Charley burst out at this in a fuss of anger. “You ought to be shot,” he shouted. “That’s all you’re fit for.”

“Charley’s right,” growled one of the others.

“Oh, cut it off,” cried Dave impatiently; “we’re not going to shoot Jack. But I guess we won’t say we’ve lost the Frenchman yet.”

He lowered his brows and turned his eyes on Mills.

“You an’ him’s quits, Jack,” he said. “What do you think about it?”

Mills looked up slowly, like a man newly awaked from a dream.

“You might get a shot at him from the path,” he answered musingly. “That is, if he’s keeping north. I’ll show you the place.”

“You don’t think we’d have a chance of catching him?”

“Not a ghost,” replied the trader decisively. “Once you get into the kloof, he’s lost. All you can do is wait till he breaks cover down below, an’ try a long shot. By God!” he cried with sudden energy, “I’ll try a lick at him myself. We’re quits now, the—the woman-shooter!”

He snatched a rifle and led the way, the others tumbling after him. Some hundred yards beyond the kraal the footpath dipped abruptly towards the valley, and at an angle of it there was to be gained a clear view of the bush beneath, where it surged at the foot of the hill and ran down the kloof; at the lower part of the kloof it ceased, and the ground was bare red earth for a space of some thousand yards. Mills sat down on a stone. Dave squatted beside him, and the others grouped themselves on adjacent boulders.

The sun was well into the sky by now—it was about six o’clock in the morning. The air was of diamond, and the chill of the night had already passed. The men glued their eyes on the bare patch and waited.

“Funny game you played up there,” whispered Dave to the trader.

Mills nodded without speaking.

“I’m not blaming you,” continued the other. “I reckon I understand, old boy. But are you goin’ to shoot at him?”

“I am that,” was the reply.

“Well, I hope you get him,” said Dave. “The chaps’ll forget the other business then. They didn’t like it, you know—nobody would.”

“It’s not because I care for them or what they think——” began Mills.

“I know it’s not,” interrupted Dave. “You know all the ranges, I suppose?”

“Nine hundred yards to that black spot,” said Mills. “The spot’s a bit of a hole in the ground. Twelve hundred to the big boulder.”

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He rose off the stone he was sitting on and lay down on the path, belly under, and ran up the back sight of his rifle with care. Flinging back the bolt, he blew into the chamber and thrust a cartridge in; tested the air with a wet finger, and wriggled the butt home into his shoulder. Dave watched him in silence; Mills was, he knew, a good shot, and he was now preparing, with all the little tricks and graces of the rifle-range, to pull trigger on the man he had risked—nay, almost thrown away—his life to save from the consequences of an unspeakable crime.

“Ah!” breathed Mills, with an artist’s luxurious satisfaction.

Down the valley a figure had broken from the bush, and was plainly to be seen against the red ground. The men on the hill flopped down and prepared to shoot.

“Don’t fire,” Dave warned the others. He was watching Mills. The trader’s face bore no signs of his recent mental struggle. It carried no expression whatever, save one of cool interest, just touched with a craftsman’s confidence. His barrel was steady as his head. The little figure below was moving over the rough ground towards the black spot. They could see its legs working grotesquely, like a mechanical toy.

“So,” murmured Mills. “Now just a little farther. So!”

He fired.

There was no leap into the air, no tragic bound and sprawling tumble.
The little figure in the valley fell where it was, and never moved.

Mills jerked open his breech.

“I’ll bet that took him in the spine,” he said.

IV

THE MURDERER

From the open door of the galley, where the cross, sleepy cook was coaxing his stove to burn, a path of light lay across the deck, showing a slice of steel bulwark with ropes coiled on the pins, and above it the arched foot of the mainsail. In the darkness forward, where the port watch of the Villingen was beginning the sea day by washing down decks, the brooms swished briskly and the head-pump clacked like a great, clumsy clock.

The men worked in silence, though the mate was aft on the poop, and nothing prevented them from talking as they passed the buckets to and from the tub under the pump and drove their brooms along the planks. They labored with the haste of men

accustomed to be driven hard, with the shuffling, involuntary speed that has nothing in it of free strength or good-will. The big German four-master had gathered from the boarding-houses of Philadelphia a crew representing all the nationalities which breed sailors, and carried officers skilled in the crude arts of getting the utmost out of it. And since the lingua franca of the sea, the tongue which has meaning for Swedish carpenters, Finn sail-makers, and Greek fo'c's'le hands alike, is not German, orders aboard the Villingen were given and understood in English.

"A hand com' aft here!"

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It was the mate's voice from the poop, robust and peremptory. Conroy, one of the two Englishmen in the port watch, laid down the bucket he was carrying and moved aft in obedience to the summons. As he trod into the slip of light by the galley door he was visible as a fair youth, long-limbed and slender, clad in a serge shirt, with dungaree trousers rolled up to the knees, and girt with a belt which carried the usual sheath-knife. His pleasant face had a hint of uncertainty; it was conciliatory and amiable; he was an able seaman of the kind which is manufactured by a boarding-master short of men out of a runaway apprentice. The others, glancing after him while they continued their work, saw him suddenly clear by the galley door, then dim again as he stepped beyond it. He passed out of sight towards the lee poop ladder.

The silent, hurried sailors pressed on with their work, while the big barque purred through the water to the drone of wind thrusting in the canvas. The brooms were abaft of the galley when the outcry began which caused them to look apprehensively towards the poop without ceasing their business of washing down. First it was an oath in explosive German, the tongue which puts a cutting-edge on profanity; then the mate's roar:

"Is dat vat I tell you, you verfluchter fool? Vat? Vat? You don't understand ven I speak? I show you vat——"

The men who looked up were on the wrong side of the deck to make out what was happening, for the chart-house screened the drama from them. But they knew too well the meaning of that instantaneous silence which cut the words off. It was the mate biting in his breath as he struck. They heard the smack of the fist's impact and Conroy's faint, angry cry as he failed to guard it; then the mate again, bull-mouthed, lustful for cruelty: "Vat—you lift up your arm to me! You dog!" More blows, a rain of them, and then a noise as though Conroy had fallen or been knocked down. And after that a thud and a scream.

The men looked at one another, and nods passed among them. "He kicked him when he was down on the deck," the whisper went. The other Englishman in the watch swore in a low grunt and dropped his broom, meeting the wondering eyes of the "Dutchmen" and "Dagoes" with a scowl. He was white-haired and red-faced, a veteran among the nomads of the sea, the oldest man aboard, and the only one in the port watch who had not felt the weight of the mate's fist. Scowling still, as though in deep thought, he moved towards the ladder. The forlorn hope was going on a desperate enterprise of rescue.

It might have been an ugly business; there was a sense in the minds of his fellows of something sickening about to happen; but the mate had finished with Conroy. The youth came staggering and crying down the ladder, with tears and blood befouling his face, and stumbled as his foot touched the deck. The older man, Slade, saved him from

falling, and held him by the upper arm with one gnarled, toil-roughened hand, peering at him through the early morning gloom.

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“Kicked you when you was down, didn’t he?” he demanded abruptly.

“Yes,” blubbered Conroy, shivering and dabbing at his face. “With his sea-boots, too, the—the——”

Slade shook him. “Don’t make that noise or he might kick you spine more,” he advised grimly. “You better go now an’ swab that blood off your face.”

“Yes,” agreed Conroy tremulously, and Slade let him go.

The elder man watched him move forward on shambling and uncertain feet, with one hand pressed to his flank, where the mate’s kick was still an agony. Slade was frowning heavily, with a tincture of thought in his manner, as though he halted on the brink of some purpose.

“Conroy,” he breathed, and started after the other.

The younger man turned. Slade again put his hand on Conroy’s arm.

“Say,” he said, breathing short, “is that a knife in your belt?”

Conroy felt behind him, uncomprehending, for the sheath-knife, which he wore, sailor fashion, in the middle of his back.

“What d’you mean?” he asked vacantly. “Here’s my knife.”

He drew it and showed it to Slade, the flat blade displayed in his palm.

The white-haired seaman thrust his keen old face toward Conroy’s, so that the other could see the flash of the white of his eyes.

“And he kicked you, didn’t he?” said Slade tensely. “You fool!”

He struck the knife to the deck, where it rattled and slid toward the scupper.

“Eh?” Conroy gaped, not understanding. “I don’t see what——”

“Pick it up!” said Slade, with a gesture toward the knife. He spoke, as though he strangled an impulse to brandish his fists and scream, in a nasal whisper. “It’s safe to kick you,” he said. “A woman could do it.”

“But——” Conroy flustered vaguely.

Slade drove him off with a wave of his arm and turned away with the abruptness of a man disgusted beyond bearing.

Conroy stared after him and saw him pick up his broom where he had dropped it and join the others. His intelligence limped; his thrashing had stunned him, and he could not think—he could only feel, like fire in his mind, the passion of the feeble soul resenting injustice and pain which it cannot resist or avenge. He stooped to pick up his knife and went forward to the tub under the head-pump, to wash his cuts in cold sea-water, the cheap balm for so many wrongs of cheap humanity.

It was an accident such as might serve to dedicate the day to the service of the owners of the Villingen. It was early and sudden; but, save in these respects, it had no character of the unusual. The men who plied the brooms and carried the buckets were not shocked or startled by it so much as stimulated; it thrust under their noses the always imminent danger of failing to satisfy the mate's ideal of seaman-like efficiency. They woke to a fresher energy, a more desperate haste, under its suggestion.

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It was after the coffee interval, which mitigates the sourness of the morning watch, when daylight had brought its chill, grey light to the wide, wet decks, that the mate came forward to superintend the “pull all round,” which is the ritual sequel to washing down.

“Lee fore-brace, dere!” his flat, voluminous voice ordered, heavy with the man’s potent and dreaded personality. They flocked to obey, scurrying like scared rats, glancing at him in timid hate. He came striding along the weather side of the deck from the remote, august poop; he was like a dreadful god making a dreadful visitation upon his faithful. Short-legged, tending to bigness in the belly, bearded, vibrant with animal force and personal power, his mere presence cowed them. His gross face, the happy face of an egoist with a sound digestion, sent its lofty and sure regard over them; it had a kind of unconsciousness of their sense of humility, of their wrong and resentment—the innocence of an aloof and distant tyrant, who has not dreamed how hurt flesh quivers and seared minds rankle. He was bland and terrible; and they hated him after their several manners, some with dull tear, one or two—and Slade among them—with a ferocity that moved them like physical nausea.

He had left his coat on the wheel-box to go to his work, and was manifestly unarmed. The belief which had currency in the forecastle, that he came on watch with a revolver in his coat-pocket, did not apply to him now; they could have seized him, smitten him on his blaspheming mouth, and hove him over the side without peril. It is a thing that has happened to a hated officer more than once or ten times, and a lie, solemnly sworn to by every man of the watch on deck, has been entered in the log, and closed the matter for all hands. He was barer of defense than they, for they had their sheath-knives; and he stood by the weather-braces, arrogant, tyrannical, overbearing, and commanded them. He seemed invulnerable, a thing too great to strike or defy, like the white squalls that swooped from the horizon and made of the vast Villingen a victim and a plaything. His full, boastful eye traveled over them absently, and they cringed like slaves.

“Belay, dere!” came his orders, overloud and galling to men surging with cowardly and insufferable haste. “Lower tobsail—haul! Belay! Ubber tobsail—haul, you sons of dogs! Haul, dere, blast you! You vant me to come over and show you?”

Servilely, desperately, they obeyed him, spending their utmost strength to placate him, while the naked spirit of murder moved in every heart among them. At the tail of the brace, Conroy, with his cuts stanched, pulled with them. His abject eyes, showing the white in sidelong glances, watched the great, squat figure of the mate with a fearful fascination.

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Eight bells came at last, signaling the release of the port watch from the deck and the tension of the officer's presence. The forecastle received them, the stronghold of their brief and limited leisure. The unkempt, weather-stained men, to whom the shifting seas were the sole arena of their lives, sat about on chests and on the edges of the lower bunks, at their breakfast, while the pale sunlight traveled to and fro on the deck as the Villingen lurched in her gait. Conroy, haggard and drawn, let the coffee slop over the brim of his hook-pot as he found himself a seat.

"Well, an' what did he punch ye for this time?"

It was old Slade who put the question, seated on a chest with his back against the bulkhead. His pot was balanced on his knee, and his venerable, sardonic face, with the scanty white hair clinging about the temples, addressed Conroy with slow mockery.

Conroy hesitated. "It was over coilin' away some gear," he said. Slade waited, and he had to go on. He had misunderstood the mate's order to coil the ropes on the pins, where they would be out of the way of the deck-washing, and he had flemished them down on the poop instead. It was the mistake of a fool, and he knew it.

Slade nodded. "Ye-es," he drawled. "You earned a punch an' you got it. But he kicked you, too, didn't he?"

"Kicked me!" cried Conroy. "Why, I thought he was goin' to kill me! Look here—look at this, will you?"

With fumbling hands he cast loose his belt and flung it on the floor, and plucked his shirt up so as to leave his side bare. He stood up, with one arm raised above his head, showing his naked flank to the slow eyes of his shipmates. His body had still a boyish delicacy and slenderness; the labor of his trade had not yet built it and thickened it to a full masculinity of proportion. Measured by any of the other men in the watch, it was frail, immature, and tender. The moving sunlight that flowed around the door touched the fair skin and showed the great, puffed bruises that stood on it, swollen and horrid, like some vampire fungus growing on the clean flesh.

A great Greek, all black hair and eyeball, clicked softly between his teeth.

"It looks like—a hell!" he said softly, in his purring voice.

"Dem is kicks, all right—ja!" said some one else, and yet another added the comment of a heavy oath.

Old Slade made no comment, but sat, balancing his hook-pot of coffee and watching the scene under his heavy white brows. Conroy lowered his arm and let the shirt fall to cover the bruises.

“You see?” he said to Slade.

“I see,” answered the other, with a bitter twist of his old, malicious lips. Setting down the pot which he held, he stooped and lifted the belt which Conroy had thrown down. It seemed to interest him, for he looked at it for some moments.

“And here’s yer knife,” he said, reaching it to the youth, still with his manner of mockery. “There’s some men it wouldn’t be safe to kick, with a knife in their belts.”

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He and Conroy were the only Englishmen there; the rest were of the races which do not fight bare-handed. The big Greek flashed a smile through the black, shining curls of his beard, and continued to smile without speaking. Through the tangle of incomprehensible conventions, he had arrived at last at a familiar principle.

Conroy flushed hotly, the blood rising hectic on his bruised and broken face.

“If he thinks it’s safe with me,” he cried, “he’ll learn different. I didn’t have a chance aft there; he came on me too quick, before I was expecting him, and it was dark, besides. Or else——”

“It’ll be dark again,” said Slade, with intent, significant eyes fixed on him, “and he needn’t be expecting you. But—it don’t do to talk too much. Talk’s easy—talk is.”

“I’ll do more than talk,” responded Conroy. “You’ll see!”

Slade nodded. “Right, then; we’ll see,” he said, and returned to his breakfast.

His bunk was an upper one, lighted and aired by a brass-framed port-hole. Here, when his meal was at an end, he lay, his pipe in his mouth, his hands behind his head, smoking with slow relish, with his wry old face upturned, and the leathery, muscular forearms showing below the rolled shirt-sleeves. His years had ground him to an edge; he had an effect, as he lay, of fineness, of subtlety, of keen and fastidious temper. Forty years of subjection to arbitrary masters had left him shrewd and secret, a Machiavelli of the forecastle.

Once Conroy, after seeming to sleep for an hour, rose on his elbow and stared across at him, craning his neck from his bunk to see the still mask of his face.

“Slade?” he said uncertainly.

“What?” demanded the other, unmoving.

Conroy hesitated. The forecastle was hushed; the seamen about them slumbered; the only noises were the soothing of the water overside, the stress of the sails and gear, and the irregular tap of a hammer aft. It was safe to speak, but he did not speak.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, and lay down again. Slade smiled slowly, almost paternally.

It took less than eight hours for Conroy’s rancor to wear dull, and he could easily have forgotten his threat against the mate in twelve, if only he had been allowed to. He was genuinely shocked when he found that his vaporings were taken as the utterance of a serious determination. Just before eight bells in the afternoon watch he went forward beneath the forecastle head in search of some rope-yarns, and was cutting an end off a bit of waste-line when the Greek, he of the curly beard and extravagant eyeballs, rose

like a demon of pantomime from the forepeak. Conroy had his knife in his hand to cut the rope, and the Greek's sudden smile seemed to rest on that and nothing else.

"Sharp, eh!" asked the Greek, in a whisper that filled the place with dark drama.

Conroy paused, apprehending his meaning with a start.

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“Oh, it’s all right,” he growled, and began to saw at the rope in his hand, while the Greek watched him with his fixed, bony smile.

“No,” said the latter suddenly. “Dat-a not sharp—no! Look-a ’ere; you see dis?”

He drew his own knife, and showed it pointing towards Conroy in a damp, swarthy hand, whose knuckles bulged above the haft. His rough, spatulate thumb rasped along it, drawing from it the crepitation that proves an acute edge.

“Carve him like-a da pork,” he said, in his stage-conspirator’s whisper. “And da point—-now, see!”

He glanced over his shoulder to be sure that none overlooked them; then, with no more than a jerk of his hand beside his hip, threw the keen blade toward the wooden door of the bo’sun’s locker. It traveled through the air swiftly and stuck, quivering on its thin point, in the stout teak. The Greek turned his smile again for a moment on Conroy before he strode across and recovered it.

“You take ’im,” he whispered. “Better dan your little knife—yais.”

By the mere urgency of his proffering it the exchange was made, and Conroy found himself with a knife in his hand that fell through the strands of the manila line as though they had been butter, an instrument made and perfected for a murder.

“Yes, but look here——” he began, in alarm.

The broad, mirthless smile was turned on him.

“Just like-a da pork,” purred the Greek, and nodded assuringly before he turned to go aft.

The bull-roar of the mate, who was awaiting his return with the rope-yarns, roused Conroy from a scared reverie over the knife. He started; the mate was bustling furiously forward in search of him, full of uproar and anger.

“Dam’ lazy schwein, you goin’ to schleep dere? You vant me to come an’ fetch you?? You vant anodder schmack on de maul to keep you avake—yes?”

He stamped into view round the forward house, while Conroy stood, convicted of idleness by the rope in his hand only half cut through. At the same moment a population of faces came into being behind him. A man who had been aloft shuffled down to the rail; a couple of others came into view on the deck; on top of the house, old Slade kneeled to see under the break of the forecastle head. It seemed as though a skeptical audience had suddenly been created out of his boast of the morning, every

face threatening him with that shame which vanity will die rather than endure. In a panic of his faculties he took one step toward the mate.

“Hey?” The mate halted in his stride, with sheer amazement written on his face. “You vant yer head knocked off—yes?”

“No, I don’t,” said Conroy, out of a dry mouth.

According to the usage of ships, even that was defiance and a challenge.

He had forgotten the revolver with which the mate was credited; he had forgotten everything but the fact that eyes were on him. Even the knife in his hand passed from his mind; he was a mere tingling pretence at fortitude, expending every force to maintain his pose.

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“Put dat knife avay!” ordered the mate suddenly.

He arrested an automatic movement to obey, fighting down a growing fear of his opponent.

“I’ve not finished with it yet,” he answered.

The mate measured him with a practiced eye. Though he had the crazy courage of a bulldog, he was too much an expert in warlike emergencies to overlook the risk of trying to rush a desperate man armed with a knife, the chances of the grapple were too ugly. There was something lunatic and strange in the youth’s glare also; and it will sometimes happen that an oppressed and cowed man in his extremity will shrug his meekness from him and become, in a breath, a desperado. This had its place in the mate’s considerations.

“Finish, den!” he rasped, with no weakening of his tone or manner. “You don’t t’ink I’m goin’ to vait all night for dem rope-yarns— hey?”

He turned his back at once lest Conroy should venture another retort, and make an immediate fight unavoidable. Before his eye the silent audience melted as swiftly as it had appeared, and Conroy was alone with his sick sense of having ventured too far, which stood him in place of the thrill of victory.

The thrill came later, in the forecastle, where he swelled to the adulation of his mates. They, at any rate, had been deceived by his attitude; they praised him by word and look; the big Greek infused a certain geniality into his smile. Only Slade said the wrong thing.

“I was ready for him as soon as he moved,” Conroy was asserting. “And he knew it. You should ha’ seen how he gaped when I wouldn’t put the knife away.”

The men were listening, crediting him. Old Slade, in the background, took his pipe from his lips.

“An’ now I suppose you’re satisfied,” he inquired harshly.

“How d’you mean, satisfied?” demanded Conroy, coloring. “You saw what happened, didn’t you?”

“You made him gape,” said Slade. “That was because he made you howl, eh? Well, ain’t you calling it quits, then—till the next time he kicks you?”

Some one laughed; Conroy raised his voice.

“He’ll never kick me again,” he cried. “His kicking days are over. He’s kicked me once too often, he has. Quits—I guess not!”

Slade let a mouthful of smoke trickle between his lips; it swam in front of his face in a tenuous film of pale vapor.

“Well, talkin’ won’t do it, anyhow,” he said.

“No,” retorted Conroy, and collected all eyes to his gesture. “But this will!”

He showed them the thin-bladed knife which the Greek had given him, holding it before them by the hilt. He let a dramatic moment elapse.

“Like that!” he said, and stabbed at the air. “Like that—see? Like that!”

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They came upon bad weather gradually, drawing into a belt of half-gales, with squalls that roared up from the horizon and made them for the time, into whole gales. The Villingen, designed and built primarily for cargo capacity, was a wet ship, and upon any point of sailing had a way of scooping in water by the many tons. In nearly every watch came the roar, “Stand by yer to’gallant halliards!” Then the wait for ten seconds or ten minutes while the wind grew and the big four-masted barque lay over and bumped her bluff bows through racing seas, till the next order, shriller and more urgent, “Lower avay!” and the stiff canvas fought and slatted as the yards came down. Sea-boots and oilskins were the wear for every watch; wet decks and the crash of water coming inboard over the rail, dull cold and the rasp of heavy, sodden canvas on numb fingers, became again familiar to the men, and at last there arrived the evening, gravid with tempest, on which all hands reefed top-sails.

The mate had the middle watch, from midnight till four o’clock in the morning, and for the first two hours it was Conroy’s turn on the lookout. The rest, in oilskins and sea-boots, were standing by under the break of the poop; save for the sleeping men in the shut forecastle, he had the fore part of the ship to himself. He leaned against the after rail of the fore-castle head, where a ventilator somewhat screened him from the bitter wind that blew out of the dark, and gazed ahead at the murk. Now and again the big barque slid forward with a curtseying motion, and dipped up a sea that flowed aft over the anchors and cascaded down the ladders to the main-deck; spray that spouted aloft’ and drove across on the wind, sparkled red and green in the glare of the sidelights like brief fireworks.

The splash and drum of waters, the heavy drone of the wind in the sails, the clatter of gear aloft, were in his ears; he did not hear one bell strike from the poop, which he should have answered with a stroke on the big bell behind him and a shouted report on the lights.

“Hoy! You schleepin’ up dere—hey?”

It was the mate, who had come forward in person to see why he had not answered. He was by the fore fife-rail, a mere black shape in the dark.

“Sleepin’—no, sir!”

“Don’t you hear yon bell shtrike?” cried the mate, slithering on the wet deck toward the foot of the ladder.

“No, sir,” said Conroy, and stooped to strike the bell.

The mate came up the ladder, hauling himself by the hand-rails, for he was swollen beyond the ordinary with extra clothes under his long oilskin coat. A plume of spray whipped him in the face as he got to the top, and he swore shortly, wiping his eyes with

his hands. At the same moment, Conroy, still stooping to the bell-lanyard, felt the Villingen lower her nose and slide down in one of her disconcerting curtseys; he caught at the rail to steady himself. The dark water, marbled with white foam, rode in over the deck, slid across the anchors and about the capstan, and came aft toward the ladder and the mate. The ship rolled at the same moment.

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Conroy saw what happened as a grotesque trick of circumstance. The mate, as the deck slanted, slipped and reached for the hand-rail with an ejaculation. The water flowed about his knees; he fell back against the hand-rail, which was just high enough for him to sit on. lit was what, for one ridiculous moment, he seemed to be doing. The next, his booted feet swayed up and he fell over backward, amid the confusion of splashing water that leaped down the main-deck. Conroy heard him strike something below with a queer, smacking noise.

“Pity he didn’t go overboard while he was about it,” he said to himself, acting out his role. Really, he was rather startled and dismayed.

He found the mate coiled in the scupper, very wet and still. He took hold of him to draw him under the forecastle head, where he would have shelter, and was alarmed at the inertness of the body under his hands.

“Sir!” he cried, “sir!-sir!”

He shook the great shoulders, bat quickly desisted; there was something horrible, something that touched his nerves, in its irresponsiveness. He remembered that he might probably find matches in the lamp-locker, and staggered there to search. He had to grope in gross darkness about the place, touching brass and the uncanny smoothness of glass, before his hand fell on what he sought. At last he was on one knee by the mate’s side, and a match shed its little illumination. The mate’s face was odd in its quietude, and the sou’- wester of oilskin was still on his head, held there by the string under the chin. From under its edge blood flowed steadily, thickly, appallingly.

“But——” cried Conroy. The match-flame stung his fingers and he dropped it. “Oh Lord!” he said. It occurred to him then, for the first time, that the mate was dead.

The men aft, bunched up under the break of the poop, were aware of him as a figure that came sliding and tottering toward them and fell sprawling at the foot of the poop ladder. He floundered up and clutched the nearest of them, the Greek.

“The mate’s dead,” he broke out, in a kind of breathless squeal. “Somebody call the captain; the mate’s dead.”

There was a moment of silence; then a cackle of words from several of them together. The Greek’s hands on his shoulders tightened. He heard the man’s purring voice in his ear.

“How did you do it?”

Conroy thrust himself loose; the skies of his mind were split by a frightful lightning flash of understanding. He had been alone with the mate; he had seen him die; he was sworn to kill him. He could see the livid smile of the Greek bent upon him.

“I didn’t do it,” he choked passionately, and struck with a wild, feeble hand at the smile. “You liar—I didn’t do it.”

“Hush!” The Greek caught him again and held him.

Some of the men had started forward; others had slipped into the alleyway to rouse the second mate and captain. The Greek had him clutched to his bosom in a strong embrace and was hushing him as one might hush a scared child. Slade was at his side.

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“He slipped, I tell you; he slipped at the top of the ladder. She’d shipped a dollop of water and then rolled, and over he went. I heard his head go smack and went down to him. I never touched him. I swear it—I never touched him.”

“Hush!” It was Slade this time. “And yer sure he’s dead. Well——” the old man exchanged nods with the Greek. “All right. Only—don’t tell the captain that tale; it ain’t good enough.”

“But——” began Conroy. A hug that crushed his face against the Greek’s oilskin breast silenced him.

“Vat is all dis?”

It was the captain, tall, august, come full-dressed from his cabin. At his back the second mate, with his oilskin coat over his pajamas, thrust forward his red, cheerful face.

Slade told the matter briefly. “And it’s scared young Conroy all to bits, sir,” he concluded.

“Come for’ard,” bade the captain. “Get a lamp, some vun!”

They followed him along the wet, slippery deck slowly, letting him pass ahead out of earshot.

“It was a belayin’-pin, ye’es?” queried the Greek softly of Conroy.

“He might have hit his head against a pin,” replied Conroy.

“Eh?” The Greek stopped. “Might ’ave—might ’ave ’it ’is ’ead? Ah, dat is fine! ’E might ’ave ’it ’is ’ead, Slade! You ’ear dat?”

“Yes, it ain’t bad!” replied Slade, and Conroy, staring in a wild attempt to see their faces clearly, realized that they were laughing, laughing silently and heartily. With a gesture of despair he left them.

A globe-lamp under the forecastle head lighted the captain’s investigations, gleaming on wet oilskins, shadow-pitted faces, and the curious, remote thing that had been the mate of the Villingen. Its ampler light revealed much that the match-flame had missed from its field—the manner in which the sou’wester and the head it covered were caved in at one side, the cut in the sou’wester through which clotted hair protruded, the whole ghastliness of death that comes by violence. With all that under his eyes, Conroy had to give his account of the affair, while the ring of silent, hard-breathing men watched him and marvelled at the clumsiness of his story.

“It is strange,” said the captain. “Fell over backwards, you said. It is very strange! And vere did you find de body?”

The scupper and deck had been washed clean by successive seas; there was no trace there of blood, and none on the rail. Even while they searched, water spouted down on them. But what Conroy noted was that no pin stood in the rail where the mate had fallen, and the hole that might have held one was empty.

“Ah, veil!” said the captain at last. “De poor fellow is dead. I do not understand, quite, how he should fall like dat, but he is dead. Four of you get de body aft.”

“Please, sir,” accosted Conroy, and the tall captain turned.

“Veil, vat is it?”

“Can I go below, sir? It was me that found him, sir. I feel rather— rather bad.”

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“So!” The tall captain considered him inscrutably, he, the final arbiter of fates. “You feel bad—yes? Veil, you can go below!”

The little group that bore the mate’s body shuffled aft, with the others following like a funeral procession. A man looked shivering out of the door of the starboard forecastle, and inquired in loud whispers.

“Was ist los? Sag mal—was ist denn los?” He put his inquiry to Conroy, who waved him off and passed to the port forecastle on the other side of the deckhouse.

The place was somehow strange, with its double row of empty bunks like vacant coffin-shelves in a vault, but solitude was what he desired. The slush-lamp swung and stank and made the shadows wander. From the other side of the bulkhead he could hear stirrings and a murmur of voices as the starboard watch grew aware that something had happened on deck. Conroy, with his oilskin coat half off, paused to listen for comprehensible words. The opening of the door behind him startled him, and he spun round to see Slade making a cautious entry. He recoiled.

“Leave me alone,” he said, in a strangled voice, before the other could speak. “What are you following me for? You want to make me out a murderer. I tell you I never touched him.”

The other stood just within the door, the upper half of his face shadowed by his sou’wester, his thin lips curved in a faint smile. “No!” he said mockingly. “You didn’t touch him? An’ I make no doubts you’d take yer oath of it. But you shouldn’t have put the pin back in the rail when you was through with it, all the same.”

“There wasn’t any pin there,” said Conroy quickly. He had backed as far from Slade as he could, and was staring at him with horrified eyes.

“But there would ha’ been if I hadn’t took a look round while you were spinnin’ your yarn to the Old Man,” said Slade. “I knew you was a fool.”

With a manner as of mild glee he passed his hand into the bosom of his coat, still keeping his sardonic gaze fixed on Conroy.

“Good thing you’ve got me to look after you,” he went on. “Thinks I, ’He might easy make a mistake that ‘ud cost him dear;’ so I took a look round. An’ I found this.” From within his coat he brought forth an iron belaying-pin, and held it out to Conroy.

“See?” His finger pointed to it. “That’s blood, that is—and that’s hair. Look for yourself. Now I suppose you’ll tell me you never touched him!”

“He hit his head against it when he fell,” protested the younger man. “He did! Oh, God, I can’t stand this!”

He sank to a seat on one of the chests and leaned his face against the steel plate of the wall.

“Hit his head,” snorted old Slade. “Couldn’t you ha’ fixed up a better yarn than that? What are you snivellin’ at? D’ye think yer the only man ‘as ever stove in a mate’s head—an’ him a murderin’ mandriver? Keep them tales for the Old Man; he believes ’em seemingly; but don’t you come them on me.”

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Conroy was moaning. “I never touched him; I never touched him!”

“Never touched him! Here, take the pin; it’s yours!”

He shrank from it. “No, no!”

Slade pitched it to his bunk, where it lay on the blanket. “It’s yours,” he repeated. “If yer don’t want it, heave it overboard yerself or stick it back in the rail. Never touched him—-you make me sick with yer never touched him!”

The door slammed on his scornful retreat; Conroy shuddered and sat up. The iron belaying-pin lay where it had fallen, on his bed, and even in that meager light it carried the traces of its part in the mate’s death. It had the look of a weapon rather than of a humble ship-fitting. It rolled a couple of inches where it lay as the ship leaned to a gust, and he saw that it left a mark where it had been, a stain.

He seized it in a panic and started for the door to be rid of it at once.

As if a malicious fate made him its toy, he ran full into the Greek outside.

“Ah!” The man’s smile flashed forth, wise and livid. “An’ so you ’ad it in your pocket all de time, den!”

Conroy answered nothing. It was beyond striving against. He walked to the rail and flung the thing forth with hysterical violence to the sea.

The watch going below at four o’clock found him apparently asleep, with his face turned to the wall. They spoke in undertones, as though they feared to disturb him, but none of them mentioned the only matter which all had in mind. They climbed heavily to their bunks, there to smoke the brief pipe, and then to slumber. Only Slade, who slept little, would from time to time lean up on one elbow to look down and across to the still figure which hid its face throughout the night.

Conroy woke when the watch was called for breakfast by a man who thrust his head in and shouted. He had slept at last, and now as he sat up it needed an effort of mind to recall his trouble. He looked out at his mates, who stood about the place pulling on their clothes, with sleep still heavy on them. They seemed as usual. It was his turn to fetch the coffee from the galley, he remembered, and he slipped out of his bunk to dress and attend to it.

“I won’t be a minute,” he said to the others, as he dragged on his trousers.

A shaggy young Swede near the door was already dressed.

“I vill go,” he said. “You don’t bother,” and forthwith slipped out.

The others were looking at him now, glancing with a queer, sharp interest and turning away when they met his eyes. It was as though he were a stranger.

“That was a queer thing last night,” he said to the nearest.

“Yes,” the other agreed, with a kind of haste.

They sat about at their meal, when the coffee had been brought by the volunteer, under the same constraint. He could not keep silent; he had to speak and make them answer.

“Where is he?” he asked abruptly.

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“On de gratings,” he was told. And the Swede who fetched the coffee added, “Sails is sowin’ him up now already.”

“We’ll see the last of him to-day,” said Slade. “He won’t kick nobody again!”

There was a mutter of agreement, and eyes turned on Conroy again. Slade smiled slowly.

“Yes, he keeck once too many times,” said the Greek.

The shaggy young Swede wagged his head. “He t’ink it was safe to kick Conroy, but it aindt,” he observed profoundly. “No, it aindt safe.”

“He got vat he asked for. . . . Didn’t know vat he go up againdst . . . No, it aindt—it aindt safe. . . Maybe vi’sh he aindt so handy mit his feet now.”

They were all talking; their mixed words came to Conroy in broken sentences. He stared at them a little wildly, realizing the fact that they were admiring him, praising him, and afraid of him. The blood rose in his face hotly.

“You fellers talk,” he began, and was disconcerted at the manner in which they all fell silent to hear him—“you talk as if I’d killed him.”

“Well! . . . Ach was!”

He faced their smiles, their conciliatory gestures, with a frown.

“You better stop it,” he said. “He fell—see? He fell an’ stove his head in. An’ any feller that says he didn’t——”

His regard traveled from face to face, giving force to his challenge.

“Ve aindt goin’ to say nodings!” they assured him mildly. “You don’t need to be scared of us, Conroy.”

“I’m not scared,” he said, with meaning. “But look out, that’s all.”

When breakfast was over, it was his turn to sweep up. But there was almost a struggle for the broom and the privilege of saving him that trouble. It comforted him and restored him; it would have been even better but for the presence of Slade, sitting aloft in his bunk, smiling over his pipe with malicious understanding.

The Villingen was still under reefed upper topsails, walking into the seas on a taut bowline, with water coming aboard freely. There was little for the watch to do save those trivial jobs which never fail on a ship. Conroy and some of the others were set to

scrubbing teak on the poop, and he had a view of the sail-maker at his work on the gratings under the break of the poop, stitching on his knees to make the mate presentable for his last passage. The sailmaker was a bearded Finn, with a heavy, darkling face and the secret eyes of a faun. He bent over his task, and in his attitude and the slow rhythm of his moving hand there was a suggestion of ceremonial, of an act mysterious and ritual.

Half-way through the morning, Conroy was sent for to the cabin, there to tell his tale anew, to see it taken down, and to sign it. The captain even asked him if he felt better.

“Thank you, sir,” replied Conroy. “It was a shock, findin’ him dead like that.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed the captain. “I can understand—a great shock. Yes!”

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He was bending over his papers at the table; Conroy smiled over his bowed head. Returning on deck, he winked to the man at the wheel, who smiled uncomfortably in return. Later he borrowed a knife to scrape some spots of paint off the deck; he did not want to spoil the edge of his own.

They buried the mate at eight bells; the weather was thickening, and it might be well to have the thing done. The hands stood around, bareheaded, with the grating in the middle of them, one edge resting on the rail, the other supported by two men. There was a dark smudge on the sky up to windward, and several times the captain glanced up from his book towards it. He read in German slowly, with a dwelling upon the sonorous passages, and towards the end he closed the book and finished without its aid.

Conroy was at the foot of the ladder; the captain was above him, reading mournfully, solemnly, without looking at the men. They were rigid, only their eyes moving. Conroy collected their glances irresistibly. When the captain had finished his reading he sighed and made a sign, lifting his hand like a man who resigns himself. The men holding the grating tilted it; the mate of the Villingen, with a little jerk, went over the side.

“Shtand by der tobs’l halliards!” roared the second mate.

Conroy, in the flurry, found himself next to a man of his watch. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the second mate, who was still vociferating orders.

“Hark at him!” he said. “Before we’re through I’ll teach him manners too.”

And he patted his knife.

V

THE VICTIM

Cobb was crossing the boulevard, and was actually evading a taxi-cab at the moment when he sighted the little comedy which he made haste to interrupt. Upon the further pavement, Savinien, whom he once believed in as a poet, had stopped in the shelter of a shop door, an unlighted cigarette between his lips, and was prospecting his vast person with gentle little slaps for a match. The current of the pavement rippled by him; the great expanse of his back was half turned to it, so that he and his search were in a kind of privacy, and the situation was favorable to the two inconspicuous men who approached him from either side. The one, with an air of hurry, ran against him at the instant, when he was exploring his upper waistcoat pocket, staggered and caught at him with mumbled apologies; the other, with the sure and suave movement of an expert, slid an arm between the two bodies, withdrew it, and was making off.

“Hi!” shouted Cobb, as the taxi shaved past him, and came across with a rush. People stopped to see what he was shouting at, and a group of them, momentarily blocking the pavement, made it easy for the lanky Cobb to bowl the fleeing pickpocket against the wall and lay secure hands on him.

“You come along with me,” said Cobb, who always forgot his French when he was excited.

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The thief, helpless under the grip on the nape of his neck, whined and stammered. He was a rat of a man, white-faced, pale-eyed, with a sagging, uncertain mouth.

“M’sieur!” he whimpered. “But I have got nothing! It is a mistake. The other man——”

Cobb thrust him at the end of a long arm to where Savinien stood, the cigarette still unlighted. The other man, of course, was gone.

“Hullo, Savinien,” said Cobb. “You know you’ve been robbed, don’t you? I just caught this fellow as he was bolting. See what you’ve lost, won’t you?”

“Lost!” Savinien stared, a little stupidly, Cobb thought, and suddenly smiled. He was bulky to the point of grotesqueness, with a huge white torpid face and a hypochondriac stoop of the shoulders, and the hand that traveled over his waistcoat, from pocket to pocket, looked as if it had been shaped out of dough.

“Well!” said Cobb impatiently, stilling the thief’s whimpering protests with a quick grip of the hand that held him.

“My watch,” murmured Savinien, still smiling though he were pleased and relieved to be the victim of a theft. “But let him go.”

“Let him go! Oh no,” said Cobb. “I’ll hand him over to the police and we’ll get the watch out of him.”

“The watch is nothing,” said Savinien. “Let him go before there arrives an agent, or it will be too late.”

He came a pace nearer as he spoke, and nodded at Cobb confidentially, as though there were reasons for his request which he could not explain before the on-lookers.

“But——” began Cobb.

“Let him go,” urged Savinien. “It is necessary. Afterwards, I will explain to you.” He put his shapeless soft hand on Cobb’s arm which held the thief.

“Let him go.”

“You are serious?” demanded Cobb. “He’s to go, is he? With your watch? All right!”

He let go the scraggy neck which he held in the fork of his hand. They were, by this time, ringed about by spectators, but the thief was not less expert with crowds than with pockets. He was no sooner loose than he seemed to merge into the folk about, to pass through and beyond them like a vapor. Heads turned, feet shuffled. Savinien came about ponderously like a battleship in narrow waters, but the thief was gone.

“Tiens!” ejaculated someone, and there was laughter.

Savinien’s arm insinuated itself through Cobb’s elbow.

“Let us go where we can sit down,” said the poet. “You are puzzled— not? But I will explain you all that.”

“It wasn’t a bet, was it?” asked Cobb.

The poet laughed gently. “That possibility alarms you?” he suggested. “But it was not a bet; it is more vital than that. I will tell you when we sit down.”

At Savinien’s slow pace they came at last to small marble-topped tables under a striped awning. Savinien, with loud gasps, let himself down upon an exiguous chair, rested both fat hands upon the head of his stick, and smiled ruefully across the table at Cobb. A tinge of blue had come out around his lips.

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“Even to walk,” he gasped, “that discomposes me, as you see. It is terrible.”

“Take it easy,” counseled Cobb.

An aproned waiter served them, Cobb with beer, Savinien with a treacly liqueur in a glass the size of a thimble. When he was a little restored from his exertions, he laid his arm on the table, with the little glass held between his thumb and forefinger, and remained in this attitude.

“Go ahead,” said Cobb. “Tell me why you are distributing watches to the deserving poor in this manner.”

“It is not benevolence,” replied Savinien. “It is simply that I have a need of some misfortune to balance things.”

There was a muffled quality in his voice, as though it were subdued by the bulk from which it had to emerge; but his enunciation was as clean and dexterous as in the days when he had made a vogue for his poems by reading them aloud. It was the voice of a poet issuing from the mouth of a glutton.

“To balance things,” he repeated. “Fortune, my dear Cobb, is a pendulum; the higher it rises on the side of happiness, the further it returns on the side of disaster. And with me, who cannot take your arm for a promenade along the pavement without a tightness in the neck and a flutter of my heart, who may not go upstairs quicker than a step a minute, disaster has only one shape. It arrives and I am extinguished! It is for that reason that I fear a persistence of good luck. Of late, the luck that dogs me has been incredible.

“Listen, now, to this! Three days ago, being in a difficulty, I go in search of Rigobert. You know Rigobert, perhaps?”

“Yes,” said Cobb. “That is, I have lent him money!”

“Precisely,” agreed Savinien. “The sum which he owed me was no more than two hundred and fifty francs but I had not much hope of him. I went leisurely upon the way towards his studio, and at the corner by the Madeleine I entered the post office to obtain a stamp for a letter I had to send. The first thing which I perceived as I opened the door was the back of Rigobert, as he sprawled against the counter, signing his name upon a form while the clerk counted out money to him. Hundred franc notes, my friend—noble new notes, ten in number, a thousand francs in all, which Rigobert received for his untidy autograph upon a blue paper. As for me, I planted myself there at his back in an attitude of expectancy and determination to await his leisure. He was cramming the money into his trousers pocket as he turned round and beheld me. He was

embarrassed. He, the universal debtor, the bottomless pit of loans and obligations, to be discovered thus.

“You!” he exclaimed.

“I!” I replied, and took him very firmly by the arm and mentioned my little affair to him. He was not pleased, Rigobert, but for the moment he was empty of excuses. When he suggested that we should go to a cafe, to change one of the notes, that he might pay me my two hundred and fifty, I agreed, for I had him by the arm, but I could see that he was gathering his faculties, and I was wary. A bon rat bon chat!

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“I wasted till his note was changed. ‘Now, my friend,’ I said. ’The hour is come.’”

“He looked at me attentively; he is very naive, in reality. Then, very slowly, he put one hand in his pocket and drew out the whole bundle of money. It looked opulent, it looked fulsome.

“‘Savinien,’ he said. ’I will do even more than you ask. Two-fifty, is it not? See, now, here is five hundred, and I will toss you whether I pay you five hundred or nothing.’”

“He balanced a coin on his thumb-nail, and smiled at me sidelong. I drew myself up with dignity to repudiate his proposal, but at that instant there came to me—who can say what it was?—a whim, a nudge from the thumb of Providence, a momentary lunacy! I relaxed my attitude.”

“‘Very well,’ I replied. ‘But first permit me to examine the coin.’”

“With Rigobert, that is not an insult. He handed me the coin without a word—an honest cart-wheel, a five-franc piece.”

“‘Toss, then,’ I said, returning it to him. ‘Face!’ I called, as he spun it up. It twinkled in the air like a humming-bird, a score of francs to each flick of its wings, and his palm intercepted it as it fell. I leaned across to see; behind Rigobert’s shoulder the waiter leaned likewise. The poor fellow had really no chance to practice those little tricks in which he is eminent. I had won. I drew the money across to me.”

“‘Peste!’ remarked Rigobert, in a tone of dejection, and looked with an appearance of horror at what remained to him of his thousand francs. The waiter beamed at me and rubbed his hands. I ordered him in a strong voice to bring two more consommations.”

“‘Look here,’ said Rigobert. ’Lend me that five hundred, will you? Or, at any rate——’”

“He paused, and his eye lit again with hope.”

“‘Tell you what,’ he said. ’I’ll toss you once more—five hundred against five hundred. This’—he laid his hand on his remaining money —’is no use to me. I simply can’t do with less than a thousand. Is it agreed?”

“I desired to refuse; I am not a gambler; I come of prudent people. But again it came, that inspired impulse, that courageous folly.”

“‘It is agreed,’ I replied.”

“He meant to win, that time. He sat back to it, he concentrated himself. He cast a look at me, the glance of a brigand. I was imperturbable. Again the waiter hurried to see the venture. Rigobert frowned.”

"'You call "face," eh?' he asked, balancing the coin."

"'I call when the coin is in the air,' I replied."

"He grunted, and spun it up. 'Pile!' I called this time. Down it came to his hand. Once more the eyes of the waiter and myself rushed to it; the result was capable of no adjustment. I felt my heart bump painfully. The broad coin lay on his hand, pile uppermost. I drew the rest of the money to me."

"'A thousand thanks,' I croaked from a throat constricted with surprise. Rigobert swore."

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Cobb laughed. “Is that all that is troubling you?” he asked.

“All!” Savinien shrugged his immense shoulders desolately. “All! That was merely the commencement,” he said. “And even that did not finish there.”

“I hope Rigobert didn’t get any of it back,” said Cobb.

“He did his best,” replied Savinien. “In a minute or two he collected his wits and addressed himself to the situation. It was worth seeing. He shook his depression from him like a dog shaking water from its coat, and sat up. Enterprise, determination, ruthlessness were eloquent in his countenance; I felt like a child before such a combination of qualities. Then he began to talk. He has an air, that brigand; he can cock his head so as to deceive a bailiff; he can wear a certain nobility of countenance; and with it all he can importune like a beggar. He has a horrid and plausible fluency; he is deaf to denials; he drugs you with words and robs you before you recover consciousness. He had got the length of quoting my own verses to me, and I felt myself going, when deliverance arrived. A stout man paused on the pavement, surveying us both, then came towards us.

“‘Monsieur Rigobert,’ he said, with that fashion of politeness which one dreads, ‘I am on my way to your address.’”

“‘Do not let me detain you,’ replied Rigobert unpleasantly.

“‘But,’ said the other, ’this was the day you appointed, M’sieur. You said, ‘Bring your bill to me on the 13th, and I will pay it.’ Here is the bill.’”

“He plunged his hand into his breast pocket and fumbled with papers. Rigobert examined me rapidly. But the spell was broken, and I was myself again master of my emotions, and of the thousand francs. He saw that it was hopeless—and rose.

“‘Monsieur,’ he said to the tradesman, ’this is not a time to talk to me of business. I have just suffered a painful bereavement.’”

“He made a gesture with his hand, mournful and resigned, and walked away, while the tradesman gazed after him. And there was I—rich and safe! I felt a warmth that pervaded me. I settled my hat on my head and reached for my cane. It was then that the truly significant thing occurred—the clue, as it were. My hand, as I took my cane, brushed against my liqueur glass upon the table; it fell, rolled to the edge, and disappeared. The waiter dived for it, while I waited to pay for the breakage. His foolish German face came up over the edge of the table, crumpled in a smile.

“‘It is all right,’ he said. ‘The glass is not broken.’”

“It was then, my friend, that I began to perceive how things were with me. Dimly at first, but, as the day proceeded, with growing clearness. I became aware that I stood in the shadow of some strange fate. Small ills, chances of trifling misfortune, stood aloof, and let me pass unharmed; I was destined to be the prey of a mightier evil. When I light my cigarette, do my matches blow out in the wind? No, they burn with the constancy of an altar candle. If I leave my gloves in a cab, as happened yesterday, do I lose them? No, the cabman comes roaring down the street at my back to catch me and restore them. A thousand such providences make up my day. This morning, just before I encountered you, the chief and most signal of them all occurred.”

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“Go on,” said Cobb.

“It was, in fact, impressive,” said Savinien. “There is, not far from here, a shop where I am accustomed to buy my cigarettes. A small place, you know, a hole in the wall, with a young ugly woman behind the counter. One enters, one murmurs ‘Maryland,’ one receives one’s yellow packet, one pays, one salutes, one departs. There is nothing in the place to invite one to linger; never in my life have I said more than those two words —’Maryland’ on entering and ‘Madame’ on leaving—to the good creature of the shop. I do not know her name, nor she mine. Ordinarily she is reading when I enter; she puts down her book to serve me as one might put down a knife and fork; it must often happen that she interrupts herself in the middle of a word. She gets as far as:

“‘Jean ki——’ then I enter. ‘Maryland,’ I murmur, receive my packet, and pay. ‘Madame!’ I raise my hat and depart. Not till then does she know the continuation:—-’ssed Marie,’ or ‘cked the Vicomte,’ whichever it may be. Not a luxurious reader, that one, you see.

“Well, this morning I enter as usual. There she sits, book in hand. ‘Maryland’ I murmur. For the first time in my experience of her she does not at once lay the book, face downwards, on the counter, and turn to the shelf behind her to reach me my cigarettes. No, the good creature is absorbed. ‘Pardon,’ I say, rather louder. She looks up, and it is clear she is impatient at being disturbed. ‘Maryland,’ I request. She puts down the book and fumbles for a packet. But I am curious to know what book it is that holds her so strongly, what genius of a romancer has aimed so surely at her intelligence. I turn the book round with a finger. The shop, the shelves, the horse’s face of Madame the proprietress swim before me. I could dance; I could weep; I could embrace the lady in the pure joy of an artist appreciated and requited. For of all the books ever printed upon paper, that book is mine. My verses! My songs of little lives, they grasp at her and will not let go, like importunate children; she is not easily nor willingly free of them when affairs claim her. Nunc dimittis!”

“What did you do?” inquired Cobb. “Give her a watch, or what?”

“My friend,” said Savinien, “I was careful. To do a foolish or a graceless thing would have been to dethrone for her a poet. There was need of a spacious and becoming gesture. I opened her book at the fly-leaf, and reached across to the comptoir for a pen. She turned at that and stared, possibly fearful, poor creature, that it was the till that attracted me. I took the pen and splashed down on the fly-leaf of the book my name in full—a striking signature! Then without a further word that might make an anti-climax, I took my cigarettes and departed. I was so thrilled, so exalted, that it was five minutes before I remembered to be afraid.”

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“For my fortune was becoming bizarre, you know. It was making me ridiculous even to myself. I have told you but the salient incidents of it; I do not desire to weary you with the facts of the broken braces, the spurious two-franc piece, or the lost door-key. But it is becoming sinister; it needed a counter-poise before it became so pronounced that nothing but sudden death would suffice. The thief steals my watch and I am relieved; he is departing with my best wishes for his success; all promises well, till you arrive at the charge, with your comb erect, and seize him. It is all of a piece. Yes, I know it is funny, but it alarms me. I offer it, therefore, my watch—a sacrifice. Perhaps it likes watches. If so, I have got off cheaply, for, to tell the truth, it was not much of a watch.”

He raised the minute glass and drank, setting it down again with a flourish.

“And now I must be going,” he said. “It is a strange story—not? But I don’t like it; I don’t like it at all.”

“Adieu,” said Cobb, rising also. “I don’t think I’d worry, if I were you. And I won’t interfere again.”

“On no account,” said Savinien, seriously.

Cobb watched him move away, plodding along the pavement heavily, huge and portentous. The back of his head bulged above the collar, with no show of neck between. He was comical and pathetic; he seemed too vast in mere flesh to be the sport of a thing so freakish as luck. To think that such a bulk had a weak heart in it—-and that deeper still in its recesses there moved and suffered the soul of a poet!

“Queer yarn,” mused Cobb.

It was on the following morning, while Cobb was dressing, that the messenger arrived—a little man in black, with a foot-rule sticking out of his coat-pocket. He looked like an elderly man-servant who had descended to trade. He had a letter for Cobb, addressed in Savinien’s pyrotechnic hand, and handed it to him without speaking.

“My dear friend,” it said, “I fear the worst. On my return to my rooms here, the first thing I saw was my watch, reposing on my bedside table. It appears that when I made my toilet in the morning I forgot to put it in my pocket. The thief, after all, got nothing. I am lost. In despair, Your Cesar Savinien.”

“Yes?” said Cobb. “You want an answer?” For the little artisan in black was waiting.

“An answer!” The other stared. “But——then monsieur does not know?”

“What?”

“He must have been going down to post that note when he had written it,” said the little man. “We found it in his hand.”

“Eh?” Cobb almost recoiled in the shock of his surprise and horror. “D’you mean to tell me that after all, he—he is——”

The little man in black uttered a professional sigh. “The concierge found him in the morning,” he replied. “It is said that he suffered from his heart, that poor Monsieur.”

“Good Lord!” said Cobb.

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VI

BETWEEN THE LIGHTS

There was but the one hotel in that somber town of East Africa, and Miss Gregory, fronting the proprietor of it squarely, noted that he looked at her with something like amusement. She was a short woman of fifty, grey-haired and composed, and her pleasant face had a quiet and almost masculine strength and assurance. In her grey flannel jacket and short skirt and felt hat, with a sun-umbrella carried like a walking-stick, she looked adequate and worthy. Hers was a presence that earned respect and deference in the highways of travel; she had the air of a veteran voyager.

“I have managed to lose the boat,” she said evenly; “and my luggage, of course, has been carried on to Zanzibar.”

The hotel proprietor had not risen from his chair. He shrugged and smiled as he looked up at her.

“Vat you vant?” he asked.

Miss Gregory frowned. “I want a room for the night,” she answered. “A room and dinner, please.”

The man smiled again and bit his nails. He was a lean creature, unshaven and sidelong, and he had the furtive and self-conscious air of one who perpetrates a practical joke. Miss Gregory watched him with some impatience; she had yet to learn that a Portugee of the Coast will even lose money to inconvenience an English man or woman.

“You got money?” he asked.

Miss Gregory squared her shoulders. “I shall pay in the morning,” she said. “You need have no fear; the Consul will be back to-morrow; I inquired at the Consulate.” She paused; he wore still his narrow grin of malice. “Man!” she said contemptuously; “do you keep an hotel and not know a lady when you see one?”

“No money?” he suggested insinuatingly.

Miss Gregory sank a hand in her big pocket and brought forth her purse. There was a slight flush on her healthy broad face, but she governed her voice admirably.

“Here are three English shillings,” she said, tilting them into her hand. “You can take these as a—as a deposit; and the rest will be paid in the morning. Now show me to my room.”

The landlord uncoiled himself and rose from his chair to look at the money. He peered at it in her hand, then straightened up and faced her. Suddenly he had become hostile, lividly vicious; he laughed a shrill cackle in her face, his nose wrinkled like a dog's.

"No good to me," he said. "T'ree shillin'—poof! For free shillin' here you buy-a free drink. For room—an' dinner—you pay-a one pound. Take-a your t'ree shillin' away; I don't vant-a you an' your free shillin'. You get out—go walk-a in da street."

His eyes traveled swiftly about the place, as though to make sure that no one overheard; then he spat a foul epithet at her. His lean, unbuttoned body writhed as he babbled; his hands whirled in gestures; he seemed to be seeking courage to be violent. Miss Gregory, with a little frown of consideration, watched him. She buttoned the flannel jacket across her breast and restored her three shillings to her pocket. It was all done very deliberately, and through it all her formidable gaze held the Portugee at arm's length, till his gabbled insults died out and left him armed only with scowls. Miss Gregory waited, but he had no more to say.

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“I will call on you to-morrow, my man,” she said significantly, and walked at a leisurely rate through the door to the grave street without, where the quick evening was already giving place to night.

The sky overhead was deep blue and clear, powdered with a multitude of stars, and over the sea to the east a crescent of moon floated low. The night was fresh, but not cold. Miss Gregory, pacing tranquilly along the cobbled street, found it agreeable after the sterile heat of the afternoon. A faint breeze stirred the acacias which were planted along the middle of the way, and they murmured secretly. The prospect of a night without shelter did not greatly disturb her; she was already conscious that when she came to look back on it, it would take a high rank among her experiences.

A turning brought her to the Praca, the little square of the town, its heart and centre. Here there were lights, the signal that the place had waked up for the evening. Two or three low-browed cafes abutted on the pavement, each lively with folk who drank and talked; the open doors of a church showed an interior faintly luminous with candles; and men and a few women stood about in groups or moved here and there at their ease. With her deliberate step, Miss Gregory passed among them, looking about her with the ready interest of the old traveler who sees without criticizing. There was a flavor in the place and its people that struck her like something pungent; they had individuality; they belonged to each other. There was a sinister character in the faces and bearing of the men, a formidable directness in the women; not one but had the air of carrying a hidden weapon. It was the commonplace evening population of an East African town which has never lived down the traditions of its pirate-founders, and Miss Gregory marked its fine picturesqueness with appreciation. Every one turned to look at her as she passed; she, clean, sane, assured, with her little air of good-breeding, was no less novel to them than they to her. A thin dark woman, with arms and breasts bare, took a quick step forward to look into her face; Miss Gregory paused in her walk to return the scrutiny. The woman’s wide lips curled in a sudden laughter; Miss Gregory smiled patronizingly, nodded to her and passed on.

She made a tour of the square, and even explored the mouth of a dark lane that led out of it. But it seemed to lead nowhere; it was a mere burrow between high silent houses, twisting abruptly among them with no purpose of direction, and she turned back to the lights. She was conscious by now that she had been on her feet since early in the afternoon, and she crossed to one of the cafes, where a tinkling band added its allurements to the yellow lights, and sat down at a small table. With one accord the customers at the place turned to look at her. A barefoot waiter received her order for coffee; she found herself a cigarette, lit it and looked about her. The

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cafe was a low whitewashed room, open to the pavement at one side; it was crowded with little tables, and at one end an orchestra of four sallow girls smoked and fiddled and strummed. All about her were the hard, keen men and women she had seen in the square, more men than women. They talked to each other earnestly, in guarded voices, with eyes alert for eavesdroppers; nearly every one had an air of secrecy and caution. They were of all the racial types she had ever seen. Teuton, Latin and Slav, and variants and mixtures of these, murmured and whispered among themselves; only one of them was unmistakably English.

Miss Gregory had noticed him as soon as she entered, and her table was next to the one at which he sat with three others, who watched him while he talked, and said little. He was a fair youth, with a bland, rather vacant face, and a weak, slack mouth. Miss Gregory knew such faces among footmen and hairdressers, creatures fitted by their deficiencies to serve their betters. He had evidently been drinking a good deal; the table before him was sloppy and foul, and there was the glaze of intoxication in his eyes. But what arrested her was a touch of exaltation in him, a manner as of triumph. For some reason or other he seemed radiant and glad. The cause soon became apparent, for he fixed his unsure gaze on her, smiled ingenuously and attempted a bow.

“Pardon me,” he said, leaning carefully towards her. “Pardon me, but the sight of an English lady——”

Miss Gregory nodded. “All right,” she said.

He hitched his chair closer to her; his three companions exchanged glances, and one of them made as though to nudge him, but hesitated and finally forbore.

“In. a general way,” said the youth confidentially, “I wouldn’t venture to speak to you. But “—and he broke into smiles—“I’m on me way home myself.”

“I see,” answered Miss Gregory.

He beamed at her, fatuous and full of pride. “On me way home,” he repeated. “For good. No more Africa for me. I’ve ’ad just upon eight years of it—eight years of sun an’ bugs an’ fever, and now I’m going home.” He paused and looked at her impressively. “I’ve made my pile,” he said.

“That’s good,” said Miss Gregory. She saw the three others exchange another glance.

The English youth was rapt; for some moments his eyes were unseeing, and his lips moved without sound. It was not difficult to see what home meant for him, a goal achieved at hazard, something familiar and sympathetic, worth all the rest of the world. He came back to his surroundings with a long sigh.

“You don’t happen to know Clapham Junction, ma’am?” he suggested. “Not the station, I don’t mean, but the place? No? Well, that’s where I’m off to. I ’aven’t seen a tramcar for eight years; it’ll be queer at first, I expect.” He looked round him slowly at the low bare room and the men in white clothes and the whispering night without. “My mother takes lodgers,” he added inconsequently.

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“She will be glad to see you,” said Miss Gregory.

“She will that,” he agreed. He dropped his voice to the tones of confidence. “I got an idea,” he said. “Give her a surprise. I’ll go along to the house just about dark and say I’m lookin’ for a room. Eh? And she’ll begin about terms. Then I’ll begin. ’Never you mind about terms,’ I’ll say. ‘’Ere’s the price of eight years sweatin’, and God bless you, old lady!’” He blinked rapidly, for his eyes were wet. “What do you think of that for a surprise?”

“Capital!” agreed Miss Gregory. “Are you going down the Coast by the boat to-morrow?”

“That’s it,” he cried. “I’m going second-class, like a gentleman. Home, by gosh!”

“Then,” suggested Miss Gregory, eyeing his sullen companions, “don’t you think it would be best if you went and got some sleep now? You wouldn’t care to miss the boat, I suppose?”

He stared at her. “No,” he said, as if the contingency had just occurred to him. He sat back; his mild, insignificant face wore a look of alarm. “No, I shouldn’t. It wouldn’t do.” His voice dropped again. “It wouldn’t do,” he repeated. “I’ve got it on me, an’ this ain’t what you call a moral place.”

Miss Gregory nodded comprehendingly. “I know,” she said. “So wouldn’t it be as well on all accounts to get to bed behind a locked door?”

“You’ve hit it,” he said. “That’s what I got to do—and lock the door. That’s common sense, that is.” He stared at her for an instant, then rose with care and deliberation to his feet. He had altogether forgotten his companions; he did not even see them.

“That is, if it’ll lock,” he added, and held out his hand to Miss Gregory.

“Good-bye,” she said, taking it heartily. “I’m glad to hear of your good fortune.”

He gulped and left her, walking forth through the little tables with the uncanny straightness of the man “in liquor.” Miss Gregory drank up her coffee and sat where she was.

She could see the men at the next table out of the corner of her eye; their heads were together, and they were whispering excitedly. The whole affair was plain enough to a veteran of the world’s byways like Miss Gregory; the plan had been to make the youth drunk, help him forth, and rob him easily in some convenient corner. He was the kind of man who lends himself to being robbed; the real wonder was that it had not been done already. But, mingled with her contempt for his helplessness, Miss Gregory felt a certain softening. His homing instinct, as blind as that of a domestic animal, his

rejoicing in his return, his childish plan for taking his mother by surprise, even his loyalty to the tramcars and all the busy littleness of Clapham Junction—these touched something in her akin to the goodness of motherhood. It occurred to her that perhaps he had been better off under the lights of the cafe than alone on his way to his bed; and at that moment the three men at the next table, their conference over, rose and went out. She sat still till they were clear; then, on an impulse of officiousness, got up and went out after them.

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Their white clothes shone in the darkness to guide her; they cut across the square and vanished in one of those dark alleys she had already remarked. Miss Gregory straightened her felt hat, took a fresh grip of the stout umbrella, and followed determinedly. The corner of the alley shut out the lights behind her; tall walls with scarce windows fast shuttered hemmed her in; the vast night of the tropics drooped its shadow over her. Through it all she plodded at the gait familiar to many varieties of men from Poughkeepsie to Pekin, a squat, resolute figure, reckless alike of risk and ridicule, an unheroic heroine. There reached her from time to time the noises that prevail in those places—noises filtering thinly through shutters, the pad of footsteps, and once—it seemed to come from some roof invisible above her—the sound of sobbing, abandoned, strangled, heart-shaking sobs. She frowned and went on.

A spot where the way forked made her hesitate; the men she was following were no longer in sight. But as she pondered there came to guide her a sudden cry, clear and poignant, the shout of a startled man. It was from the right-hand path, and promptly, as though on a summons, she bent her grey head and broke into a run in the direction of it. As she ran, pounding valiantly, she groped in her pocket for a dog-whistle she had with her; she took it in her lips, and, never ceasing to run, blew shrill call upon call. Her umbrella was poised for war, but, rounding a corner, she saw that her whistling had done its work; three white jackets were making off at top-speed. It takes little to alarm a thief; Miss Gregory had counted on that.

It was not till she fell over him that she was aware of the man on the ground, who rolled over and cried out at the movement. She put a steady hand on him.

“Are you hurt?” she asked eagerly.

He groaned; his face was a pale blur against the earth.

“They’ve got me,” he said. “They stuck a knife in my back. I’m bleeding; I’m bleeding.”

“Get up,” bade Miss Gregory. “Bleeding or not, we must get away from here. Up you get.”

She pulled him to a sitting position, and he screamed and resisted, but Miss Gregory was his master. By voice and force she brought him upright; he could stand alone, and seemed surprised to find it out.

“Take my arm,” she ordered him. “Lean on it; don t be afraid. Now, where are your rooms?”

“On this way,” he sobbed.

Evidently he had an ugly wound, for at each few steps he had to stop and rest, and sometimes he swayed, and Miss Gregory had to hold him up. His breath came hastily;

he was soft with terror. “They’ll come back! they’ll come back!” he gabbled, tottering on his feet.

“They’re coming now; I can hear them,” replied Miss Gregory grimly. “Here, lean in this doorway behind me, man. Stop that whimpering, will you! Now, keep close.”

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She propped him against the nail-studded door, and placed herself before, him, and the three robbers, bunched together in a group, stealing along the middle of the way, might almost have gone past without seeing them. But it was not a chance to trust to. Miss Gregory let them come abreast of her; her whole honest body was tense to the occasion; on the due moment she flung herself forward and the brandished umbrella rained loud blows on aghast heads; and at the same time she summoned to her aid her one accomplishment—she shrieked. She was a strong woman, deep-chested, full-lunged; her raw yell shattered the stillness of the night like some crazy trumpet; it broke from her with the suddenness of a catastrophe, nerve-sapping, ear-scaring, heart-striking. Before it and the assault of the stout umbrella the robbers broke; a panic captured them; they squealed, clasped at each other, and ran in mere senseless amaze. The Latin blood, when diluted with Coast mixtures, is never remarkable for courage; but braver men might have scattered at the alarm of that mighty discordancy attacking from behind.

Fortunately the door they sought was not far off; through it they entered a big untidy room, stone-floored as the custom is, and littered with all the various trifles a man gathers about him on the Coast. Miss Gregory put her patient on the narrow bed and turned to the door; true to his fears, it would not lock. The youth was very pale and in much fear; blood stained the back of his clothes, and his eyes followed her about in appeal.

“You must wait a little,” Miss Gregory told him. “I’ll look at that wound of yours when I’ve seen to the door. No lock, of course.” She pondered frowningly. “It’s a childish thing at the best,” she added thoughtfully; “but it may be a novelty in these parts. Have you ever arranged a booby trap, my boy?”

“No,” he answered, wonderingly.

Miss Gregory shook her head. “The lower classes are getting worse and worse,” she observed. She put a chair by the door, which stood a little ajar, and looked about her.

“As you are going away you won’t want this china.” It was his ewer and wash-hand basin. “I don’t see anything better, and it’ll make a smash, at any rate.”

“What you goin’ to do, ma’am?” asked the man on the bed.

“Watch,” she bade him. It was not easy, but with care she managed to poise the basin and the ewer in it on top of the door, so that it leaned on the lintel and must fall as soon as the door was pushed wider.

“Now,” she said, when it was done, “let’s have a look at that cut.”

It was an ugly gash high in the back, to the left of the spine—a bungler's or a coward's attempt at the terrible heart-stab. Miss Gregory, examining it carefully, was of opinion that she could have done it better; it had bled copiously, but she judged it not to be dangerous. She washed it and made a bandage for it out of a couple of the patient's shirts, and he found himself a good deal more comfortable. He lay back on his bed with some of the color restored to his face, and watched her as she moved here and there about the room with eyes that were trustful and slavish.

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“Well,” said Miss Gregory, when she had completed an examination of the apartment, “there doesn’t seem to be much more one can do. They’ll come back, I suppose? But of course they will. How much money have you got about you?”

“About two thousand pounds, ma’am,” he said, meekly.

“H’m!” Miss Gregory thought a moment. “And they know it? Of course.” She added her little sharp nod of certainty. “Well, when they come we’ll attend to them.”

There was a tiny mirror hanging from a nail, and she went to it, patted her grey hair to neatness, and re-established her felt hat on top of it. The place was as still as the grave; no noise reached it from without. The one candle at the bedside threw her shadow monstrously up the wall; while she fumbled with her hatpins it pictured a looming giantess brandishing weapons.

She was still at the mirror, with hatpins held in her mouth, when the steps of the robbers made themselves heard. The man on the bed started up on his elbow, with wide eyes and a sagging mouth. Miss Gregory quelled him with a glance, then crossed the floor and blew the candle out. In the darkness she laid her hat down that it might not come to harm, and put a reassuring hand on the youth’s shoulder, it was quaking, and she murmured him a caution to keep quiet. Together, with breath withheld, they heard the men in the entry of the house, three of them, coming guardedly. Miss Gregory realized that this was the real onslaught; they would be nerved for shrieks this time. She took her hand from the youth’s shoulder with another whispered word, and stepped to the middle of the room and stood motionless. The noise of breathing reached her, then a foot shuffled, and on the instant somebody sprang forward and shoved the door wide.

The jug and basin smashed splendidly; whoever it fell on uttered a little shrill yell and paused, confounded by the darkness. Miss Gregory, her eyes more tuned to it, could make out the blur of white clothes; with noiseless feet she moved towards them. She was all purpose and directness; no tremor disturbed her. As calmly as she would have shaken hands with the Consul she reached forward, felt her enemy, and delivered a cool and well-directed thrust. An appalling yell answered her, and she stepped back a space, the hatpin held ready for another attack. There was a tense instant of inaction, and then the three rushed, and one bowled her over on the floor and fell with her.

Miss Gregory fell on her side, and before she was well down the steel hatpin, eight inches long of good Paris metal, plunged and found its prey. The man roared and wallowed clear, and she rose. The big room was wild with stamping feet and throaty noises such as dogs make. The bedside chair, kicked aside struck her ankles; she picked it up and threw it at the sounds. It seemed to complicate matters. The place was as dark as a well, and she moved groping with her hands towards the bed. Some one backed into her—another yell and a jump, and, as she stepped back, the swish of a

blow aimed towards her that barely missed her. Then she was by the bed, feeling over it; it was empty.

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She had some moments of rest; every one was still, save for harsh breathing. But she dared not stand long, lest their eyes too should adapt themselves to the dark. It was evident that nobody had firearms; there was that much to be thankful for. She gathered herself for an attack, a rush at the enemy with an active hatpin, when something touched her foot. She bent, swiftly alert for war, but arrested the pin on its way. It was a hand from under the bed; her protege had taken refuge there. She took his wrist and pulled; he whimpered, and there was a grunt from the middle of the room at the sound, but he came crawling. She dared not whisper, for those others were moving already, but with her cool, firm hand on his wrist, she sank down on all-fours and drew him on towards the door. It was impossible to make no noise, but at any rate their noise was disconcerting; the robbers could not guess what it betokened. Each of them had his stab, a tingling, unaccountable wound, a hurt to daunt a man, and they were separately standing guard each over his own life.

They encountered one half way across the room. He felt them near him, and sent a smashing blow with a knife into the empty air. Miss Gregory, always with that considered and careful swiftness that was so like deliberation, reared to her knees, her left hand still holding the youth's wrist, and lunged. Another yell, and the man, leaping back, fouled a comrade, who stabbed and sprang away. They heard the man fall and move upon the floor like a dying fish, with sounds of choking. Then the door was before them, and, crawling still, with infinite pains to be noiseless, they passed through it. From within the room the choking noises followed them till they gained the open air.

The tortuous alley received them like a refuge; they fled along it with lightened hearts, taking all turnings that might baffle a chase, till at last Miss Gregory smelt acacias and they issued again into the little square. To Miss Gregory it was almost amazing that the cafes should still be lighted, their tables thronged, the music insistent. While history had paced for her the world had stood still. She stood and looked across at the lights thoughtfully.

The youth at her side coughed. "The least I can do," he suggested inanely, "is ask you to 'ave a cup of coffee, ma'am."

Miss Gregory turned on him sharply.

"And then?" she asked. "After the coffee, what then?"

He shuffled his feet uneasily. "Well, ma'am," he said; "this hole in my back is more'n a bit painful. So I thought I'd get along to the hotel an' have a lie down."

She looked at him thoughtfully. Her head was bare, and the night breeze from the sea whipped a strand of grey hair across her brow. She brushed it away a little wearily.

"Unless there's anything more I can do for you," suggested the young man smoothly.

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Anything more he could do for her! She smiled, considering him. The events of the night had not ruffled him; his blonde face was still mild, insignificant, plebeian. Of such men slaves are made; their part is to obey orders, to be without responsibility, to be guided, governed, and protected by their betters. Miss Gregory, sister of a Major-General, friend of Colonial Governors, aunt of a Member of Parliament, author of "The Saharan Solitudes," and woman of the world, saw that she had served her purpose, her work was done.

"Thank you," she said; "there is nothing more. You had better go to bed at once."

There was a broken fountain in the middle of the square, overgrown with sickly lichen, and round it ran a stone bench. The acacias sheltered it, and a dribble of water from the conduit sounded always, fitting itself to one's thoughts in a murmuring cadence. Here Miss Gregory disposed herself, and here the dawn found her, a little disheveled, and looking rather old with the chill of that bleak hour before the sun rises. But her grey head was erect, her broad back straight, and the regard of her eyes serene and untroubled always. She was waiting for the hour when the Consul would be accessible; he was the son of her dearest friend.

"And I must not forget," she told herself—"I really must not forget to attend to that hotel man."

VII

THE MASTER

Papa Musard, whenever he felt that he was about to die, which happened three times a year at least, would beckon as with a finger from the grimy Montmartre tenement in which he abode and call Rufin to come and bid him farewell. The great artist always came; he never failed to show himself humble to humble people, and, besides, Papa Musard had known Corot—or said that he had—and in his capacity of a model had impressed his giant shoulders and its beard on the work of three generations of painters.

The boy who carried the summons sat confidently on the kerb outside the restaurant at which Rufin was used to lunch, and rose to his feet as the tall, cloaked figure turned the corner of the street and approached along the sunlit pavement.

"Monsieur Musard said you would be here at one o'clock," he explained, presenting the note.

"Then it is very fortunate that I am not late," said Rufin politely, accepting it. "But how did you know me?"

The boy—he was aged perhaps twelve—gave a sophisticated shrug.

“Monsieur Musard said: ’At one o’clock there will approach an artist with the airs of a gentleman. That is he.’”

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Rufin laughed and opened the note. While he read it the boy watched him with the admiration which, in Paris, even the rat-like gamin of the streets pays to distinction such as his. He was a tall man splendidly blonde, and he affected the cloak, the slouch hat, the picturesque amplitude of hair which were once the uniform of the artist. But these, in his final effect, were subordinate to 'a certain breadth and majesty of brow, a cast of countenance at once benign and austere, as though the art he practiced so supremely both exacted much and conferred much. He made a fine and potent figure as he stood, with his back to the bright street and the gutter-child standing beside him like a familiar companion, and read the smudged scrawl of Papa Musard.

"So Musard is very ill again, is he?" he asked of the boy. "Have you seen him yourself?"

"Oh yes," replied the boy; "I have seen him. He lies in bed and his temper is frightful."

"He is a very old man, you see," said Rufin. "Old men have much to suffer. Well, tell him I will come this afternoon to visit him. And this"—producing a coin from his pocket—"this is for you."

The gamin managed, in some fashion of his own, to combine, in a single movement, a snatch at the money with a gesture of polite deprecation. They parted with mutual salutations, two gentlemen who had carried an honorable transaction to a worthy close. A white-aproned waiter smiled upon them tolerantly and held open the door that Rufin might enter to his lunch.

It was in this manner that the strings were pulled which sent Rufin on foot to Montmartre, with the sun at his back and the streets chirping about him. Two young men, passing near the Opera, saluted him with the title of "maitre;" and then the Paris of sleek magnificence lay behind him and the street sloped uphill to the Place Pigalle and all that region where sober, industrious Parisians work like beavers to furnish vice for inquiring foreigners. Yet steeper slopes ascended between high houses toward his destination, and he came at last to the cobbled courtyard, overlooked by window-dotted cliffs of building, above which Papa Musard had his habitation.

A fat concierge, whose bulged and gaping clothes gave her the aspect of an over-ripe fruit, slept stonily in a chair at the doorway. Rufin was not certain whether Musard lived on the fourth floor or the fifth, and would have been glad to inquire, but he had not the courage to prod that slumbering bulk, and was careful to edge past without touching it. The grimy stair led him upward to find out for himself.

On the third floor, according to his count, a door looked like what he remembered of Musard's, but it yielded no answer to his knocking. A flight higher there was another which stood an inch or so ajar, and this he ventured to push open that he might look in. It yielded him a room empty of life, but he remained in the doorway looking.

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It was a commonplace, square, ugly room, the counterpart of a hundred others in that melancholy building; but its window, framing a saw-edged horizon of roofs and chimneys, faced to the north, and some one, it was plain, had promoted it to the uses of a studio. An easel stood in the middle of the floor with a canvas upon it; the walls were covered with gross caricatures drawn upon the bare plaster with charcoal. A mattress and some tumbled bedclothes lay in one corner, and a few humble utensils also testified that the place was a dwelling as well as a workshop.

Rufin looked back to be sure that no one was coming up the stairs, and then tiptoed into the room to see what hung on the easel.

“After all,” he murmured, “an artist has the right.”

The picture on the easel was all but completed; it was a quarter-length painting of a girl. Stepping cautiously around the easel, he came upon a full view of it suddenly, and forthwith forgot all his precautions to be unheard. Here was a thing no man could keep quiet! With his first glance he saw—he, himself a painter, a creator, a judge—that he stood in the presence of a great work of art, a vision, a power.

“But here!” he exclaimed amazedly. “Of all places—here!”

The painted face looked out at him with all the sorrowful wisdom that is comprised in a life sharpened on the grindstone of a remorseless civilization. It was a girl such as one might find anywhere in that neighborhood, she had the hardy prettiness, the alertness, the predatory quality which belong to wild creatures civilized by force. It was set on the canvas with a skill that made Rufin smile with frank pleasure; but the skill, the artifice of the thing, were the least part of it. What was wonderful was the imagination, the living insight, that represented not only the shaped product of a harsh existence, but the womanhood at the root of it. It was miraculous; it was convincing as life is convincing; it was great.

Rufin, the painter whose fame was secure, upon whom Art had showered gifts, gazed at it, absorbed and reverent. He realized that in this picture his age had achieved a masterpiece; he was at least the contemporary of an immortal.

“Ah!” he said, with an impulse of high indignation. “And while he paints here and sleeps on the floor, they buy my pictures!”

He stepped back from the easel. He was equal to a great gesture, as to a great thought. As though he had greeted a living princess, he swept his hat off in a bow to the work of this unknown fellow.

Papa Musard in his bed, with his comforts—mostly in bottles— arranged within his reach, found it rather shocking that a distinguished artist should enter the presence of a

dying man like— as he remarked during his convalescence—a dog going into a pond. He sat up in astonishment.

“Musard,” demanded Rufin abruptly, “who is the artist who lives in the room below this?”

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“Oh, him!” replied Papa Musard, sinking back on his pillow. “M’sieur Rufin, this is the last time I shall appeal to you. Before long I shall again be in the presence of the great master, of Corot, of him who——”

Rufin, it seemed, had lost all respect both for Corot and death. He waved an imperious arm, over which his cloak flapped like a black wing.

“Who is the artist in the room below?” repeated Rufin urgently. “Do you know him?”

“No,” replied Papa Musard, with emphasis. “Know him—an Italian, a ruffian, an apache, a man with hair on his arms like a baboon! I do not know him. There!”

He was offended; a dying man has his privileges, at least. The face, gnarled and tempestuously bearded, which had been perpetuated by a hundred laborious painters, glared from the pillow at Rufin with indignation and protest.

Rufin suppressed an impulse to speak forcibly, for one has no more right to strip a man of his pose than of his shirt. He smiled at the angry invalid conciliatingly.

“See how I forget myself!” he said apologetically. “We artists are all alike. Show us a picture and our manners go by the board. With you, Musard, need I say more?”

“You have said a lot,” grumbled the ancient of days. “Coming in roaring like a bull! What picture has upset you?”

“A picture you have not seen,” said Rufin, “or you would be grasping my hand and weeping for joy—you who know pictures better than us all!” He surveyed the invalid, who was softening. Musard knew no more of pictures than a frame-maker; but that was a fact one did not mention in his presence.

“Since Corot,” sighed Musard, “I have seen few pictures which were— en effet—-pictures.”

“You have great memories,” agreed Rufin hastily. “But I have just seen a picture—ah, but a picture, my friend!”

The old cunning face on the pillow resisted the charm of his manner, the gentleness of his appeal.

“Not his?” demanded Papa Musard. “Not in the room underneath? Not one of the daubs of that assassin, that cut-throat, that Italian?”

Rufin nodded, as though confirming a pleasant surprise. “Is it not strange,” he said, “how genius will roost on any perch? It is true, then, that he is a person who offends your taste? That is bad. Tell me about him, Musard.”

He reached himself a chair and sat down near the foot of the bed.

“You are always making a fuss of some worthless creature,” grumbled Musard. “I do not even know the man’s name. They speak of him as Peter the Lucky—it is a nickname he has on the streets, an apache name. He has been in prison, too, and he bellows insults at his elders and betters when they pass him on the stairs. He is a man of no soul!”

“Yes,” said Rufin. “But did you say he had been in prison?”

“I did,” affirmed Musard. “Ask anyone. It is not that I abuse him; he is, in fact, a criminal. Once he threw an egg at a gendarme. And yet you come to me—a dying man—and declare that such a creature can paint! Bah!”

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“Yes,” said Rufin, “it is strange.”

It was clearly hopeless to try to extract any real information from Papa Musard; that veteran was fortified with prejudices. Rufin resigned himself to the inevitable; and, although he was burning with eagerness to find the painter of the picture he had recently seen, to welcome him into the sunlight of fame and success, he bent his mind to the interview with Papa Musard.

“I have had my part in the development of Art,” the invalid was saying at the end of three-quarters of an hour. “Perhaps I have not had my full share of recognition. Since Corot, no artist has been magnanimous; they have become tradesmen, shopkeepers.”

“You are hard on us, Musard,” said Rufin. “We’re a bad lot, but we do our best. Here is a small matter of money that may help to make you comfortable. I’m sorry you have such an unpleasant neighbor.”

“You are going?” demanded Musard.

“I must,” said Rufin. “To-morrow I go into the country for some weeks, and nothing is packed yet.”

“Corot would not have left an old man to die in solitude,” remarked Musard thoughtfully.

Rufin smiled regretfully and got away while he could. Papa Musard in an hour could wear down even his patience.

The painter’s room was still unlocked and unoccupied as he descended the stairs; he entered it for another look at the picture. He needed to confirm his memory, to be assured that he had not endowed the work with virtue not its own. The trivial, cheaply pretty face fronted him again, with its little artificial graces only half-masking the sore, tormented femininity behind it. Yes, it was the true art, the poignant vision, a thing belonging to all time.

In the courtyard the fat concierge was awake, in a torpid fashion, and knitting. She lifted her greedy and tyrannical eyes at the tall figure of Rufin, with its suggestion of splendors and dignities. But she was not much more informative than Papa Musard had been.

“Oh, the painter!” she exclaimed, when she understood who was in question. “Ah, M’sieur, it is two days since I have seen him. He is not of a punctual habit—no! How often have I waked in the blackness of night, upon a frightful uproar of the bell, to admit him, and he making observations at the top of his voice that would cause a fish to blush! An Italian, M’sieur—yes! But all the same it astonishes no one when he is away for two days.”

“The Italians are like that,” generalized Rufin unscrupulously. “His door is unlocked, Madame, and there is a picture in his room which is—well, valuable.”

“He sold the key,” lamented Madame, “and the catches of the window, and the bell-push, and a bucket of mine which I had neglected to watch. And he called me a she-camel when I remonstrated.”

“In Italian it is a mere jest,” Rufin assured her. “See, Madame, this is my card, which I beg you to give him. I am obliged to leave Paris to-morrow, but on my return I shall have the honor to call on him. And this is a five-franc piece!”

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The big coin seemed to work on the concierge like a powerful drug. She choked noisily and was for the while almost enthusiastic.

“He shall have the card,” she promised. “I swear it! After all, artists must have their experiences. Doubtless the monsieur who resides above is a great painter?”

“A very great painter,” replied Rufin.

His work, during the next three weeks, exiled him to a green solitude of flat land whose horizons were ridged by poplars growing beside roads laid down as though with a ruler, so straight they were as they sliced across the rich levels. It was there he effected the vital work on his great picture, “Promesse,” a revelation of earth gravid with life, of the opulent promise and purpose of spring. It is the greater for what lodged in his mind of the picture he had seen in the Montmartre tenement. It was constant in his thought, the while he noted on his canvas the very texture of the year’s early light; it aided his brush. In honesty and humbleness of heart, as he worked, he acknowledged a debt to the unknown Italian who stole the key of the room to sell, and called his concierge a she-camel.

It was a debt he knew he could pay. He, Rufin, whose work was in the Luxembourg, in galleries in America, in Russia, in the palaces of kings, could assure the painter of Montmartre of fame. He went to seek him on the evening of his return to the city.

The fat concierge preserved still her burst and overripe appearance, and at the sight of him she was so moved that she rose from her chair and stood upright to voice her lamentations.

“Monsieur, what can I say? He is gone! It was a nightmare. It is true that he omitted to pay his rent—a defect of his temperament, without doubt. But the proprietor does not make these distinctions. After three weeks he would expel Michelangelo himself. The monsieur who was driven out—he resisted. He employed blasphemies, maledictions; he smote my poor husband on the nose and in the stomach—all to no purpose, for he is gone. I was overcome with grief, but what could I do?”

“At least you know whither he went?” suggested Rufin.

“But, M’sieur, how should I know? His furniture—it was not much—was impounded for the rent, else one might have followed it. He took away with him only one picture, and that by force of threats and assaults.”

“Oh yes, of course he would take that,” agreed the artist.

“He retired down the street with it, walking backward in the middle of the road and not ceasing to make outcries at us,” said the concierge. “He uttered menaces; he was

dangerous. Could I leave my poor husband to imperil myself by following such a one? I ask M'sieur could I?"

"I suppose not," said Rufin, staring at her absently. He was thinking, by an odd momentary turn of fancy, how well he could have spared this gruesome woman for another look at the picture.

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“Who are his friends?” he inquired.

But the concierge could tell him nothing useful.

“He had no friends in the house,” she said. “Our poor honest people— he treated them with contumely. I do not know his friends, M’sieur.”

“Ah, well,” said Rufin, “I shall come across him somehow.”

He saluted her perfunctorily and was about to turn away, but the avidity of her face reminded him that he had a standard to live up to. He produced another five-franc piece and was pursued to the gate by the stridency of her gratitude.

A man—even a man of notable attributes and shocking manners—is as easily lost in Paris as anywhere; it is a city of many shadows. At the end of some weeks, during which his work had suffered from his new preoccupation, Rufin saw himself baffled. His man had vanished effectually, carrying with him to his obscurity the great picture. It was the memory of that consummate thing that held Rufin to his task of finding the author; he pictured it to himself, housed in some garret, making the mean place wonderful. He obtained the unofficial aid of the police and of many other people whose business in life is with the underworld. He even caused a guarded paragraph to appear in certain papers, which spoke temperately of a genius in hiding, for whom fame was ripe whenever he should choose to claim it. But Paris at that moment was thrilled by a series of murders by apaches, and the notice passed unremarked.

In the end, therefore, Rufin restored himself to his work, richer by a memory, poorer by a failure. Not till then came the last accident in the chain of accidents by which the matter had presented itself to him.

Some detail of quite trivial business took him to see an official at the Palais de Justice, In the great Salle des Pas Perdus there was, as always, a crowd of folk, jostling, fidgeting, making a clamor of mixed voices. He did not visit it often enough to know that the crowd was larger than usual and strongly leavened with an element of furtive shabby men and desperate calm women. He found his official and disposed of his affair, and the official, who was willing enough to be seen in the company of a man of Rufin’s position, rose politely to see him forth, and walked with him into the noisy hall.

“You are not often here, Monsieur Rufin?” he suggested. “And yet, as you see, here is much matter for an artist. These faces, eh? All the brigands of Paris are here to-day. In there”—and he pointed to one of the many doors—“the trial is proceeding of those apaches.”

“A great occasion, no doubt,” said Rufin. He looked casually towards the door which his companion indicated. “Of course I have read of the matter in the newspapers, but——”

He ceased speaking abruptly. A movement in the crowd between him and the door had let him see, for a space of seconds, a girl who leaned against the wall, strained and pale, as though waiting in a patient agony for news, for tidings of the fates that were being decided within. From the moment his eyes rested on her he was sure; there was no possibility of a mistake; it was the girl whose face, reproduced, interpreted, and immortalized, looked forth from the canvas he had seen in the Montmartre tenement.

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“Two of them held the gendarme, while the third cut his throat with his own sword. A grotesque touch, that—vous ne trouvez pas? tres fort!”—the official was remarking when Rufin took him by the arm.

“That girl,” he said. “You see her?—against the wall there. I cannot talk with her in this crowd, and I must talk to her at once. Where is there some quiet Place?”

“Eh?” The little babbling official had a moment of doubt. But he reflected that one is not a great artist without being eccentric; and his amiable brow cleared.

“She is certainly a type,” he said, peering on tiptoe. “Wonderful! You cast your eye upon all this crowd and at once, in a single glance, you pluck forth the type—wonderful! As to a place, that is easy. My office is at your service.”

The girl lifted hunted and miserable eyes to the tall, grave man who looked down upon her and raised his hat.

“I have something to say to you,” he said. “Come with me.”

A momentary frantic hope flamed in her thin countenance. It sank, and she hesitated. Girls of her world are practiced in discounting such requests. But Rufin’s courteous and fastidious face was above suspicion; without a word she followed him.

The office to which he led her was an arid, neat room, an economical legal factory for making molehills into mountains. A desk and certain chairs stood like chill islands about its floor; it had the forlorn atmosphere of a waiting-room. The little official whose workshop it was held open the door for them, followed them in, and closed it again. “Do not be alarmed, my child,” he said to the tragic girl. “This gentleman is a great artist. You will be honored in serving him.”

Rufin stilled him with an upraised hand and fetched a chair for the girl. She rested an arm on the back of it, but did not sit down. She did not understand why she had been brought to this room, and stared with hard, preoccupied eyes at the tall man with the mild, still face.

“I recognized you by a picture I saw some months ago in a room in Montmartre,” said Rufin.

“It was a great picture, the work of a great man.”

“Ah!” The girl let her breath go in a long sigh. “Monsieur knows him, then? And knows that he is a great man? For he is—he is a great man!”

She spoke with passion, with a living fervor of conviction, but her eyes still appealed.

“You and I both know it quite certainly, Mademoiselle,” replied Rufin. “Everybody will know it very soon. It is a truth that cannot be hidden. But where is the picture?!”

“I have it,” she answered.

“Take care of it, then,” said Rufin. “You have a great trust. And the painter—have you got him, too?”

She stared at him, bewildered. “The painter? The painter of the picture?”

“Of course,” said Rufin. “Who else?”

“But——” she looked from him to the benign official, who had the air of presiding at a ceremony. “Then you don’t know? You haven’t heard?”

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Comprehension lit in her face; she uttered a wretched little laugh.

“Ah, v’la de la comedie!” she cried. “No, I haven’t got him. They have taken him from me. They have taken him, and in there”—her forefinger shot out and pointed to the wall and beyond it—“in there, in a room full of people who stare and listen, they are making him into a murderer.”

“Then—parbleu!” The little official was seized by comprehension as by a fit. “Then there is an artist—the artist of whom you talk—who is one of the apaches! It is unbelievable!”

At the word apaches the girl turned on him with teeth bared as though in a snarl. But at the sound of Rufin’s voice she subsided.

“What is his name—quickly?” he demanded.

“Giaconi,” she answered.

Rufin looked his question at the little official, who turned to the girl.

“Peter the Lucky?” he queried.

She nodded dejectedly.

The little official made a grimace. “It was he,” he said, “who did the throat-cutting. Tiens! this begins to be a drama.”

The girl, with drooping head, made a faint moan of protest and misery. Rufin signed the little man to be silent. The truth, if he had but given it entertainment, had offered itself to him from the first. All he had heard of the man, Papa Musard’s slanderous-sounding complaints of him, the fat concierge’s reports of his violence, had gathered towards this culmination. He had insisted upon thinking of him as a full-blooded man of genius, riotously making little of conventions, a creature abounding in life, tinctured a little, perhaps, with the madness that may spice the mind of a visionary and enrage his appetites. It was a figure ha had created to satisfy himself.

“It was false art,” he reflected. “That is me—false art!”

Still, whatever he had seen wrongly, there was still the picture. Apache, murderer, and all the rest—the fellow had painted the picture. No one verdict can account for both art and morals, and there was reason to fear, it seemed, that the law which executed a murderer would murder a painter at the same time—and such a painter!

“No,” said Rufin, unconsciously speaking aloud—“no; they must not kill him.”

“Ah, M’sieur!” It was a cry from the girl, whose composure had broken utterly at his words. “You are also an artist—you know!”

In a hysteria of supplication she flung herself forward and was on her knees at his feet. She lifted clasped hands and blinded eyes; she was like a child saying its prayers but for the writhen torture of her face, where wild hopes and lunatic terrors played alternately.

“M’sieur, you can save him! You have the grand air, M’sieur; there is God in your face; you make men hear you! For mercy—for blessed charity—ah, M’sieur, M’sieur, I will carry your sins for you; I will go to hell in your place! You are great—one sees it; and he is great, too! M’sieur, I am your chattel, your beast—only save him, save him!”

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It tore the barren atmosphere of the office to rags; it made the place august and awful. Rufin bent to her and took her clasped hands in one of his to raise her.

“I will do all that I can,” he said earnestly. “All! I dare not do less, my child.”

She gulped and shivered; she had poured her soul and her force forth, and she was weak and empty. She strained to find further expression, but could not. Rufin supported her to the chair.

“We must see what is happening in this trial,” he said to the little official. “We have lost time as it is.”

“I will guide you,” replied the other happily. “It!-is a situation, is it not? Ah, the crevasses, the abysses of life! Come, my friend.”

From the Salle des Pas Perdus a murmur reached them. They entered it to find the crowd sundered, leaving empty a broad alley.

“Qu’est ce qu’y a?” The little official was jumping on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of him. “Is it possible that the case is finished?”

A huissier came at his gesture and found means to get them through to the front of the crowd, which waited with a hungry expectation.

“The case is certainly finished,” murmured the little man.

A double door opened at the head of the alley of people, and half a dozen men in uniform came out quickly. Others followed, and they came down toward the entrance. In the midst of them, their shabby civilian clothes contrasting abruptly with the uniforms of their guards, slouched four men, handcuffed and bareheaded.

“It is they,” whispered the official to Rufin, and half turned his head to ask a question of the huissier behind them.

Three of them were lean young men, with hardy, debased, animal countenances. They were referable at a glance to the dregs of civilization. They had the stooped shoulders, the dragging gait, the half-servile, half-threatening expression that hallmarks the apache. It was to the fourth that Rufin turned with an overdue thrill of excitement. A young man—not more than twenty-five—built like a bull for force and wrath. His was that colossal physique that develops in the South; his shoulders were mighty under his mean coat, and his chained wrists were square and knotty. He held his head up with a sort of truculence in its poise; it was the head, massive, sensuous-lipped, slow-eyed, of a whimsical Nero. It was weariness, perhaps, that give him his look of satiety, of appetites full fed and dormant, of lusts grossly slaked. A murmur ran through the hall as

he passed; it was as though the wretched men and women who knew him uttered an involuntary applause.

“There is Peter,” said some one near Rufin. “Lucky Peter; Quel homme!”

The Huissier was memorizing for the little official the closing scene of the trial. Rufin heard words here and there in his narrative. “Called the judges a set of old . . . Laughed aloud when they asked him if . . . Yes, roared with laughter—roared.” And then for the final phrase: “Condamnes a la mort!”

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“You hear?” inquired the little official, nudging him. “It is too late. They are condemned to death, all of them. They have their affair!”

Rufin shrugged and led the way back to the office. But it was empty; the girl had gone.

“Tiens!” said the official. “No doubt she heard of the sentence and knew that there was no more to be done.”

“Or else,” said Rufin thoughtfully, frowning at the floor—“or else she reposes her trust in me.”

“Ah, doubtless,” agreed the little man. “But say, then! It has been an experience, hein? Piquant, picturesque, moving, too. For I am not like you; I do not see these dramas every day.”

“And you fancy I do?” cried Rufin. “Man, I am terrified to find what goes on in the world. And I thought I knew life!” With a gesture of hopelessness and impotence he turned on his heel and went forth.

The business preserved its character of a series of accidents to the end; accidents are the forced effects of truth. Rufin, having organized supports of a kind not to be ignored in a republican state, even by blind Justice herself, threw his case at the wise grey head of the Minister of Justice—a wily politician who knew the uses of advertisement. The apaches are distinctively a Parisian produce, and if only Paris could be won over, intrigued by the romance and strangeness of the genius that had flowered in the gutter, and given to the world a star of art, all would be arranged and the guillotine would have but three necks to subdue. France at large would only shrug, for France is the husband of Paris and permits her her caprices. It rested with Paris, then.

But, as though they insisted upon a martyr, the apaches themselves intervened with a brisk series of murders and outrages, the last of which they effected on the very fringe of the show-Paris. It was not a sergent de ville this time, but a shopkeeper, and the city frothed at the mouth and shrieked for revenge.

“After that,” said the Minister, “there is nothing to do. See for yourself—here are the papers! We shall be fortunate if four executions suffice.”

Rufin was seated facing him across a great desk littered with documents.

“Why not try if three will serve?” he suggested.

The minister smiled and shook his head. He looked at Rufin half humorously.

“These Parisians,” he said, “have the guillotine habit. If they take to crying for more, what old man can be sure of dying in his bed? My grandfather was an old man, and his head fell in the Revolution.”

“But this,” said Rufin, rustling the newspapers before him—“this is clamor. It is panic. It is not serious.”

“That is why I am afraid of it,” replied the Minister. “I am always afraid of a frightened Frenchman. But, sans blague, my friend, I cannot do what you wish.”

Rufin put the piled newspapers from him and leaned forward to plead.

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It was useless. The old man opposite him had a manner as deft and unassuming as his own; it masked a cynical inflexibility of purpose proof against any appeal.

“I cannot do it,” was his single answer.

Rufin sighed. “Then it remains to see the President,” he suggested.

“There is that,” smiled the Minister. “See him by all means. If you are interested in gardening, you will find him charming. Otherwise, perhaps—but an honest man, I assure you.”

“At least,” said Rufin, “if everything fails, if the great painter is to be sacrificed to the newspapers and your epigrams—at least you will allow me to visit him before—before the——”

“But certainly!” the Minister bowed. “I am eager to serve you, Monsieur Rufin. When the date is fixed I will write you a permission. You three shall have an interview; it should be a memorable one.”

“We three?” Rufin waited for an explanation.

“Exactly. You two great artists, Monsieur Rufin and Monsieur Giaconi, and also the murderer, Peter the Lucky.”

The old man smiled charmingly; he had brought the negotiations to a point with a mot.

“Adieu, cher maitre,” he said, rising to shake his visitor’s hand across the wide desk.

Rufin seemed to have trodden into a groove of unsuccess. All his efforts were futile; he saw himself wasting time and energy while fate wasted none. The picture came to hang in his studio till the Luxembourg should demand it; daily its tragic wisdom and tenacious femininity goaded him to new endeavors, and daily he knew that he spent himself in vain.

He did not even realize how much of himself he had expended till that raw morning before the dawn when he drove across Paris in a damp and mournful cab, with the silent girl at his side, to a little square like a well shut in by high houses whose every window was lighted. There was already a crowd waiting massed under the care of mounted soldiers, and the cab slowed to a walk to pass through them. From the window at his side he saw, with unconscious appreciation, the picture it made, an arrangement of somber masses with yellow windows shining, and in the middle the gaunt uprights, the severe simplicity of the guillotine.

Faces looked in at him, strange and sudden, lit abruptly by the carriage-lamps. Somebody—doubtless a student—peered and recognized him. “Good morning,

maitre," he said, and was gone. Maitre—master! Men did him honor in so naming him, gave him rank, deferred to him. But he acknowledged life for his master, himself for its pupil and servant.

The girl had not spoken since they started; she remained sitting still in her place when the cab halted at a door, and it needed his hand on her arm to rouse her to dismount. She followed him obediently between more men in uniform, and they found themselves in a corridor, where an officer, obviously waiting there for the purpose, greeted Rufin with marked deference.

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“There is no need,” he said, as Rufin groped in his pockets for the permit with which he had been provided. “I have been warned to expect Monsieur Rufin and the lady, and I congratulate myself on the honor of receiving them.”

“He knows we are coming?” asked Rufin.

“Yes, he knows,” replied the other. “At this moment his toilet is being made.” He sank his voice so that the mute, abstracted girl should not overhear. “The hair above the neck, you know—they always shave that off. It might be better that mademoiselle should not see.”

“Possibly,” agreed Rufin, looking absently at his comely, insignificant face, which the lamps illuminated mercilessly.

The girl stood with her hands loosely joined before her, and her thin face vacant, staring, as though in a mood of deep thought, along the bare passage. Suddenly she addressed the officer.

“How long shall I be with him,” she inquired, in tones of an almost arrogant composure, “before they cut his head off?”

The words, in their matter-of-fact directness, no less than the tone, seemed to startle the officer.

“Ah, Mademoiselle!” he protested, as though at an indelicacy or an accusation.

“How long?” repeated the girl.

“Kindly tell mademoiselle what she wishes to know,” directed Rufin.

The officer hesitated. “It does not rest with me,” he said uncomfortably. “You see, there is a regular course in these matters, a routine. I hope mademoiselle will have not less than ten minutes.”

The girl looked at Rufin and made a face. It was as though she had been overcharged in a shop; she invited him, it seemed, to take note of a trivial imposture. Her manner and gesture had the repressed power of under-expression. He nodded to her in entire comprehension.

“But,” began the officer excitedly, “how can I——” Rufin turned on him gravely, a somber, august figure of reproof.

“Sir,” he said, “you are in the presence of a tragedy. I beg you to be silent.”

The officer made a hopeless gesture; the shadow of it fled grotesquely up the walls.

A few moments later the summons came that took them along the passage to an open door, giving on to a room brilliant with lights and containing a number of people. At the farther end of it a table against the wall had been converted into a sort of altar, with wan candles alight upon it, and there was a robed priest among the uniformed men. Those by the door parted to make way for them. Rufin saw them salute him, and removed his hat.

Somebody was speaking. “Regret we cannot leave you alone, but——”

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“It does not matter,” said Rufin. The room was raw and aching with light; the big electrics were pitiless. In the middle of it a man sat on a chair and raised expectant eyes at his arrival. It was Giaconi, the painter, the murderer. There was some disorder of his dress which Rufin noted automatically, but it was not for some minutes that he perceived its cause—the collar of his coat had been shorn away. The man sat under all those fascinated eyes impatiently; his tired and whimsical face was tense and drawn; he was plainly putting a strong constraint upon himself. The great shoulders, the huge arms, all the compressed strength of the body, made the effect of some strong animal fettered and compelled to tameness.

“Rufin?” he said hesitatingly.

The painter nodded. “Yes, it is Rufin.”

The girl glided past him toward the seated man. “And I, Pietro,” she said.

He made a gesture with his hand as though to move her aside, for she stood between him and Rufin.

“Ah,” she cried, “do you not need me at all—even now?”

“Oh, what is it?” said the condemned man, with a quick irritation. “Is this a time! There is not a moment to spare. I must speak to Rufin—I must. Yes, kneel down; that’s right!”

She had sunk at his knee and laid her brown head upon it. As though to acknowledge the caress of a dog, he let one hand fall on her bowed shoulders. His eyes traveled across her to Rufin.

“They told me you would come. Say—is it because of my picture?”

“Yes,” said Rufin. “I have done all that I could to save you because of that. But——”

“I know,” said the other. “They have told me. You like it, then—my poor ‘Mona Lisa’ of Montmartre?”

Rufin stepped closer. It was not easy to utter all he desired to say under the eyes of those uniformed men, with the sad, attentive priest in the background.

“Monsieur,” he said, “your picture is in my studio. Nothing shall ever hang in its place, for nothing will be worthy.”

The seated man heard him hungrily. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten where he was and what was to happen to him ere he drew many more breaths.

“I knew,” he said, “I knew. I can paint. So can you, Monsieur— sometimes. We two ——we know!”

He frowned heavily as realization returned to him. “And now I never shall,” he said. “I never shall! Ah, it is horrible! A man is two people, and both die like a single soul. You know, for you are an artist.”

“I—I have done my best,” said Rufin despairingly. “If I could go instead and leave you to paint—oh, believe me, I would go now gladly, proudly, for I should have given the world pictures—great pictures.”

A spasm of emotion filled his eyes with tears, and some one touched his arm and drew him aside. He strove with himself fiercely and looked up again to see that three men had entered the room and were going toward the prisoner. The priest had come forward and was raising the kneeling girl.

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“A moment,” cried the prisoner, as the three laid hands upon him. “Just a moment.” They took no notice. “Monsieur Rufin,” he cried, “it is my hand I offer you—only that.”

Somebody near Rufin spoke a brief order and the three were still. He saw Giaconi’s intent face across their shoulders, his open hand reaching forward between them. He clasped it silently.

The priest had set the girl on her knees before the improvised altar and stood beside her in silence. The three, with no word spoken, proceeded with their business. With deft speed they lashed their man’s hands behind his back, forcing them back with rough skill. The chief of them motioned his subordinates to take him by the elbows and signed to the priest with his hand. The priest came forward, holding the crucifix, and took his place close to the prisoner. For a final touch of the grotesque the executioner produced and put on a tall silk hat.

“March!” he said, and they took the condemned man toward the door. He twisted his head round for a last glance at the room.

“Good-bye, little one!” he cried loudly. The kneeling girl only moaned.

“Good-bye, M’sieur Rufin.”

Rufin stepped forward and bowed mechanically.

“Adieu, Maitre,” he answered.

He saw that the condemned man’s eyes lightened, a flush rose in his face; he smiled as if in triumph. Then they passed out, and Rufin, after standing for a moment in uncertainty, crossed the room and knelt beside the girl, with his hands pressed to his ears.

VIII

“*Parisienne*”

“At least,” said the Comtesse, still staring at the brisk fire in the steel grate—“at least he saw them with his own eyes.”

She was thinking aloud, and Elsie Gray, her distant relative and close companion, only looked up without reply. The Comtesse’s face stood in profile against the bright appointments of the fireplace, delicate and serene; the tall salon, with its white panels gleaming discreetly in the light of the candles, made a chaste frame for her fragile presence. The window-curtains had been drawn to shut out the evening which shed its damp melancholy over the Faubourg, and to the girl the great, still room seemed like a

stage set for a drama. She sat on a stool beside the Comtesse's chair, her fingers busy with many-colored skeins of silk, and the soft stir of the fire and the tick of a little clock worked themselves into her patient thoughts.

"He was to come at nine, I think," said the Comtesse at last, without turning her head.

"Yes," said Elsie, leaning forward to look at the little clock. "It still wants twenty minutes."

The Comtesse nodded slowly; all her gestures had the gentle deliberation of things done ceremonially.

"It is not much longer to wait, is it?" she said. "After twenty years, one should be patient. But to think! To-night, for the first time I hear of Jeanne from one who saw her at the end. Not a lawyer who has sought out the tale and rearranged it, but one who knew. You see, Elsie?"

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Elsie put a hand on her arm, and her little thrill of excitement died out at once.

“Yes,” said the girl; “I see, but you must be tranquil.”

“I will be tranquil,” promised the Comtesse. “I will have consideration for my heart. It is only the waiting which tries me.”

“And that is nearly at an end.” Elsie released her arm, and the Comtesse turned again to the fire. The tick of the clock renewed its tiny insistence; the great room again enveloped them in the austerity of its silence. The girl returned to the silk strings in her lap. She knew the occasion of the Comtesse’s sudden emotion; it was a familiar tale, and not the loss familiar for being told in whispers. She had heard it first when she came from her English home to be the Comtesse’s companion. It had been told to her officially, as it were, to guide her in her dealings with the Comtesse. A florid French uncle, with a manner of confidential discretion that made her blush, had been the mouthpiece of the family, and from him she had learned how Jeanne, the Comtesse’s half-sister, had run away with a rogue, a man who got his deserts, an officer in a regiment stationed in Algeria.

“Eventually he committed suicide, but before that there were passages,” the French uncle had said. The dreadful word “passages” seemed to contain the story, and he gave it an accent of unspeakable significance. “The Comtesse has suffered,” he told her further. “It was a sad affair, and she had much tenderness for Jeanne.” And that, at first, seemed to be the whole of it, though once or twice the uncle checked himself on the brink of details. But on this evening the tale was to be told afresh. There had arrived from Africa one Colonel Saval, who had served with the sorry hero of poor Jeanne’s romance; he had known him and dealt with him; and he was appointed to come to the Comtesse in the quality of eye-witness.

He was punctual, at all events; the little clock was yet striking when the gaunt footman opened the door and spoke his name. The Comtesse looked up, and Elsie Gray rose to receive him; he advanced and made his bow.

“Madame la Comtesse?” he said, with a faint note of inquiry. The Comtesse’s inclination answered him. “Madame la Comtesse honors me. I am happy to be of service.”

He bowed to Elsie, who gave him “Good evening;” the footman set forward a chair for him and withdrew. His white hair stood about his head like a delicate haze; under it, the narrow wise face was brick-red, giving news of his long service under the sun of North Africa. He was short and slight, a tiny vivacious man, full of charming formalities, and there was about him something gentle and suave, that did not quite hide a trenchant quality of spirit. He stood before them, smiling in a moment of hesitation, half paternal, wholly gallant.

“Madame la Comtesse is suffering,” said Elsie, in the spacious French idiom. “There is little that she can say. But she thanks Monsieur most sincerely for giving himself this trouble. But please be seated.”

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He was active in condolences at once. “I am most sympathetic,” he said seriously. “And for the trouble”—he nicked it from him—“there is no trouble. I am honored.”

The Comtesse bowed to him. “Monsieur is very amiable,” she murmured.

He hitched up his chair and sat down, facing the pair of them. His shrewd eye took the measure of the Comtesse and her infirmity, without relinquishing a suggestion of admiration. He was a man panoplied with the civil arts; his long career in camps and garrisons had subtracted nothing of social dexterity. There was even a kind of grace in his attitude as he sat, his cane and hat in one hand, with one knee crossed upon the other. He spent a moment in consideration.

“It is of the Capitaine Bertin that I am to speak? Yes?” he asked suddenly.

The Comtesse stirred a little in her chair. “Yes,” she answered, in a voice like a sigh—a sigh of relief, perhaps.

“Ah!” He made a little gesture of acknowledgment. “Le Capitaine Bertin! Then Madame will compose herself to hear little that is agreeable, for it is a tale of tragedy.” His eyes wandered for a moment; he seemed to be renewing and testing again the flavor of memories. Under his trim moustache the mouth set and grew harder. Then, without further preamble, he began to speak.

“Bertin and I were of the same rank,” he said, “and of much the same age. There was never a time when we were friends; there stood between us too pronounced a difference—a difference, Madame, of spirit, of aim, and even of physique. Bertin was large, sanguine, with the face of a bold lover, of a man noticeably gallant. I recall him most vividly as he sat in a cafe behind a little round table. It was thus one saw him most frequently, with his hard, swarthy face and moustaches that curled like a ram’s horns. In such places he seemed most at home, with men about him and cards ready to his hand; and yet—has Madame seen the kind of man who is never wholly at his ease, who stands for ever on his guard, as it were! Bertin was such a one; there were many occasions when I remarked it. He would be in the centre of a company of his friends, assured, genial, dominant; and yet, at each fresh arrival in the room, he would look up with something furtive and defensive in his expression. I have seen deserters like that, but in Bertin it lacked an explanation.”

“And there was a further matter yet. He was my fellow officer; I saw him on parade and at mess; but his life, the life of his own choice, was lived among those who were not our equals. How shall I make that clear to you, Madame? In those days, Europe drained into Algiers; it had its little world of men who gambled and drank much, and understood one another with a complete mistrust; it was with such as these that Bertin occupied his leisure. It was with them that his harshness and power were most efficacious. Naturally, it was not pleasant for us, his colleagues, to behold him for ever with such

companions; the most of them seemed to be men connected with one sport or another, with billiards, or racing, or the like; but there was nothing to be done."

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The Comtesse shifted slightly in her chair. “He had power,” she said thoughtfully.

The little Colonel nodded twice. “He had power, as Madame observes. He had many good qualities—not quite enough, it is true, but many. There were even those that loved him, dogs, horses, waiters, croupiers and the poor women who made up the background of his life. I have thought, sometimes, that it is easy for a man to be loved, Madame, if he will take that responsibility. But what befell Bertin was not commonplace. He returned to France on leave, for six months, and it was then, I believe, that he first met the lady who became Madame Bertin?”

He gave the words the tone of a question, and the Comtesse answered with a slow gesture of assent.

“Yes, I have heard that it was so,” said the Colonel. “Of what took place at that time I can tell nothing, naturally, and Madame is no doubt sufficiently informed. But I saw him—I saw them both—within a week of their return. Upon that occasion I dined at a hotel with two friends, Captain Vaucher and Lieutenant de Sailles. Bertin, with some friends and his wife, was at a table near-by. She was the only lady of the party; her place was between an Englishman, a lean, twisted man with the thin legs of a groom, and a Belgian who passed for an artist. It was de Sailles who pointed them out; and in effect it was a group to see with emotion. The lady—she was known to you, Madame? Then the position will be clear. She was of that complete and perfect type we honor as the Parisienne, a product of the most complex life in the world. She was slender and straight—ah! straight as a lance, with youth and spirit and buoyancy in the carriage of her head, the poise of her body, the color upon her cheeks. But it was not that— the beauty and the courage—that caused her to stand out among those men as a climbing rose stands out from an old wall; it was the schooled and perfected quality of her, the fineness and delicacy of her manner and expression, the—in short, the note of breeding, Madame, the unmistakable ensign of caste. The Englishman fidgeted and lounged beside her; the fat Belgian drank much and was boisterous; Bertin was harsh and rudely jovial and loud. It was as though she were enveloped in a miasma.”

“‘So that is what Bertin has brought back,’ said Vaucher slowly, as his custom was.”

“‘It is a crime,’ said de Sailles.”

“‘I wonder,’ said Vaucher, and drank his wine. He was much my friend, a man with the courage and innocence of a good child; but his thought was not easy to follow. He gave Bertin’s group another look under puckered brows, and then turned his back on it and began to talk of other matters. I might have known then that—but I must tell my tale in order.”

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“Bertin was not wise—if it were nothing more—to bring such a wife to Algiers. It turned eyes upon him. Those who had been aware of him merely as a man of low tastes now began to notice his particular actions. He had a house in a certain impasse, and one night there was a brawl there—an affair of a man drunk and angry, of a knife drawn and some one stabbed. Before, it might have passed; our discipline was indulgent; but now it took on the shape of a scandal. It was brief and ugly, but it marked a stage passed in Bertin’s career. And it was only two days later that Vaucher came to me in my quarters with a manner at once deprecating and defiant. He sat in my arm-chair and laughed quietly before he spoke.”

“‘I am looking for friends,’ he said; ‘for a pair of friends.’”

“Then, of course, I understood. I bade him count on me. ’And there is also de Sailles,’ I reminded him. ’He has a very just taste in these affairs. But who is our opponent?’”

“‘It is Bertin,’ he answered.”

“I was astonished, and he told me all. It was an episode of quixotry, a thing entirely imprudent and altogether lovable in him. It chanced that on the evening of Bertin’s little—er—fracas, Vaucher had passed by the impasse in which Bertin lived. He had heard the scream of the man with the knife in him and paused. It was a dark night, and in the impasse there was but one lamp which stood near Bertin’s door. There was a babble of many voices after that scream—shouts of fury, the whining of the would-be assassin, and so on; he was about to pass on, when Bertin’s door opened and a woman slipped out and stood listening on the pavement. Her attitude was that of one ready to flee, terrified but uncertain. As the noises within died down she relapsed from her tense pose and showed her face to Vaucher in the light of the lamp. It was Madame Bertin. She did not see him where he waited, and all of a sudden her self-possession snapped like a twig you break in your fingers. She was weeping, leaning against the wall, weeping desolately, in an abandonment of humiliation and impotence. But Vaucher was not moved when he told me of it.”

“‘That I could have endured,’ he said. ’I held my peace and did not intrude upon her. But presently they brought the wounded man downstairs, and Bertin came forth to seek a fiacre to take him away. She heard him ere he came out and gained thus the grace of an instant. There was never anything in life so pitiful, so moving, as the woman’s strength that strangled down her sobs, dried the tears at their source, and showed to her husband a face as calm as it was cold. He spoke to her and she gave him a word in answer. But’—and he leaned forward in my chair and struck his fist on the arm of it—-’but that poor victory is sore in my memory like a scar.”

“All that was comprehensible. Vaucher was a man of heart. ’But what is the quarrel?’ I demanded.”

"'The quarrel!' he repeated. 'Let me see; what was it, now?' He had actually forgotten. 'Oh yes. He spoke to me. That was it. He spoke to me, and I desired him not to speak to me for the future, of course.'

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“Madame, up to the time when I went with Vaucher to the ground I had not given a thought to the issue of the affair. I had taken it for granted that Bertin would go down; at such seasons, one is blinded by one’s sense of right. It lasted not two minutes. They fought with the saber—our custom at that time. Though it was early in the morning, there was a strong sun; it made a flame on the blades as they saluted before engaging. Bertin was very sober and serious, but one had only to glance at him to perceive a very heat of wrath masked under his heavy countenance. Vaucher was intent, wary, full of careful purpose. Their blades touched. ‘All’ez!’ There were a couple of moments of fencing, of almost formal escrime, and then Vaucher lengthened his arm and attacked. Bertin stepped back a pace, and, as Vaucher advanced, he slashed with a high open cut, and it was over. Vaucher threw up both hands and came to his knees. I remember that I stood, unable to move, staring aghast at this end to the affair; while Bertin threw down his sword, turned his back, and went to where his clothes lay. At that moment he seemed as vast against the morning sky as a monument, as a sphinx carved out of a mountain. He had spoken no word.”

“We took Vaucher back to the city. It was a cut in the head. Madame shall be spared the particulars. I think he is living yet, but it was the end of him, none the less.”

The little Colonel’s voice dropped on the last words. He did not take the sympathy and friendship that waited for him in Elsie’s grey eyes; he looked with a somber gaze at the Comtesse. She still held her favorite attitude, leaning a little to one side in her great chair, so that she could watch the shifting shapes in the fire. She was smiling slightly, but her smile vanished as the Colonel paused.

“He was a gallant gentleman,” she said softly. Elsie turned her head to look at her, surprised, for the thing was said perfunctorily, in the manner of a commonplace of politeness.

Colonel Saval bowed. “Madame la Comtesse is only just,” he said. But he glanced sharply at her serene, preoccupied face with a manner of some dissatisfaction.

He resumed his tale with a sigh. “After all,” he said, “there is not much to tell. I was not fortunate enough to meet Madame Bertin frequently during the two years that followed. From time to time I saw her, always with some wonder, for she preserved to the end that delicate and superb quality which so distinguished her. The scandal of the brawl was the small thing that was needed to turn Bertin’s course downhill; almost from that day one could mark his decline. It was not a matter of incidents; it was simply that within a year most of us were passing him without recognition, and there was talk of debts that troubled him. He had deteriorated, too; whereas of old he was florid, now he was inflamed and gross; where he had been merely loud, he was now coarse.

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Within eighteen months the Colonel had made him a scene, had told him sour truths, and shaken his finger at him. That power of his, Madame, was not the power that enables a man to hold his level. Even with the companions of his leisure, his ascendancy faded. I recollect seeing him once, at the corner of the Place du Gouvernement, in the centre of a group of them, raging almost tearfully, while they laughed at him. The horrible laughter of those outcasts, edged like a saw, cruel and vile! And he was purple with fury, shaking like a man in an ague, and helpless against them. I was young in those days and not incapable of generous impulses; I recollect that as I passed I jostled one of those creatures out of the path, and then turned and waited for the remonstrance which he decided not to make."

The Comtesse nodded at the fire, like one well pleased. The little Colonel gave her another of his shrewd glances and went on.

"As you see, Madame, it is not possible to describe to you the steps by which Bertin sank. The end came within two years of the duel. One knew—somehow—that it was at hand. There were things dropped in talk, things overheard and pieced together—a whole atmosphere of scandal, in which there came and went little items of plain fact. The trouble was with regimental funds; again I will spare Madame the details; but certain of them which should have passed through Bertin's hands had not arrived at their destination. Clerks from a bank came to work upon the accounts; strange, cool young men, who hunted figures through ledgers as a ferret traces a rat under a floor. You must understand that for the regiment it was a monstrous matter, an affair to hide sedulously; it touched our intimate honor. There was a meeting of the rest of us to consider the thing; finally, it was I that was deputed to go forthwith to Bertin and persuade him to leave the city, to vanish, to do his part to save our credit. And that evening, as soon as it was dark enough to be convenient, I went."

"There was still that light in the impasse by which my poor friend Vaucher had seen Madame Bertin weeping; but from the windows of the house there came none. It was shuttered like a fort. It was not till I had knocked many times upon the door that there came any response. At last I heard bolts being withdrawn—bolt after bolt, as if the place had been a prison or a treasury; and Madame Bertin herself stood in the entry. The one lamp in the impasse showed her my uniform, and she breathed like one who had been running."

"I saluted her and inquired for Bertin."

"'Captain Bertin?' she repeated after me. 'I do not know—I fear——'"

"'My business with him is urgent,' I told her, and at that she whitened. 'And unofficial,' I added, therefore."

“At that she stood aside for me to enter. I aided her to fasten the door again, and she led me up the stairs to a small room, divided by large doors from an inner chamber.”

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"'If you will please be seated,' she said, 'I will send Captain Bertin in to you.'"

"She was thinner, I thought, and perhaps a trifle less assured; but that was to be understood. For the rest, she had the deliberate tones of the salon, the little smile of a convention that is not irksome. Her voice, her posture, had that grace one knows and defers to at sight. It was all very wonderful to come upon in that house. As she left the room, her profile shone against the wall like a cameo, so splendid in its pallor and the fineness of its outline."

"She must have gone from the passage by another entrance to the room beyond the double doors, for I heard her voice there—and his. They spoke together for some minutes, she at length, but he shortly; and then the doors slid apart a foot or so, and he came through sideways. He gave me a desperate look, and pulled at the doors to close them behind him. They stuck and resisted him, and he ceased his efforts at once."

"'You wanted to speak to me?' he asked. He seemed to be frowning as a child will frown to keep from bursting into tears. 'But not officially, I believe? It is not official, is it?'"

"'No,' I answered. 'It is a message—quite private.'"

"He ceased to frown at that, staring at me heavily, and chewing his moustache."

"'Sit down,' he said suddenly, and came nearer, glancing over his shoulder at the aperture of the doors. Something in that movement gave me the suggestion that he was accustomed to guard against eavesdroppers; all those poor forlorn gamesters and wastrels are full of secrets and privacies. One sees them for ever in corners with furtive eyes for listeners, guiding their business like conspirators."

"I gave him my message at once. There was a need upon me for plain speech with the man, like that need for cold steel which came upon poor Vaucher."

"'There is time for you to make your packages and be gone,' I said. 'Time for that and no more, and I recommend you to let the packages be few. If you go, you will not be sought for. That is what I have to say to you.'"

"He glanced over his shoulder again and came a step nearer. 'You mean——'he said, and hesitated."

"'The money? Yes,' I answered. 'That is what I mean. You will go?"

"He stared at me a moment in silence. I felt as if I had struck him and spat in his face. But he had no such thought."

"'How long have I?' he asked suddenly."

"'You have to-night,' I answered."

"It seemed as if he were going to ask further questions, but at that moment Madame Bertin appeared in the doorway behind him. I knew she had heard our talk.

"'Your business is finished?' she asked carelessly, coming forward into the room."

"'It is quite finished,' I replied."

"She nodded, smiling. 'Captain Bertin has to catch a train,' she said, 'and if I did not watch the time for him, he would surely lose it. He has no idea of punctuality.'"

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"'I hope he has not much packing to do,' I said."

"'I have seen to that,' she replied."

"'Then I will not intrude upon your adieux,' I said, preparing to depart. Ma foi, I was ready to weep, as Vaucher had wept, at the gay courage of her. But she stopped me."

"'Oh, the adieux are complete like the packing,' she said. 'And if you should have anything further to say to Captain Bertin, you can drive with him to the station.'"

"I could see her meaning in that; my company would guard him till he left. So I bowed."

"'I shall be very happy,' I said."

"'Then if you will send for a fiacre,' she suggested to her husband. He was standing between us, wordless and dull. He gave her a look of inquiry; she returned it with a clear, high gaze, and he went at once."

"'It is a good season for traveling, I believe!' she said, when the door had closed behind him."

"'Captain Bertin could not have chosen a better,' I assured her."

"Her composure was more than wonderful; by no sign, no hint of weakness or ill ease, did she make any appeal to me. To my sympathy, my admiration, my devotion, she offered only that bright surface of her schooled manner and disciplined emotions. While her house crumbled about her ears, while her world failed her, she deviated not a hairbreadth from the line of social amenity."

"'But he is hardly likely to have company?' she asked again."

"As for me, I had visions of the kind of company that was due to him —a formal sons-officer with a warrant of arrest, a file of stolid soldiers, with rigid faces and curious eyes."

"But I answered her in her own manner."

"'There is certainly that drawback,' I said, and I thought—I hoped— I saw gratitude in her answering look."

"Then Bertin returned, with the hat of a civilian and a cloak that covered him to the ears. I saw their farewell—his look of appeal at her, the smile of amusement which answered it. And next I was seated beside him in the fiacre and she was framed in the door, looking after us, slender and erect, pale and subtle, smiling still with a manner as of weariness. It is thus that I remember her best."

“It was not till we were out of her sight that Bertin spoke. He lit a cigarette and stared up at the great white stars.”

“‘She spoilt my luck from the first,’ he said.”

“I don’t know why, but I laughed. At the moment it seemed to be a very droll saying. And at the sound of my laughter he grinned in sympathy. He was a wonderful man. When he was established in the train, he held out his hand to me.”

“‘Adieu,’ he said. ’You have been kind in your way. You didn’t do it for me, you know—-so adieu!”

“I took his hand. It was a small thing to grant him, and I bad no other answer. As the train moved away, I saw his face at the window of the carriage, full of a kind of sly humor—gross, amiable, and tragic! He waved me a good-bye.”

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The Colonel paused, staring at his trimly booted toe. Madame la Comtesse looked at him thoughtfully.

“You saw him again? she asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “But possibly the tale becomes too painful.”

The Comtesse passed a hand over her eyes. “I must hear the rest,” she said. “You saw her, too, again?”

“Yes,” said the Colonel.

“She was very hard,” said the Comtesse thoughtfully. “Very hard always. As a girl I remember——”

The Colonel was looking at her intently, as though some thought had suddenly brought him enlightenment. Both he and the Comtesse seemed quite to have forgotten Elsie, listening on her stool in bewilderment and compassion. She saw them now exchange guarded glances, as though measuring each other’s penetration.

The Comtesse leaned back. “I beg you to proceed,” she said, with a sigh. Elsie reached over the arm of the chair and took her hand and held it.

The little Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

“Since Madame la Comtesse wishes it,” he said. “But some years elapsed before I saw either of them again. Madame Bertin had said nothing which could encourage me to call at the house in the impasse, and there was no message from him to carry thither. I heard—it was said—that she, too, left the city; Bertin’s exit from the service was arranged, and thus the matter seemed to close. I preserved certain memories, which I still preserve; I was the richer by them. Then came active service, expeditions to the interior, some fighting and much occupation. It chanced that I was fortunate; I gained some credit and promotion; and by degrees the affair of Bertin sank to rest in the background of my life. It was a closed incident, and I was reconciled never to have it reopened. But it seems one can never be sure that a thing is ended; possibly Bertin in his hiding-place thought as I did and made the same mistake. I heard the news when I visited Algiers on my way to a post up-country at the edge of the desert. New powers had taken charge of our business; there was a new General, an austere, mirthless man, who knew of Bertin’s existence, and resented it. He had been concerned here and there in more than one enterprise of an unpleasant flavor, and it was the General’s intention to put a period to him. My friends in barracks told me of it, perfunctorily; and my chief sense was of disgust that Bertin should continue to be noticeable. And then I went away up-country, in a train that carried me beyond the borders of civilization, and set me down at last one dawn at a point where a military line trickled out into the vast

yellow distance, against an undulated horizon of sandhills. It was in the chill hour of the morning; a few sentries walked their beats, and beyond them there was a plot of silent tents. The station was no more than planks laid on the ground beside some locked iron sheds, a tank for the engine, and a flagstaff. It was infinitely forlorn and empty, with an air of staleness and discomfort. At some distance, a single muffled figure sat apart on a seat; I thought it was some Arab waiting for the day. Be judge, then, of my amazement when it rose, as I would have passed it, and spoke."

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"'This, also, is a good season for traveling?' it said, and I spun on my heel to face it. From the hood of a bernouse there looked out at me, pale and delicate still, the face of Madame Bertin."

"In my bewilderment and my—my joy, I caught at both her hands and held them for a moment. She smiled and freed herself gently, and her eyes mocked me. She was the same as ever, impregnably the same; stress of mind, sorrow, exile, loneliness—they could not avail to stir her from her pedestal of composure. That manner—it is the armor of the woman of the world."

"'I came here on a camel,' she told me, in answer to my inquiries. 'On a camel from my home. I understand now why chameau is a word of abuse.'"

"'I am not very sure that the season is good for traveling,' I said."

"She shrugged her shoulders. 'When one is acclimatized, seasons are no longer important.'"

"'And you are acclimatized, Madame?' I asked her."

"She showed me the bernouse. 'Even to this,' she said."

"Across the slopes of sand, one could hear the engine of the little military train grunting and wheezing as it collected its cars, and the strident voice of a man cursing Arab laborers."

"'You go by that train?' she asked me."

"'To Torah,' I answered."

"'I also,' she said, looking at me inquiringly.

"I said I was fortunate to have her company, and it was plain that she was relieved. For I guessed forthwith that it was at Torah that Bertin was, and she knew that if my going thither were to arrest him, I would spare her. I am sure she knew that."

"It was a journey of a day and a night, while that little train rolled at leisure through a world of parched sand, beyond the sandhills to the eye-wearying monotony of the desert. Sometimes it would halt beside a tank and a tent, while a sore-eyed man ran along the train to beg for newspapers. Over us, the sky rose in an arch from horizon to horizon, blue and blinding; the heat was like a hand laid on one's mouth. I had with me my soldier-servant and a provision of food; there was something of both ecstasy and anguish in serving her needs, in establishing her comfort. She talked little and always so that I stood at a distance from her, fenced apart by little graceful formalities, groping hopelessly and vainly towards her through the clever mesh of her adroit speech and

skilful remoteness. I was already fifteen years in the country, and fifteen years her inferior in those civilized dexterities. But she thanked me very sweetly for my aid."

"Another dawn, and we were at Torah. A half-circle of dusty palms leaned away to one side of the place, the common ensign of a well on a caravan route. The post was but a few structures of wood and mud, and, a little way off, the tents of the camp. In the east, the sky was red with foreknowledge of the sun; its light already lay pale over the meanness of all the village. I helped her from the train, and demanded to know whither I should conduct her."

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"'I will not give you further trouble,' she said; and though I protested, she was firm. And at last she walked away, alone, to the huddle of little buildings, and I saw her pass among them and out of my sight. Then I turned and went over to the camp, where my duty lay."

"That was a sorrowful place, that Torah. The troops were chiefly men of the Foreign Legion, of whom three in every four expressed in their eyes only patience and the bitterness of men whose lives are hidden things. With them were some elderly officers, whose only enthusiasms showed themselves in a crazy bravery in action, the callous courage of men who have already died once. From some of these I heard of Bertin. It was a brown, sun-dried man who told me."

"'Yes, we know him,' he said. 'He passes under various names, but we know him. A man wasted, thrown away, my friend! He should have joined us.'"

"'You would have accepted him?' I asked."

"'Why not?' was the answer. 'It is not honest men we ask for, nor true men, nor even brave men—only fighting men. And any man can be that.'"

"It made me wonder if it were yet too late for Bertin, 'and whether he might not still find a destiny in the ranks of that regiment where so many do penance. But when I saw him, a week later, I knew that the chance had gone by with his other chances, It was in a cafe in the village, a shed open at one side to the little street of sand, and furnished only with tables and chairs. A great Spahi, in the splendid uniform of his corps, lounged in one corner; a shrouded Arab tended the coffee apparatus in another; in the middle, with a glass before him, sat Bertin. The sun beat in at the open front of the building and spread the shadows in a tangle on its floor; he was leaning with both elbows on the table, gazing before him with the eyes of a dead man. He had always promised to be stout, but he was already fat—a flabby, blue-jowled heap of a man, all thick creases and bulges; and his face had patches of blue and purple in its hollows. He was ponderous, he was huge; and with it there was an aspect of horror, as though all that flesh were diseased."

"I paused by his table and slowly he looked up to me. His features labored with thought, and he recognized me."

"'Saval!' he ejaculated hoarsely. 'You—you want me?'"

"I sat down at his table. 'I haven't come to arrest you,' I told him. 'But you had better know that the authorities have decided to arrest you.'"

"He gasped. 'For—for——'"

"'I don't know what for,' I told him. 'For whatever you have been doing.'"

“He had to blink and swallow and wipe his brow before he mastered the fact. His mind, like his body, was a shameful ruin. But the fact that he was not to be arrested at the moment seemed to comfort him. He leaned over the table to me.”

“‘My wife’s here,’ he said, in a raucous whisper.”

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"'Yes; she knows,' I answered."

"He frowned, and seemed perplexed. 'She'll make me shoot myself,' he went on. 'I know what she means. I warn you, she'll make me do it. Have a drink?'"

"He was horrible, an offence to the daylight. He bawled an order to the Arab, and turned to me again."

"'That's what it'll come to,' he said. 'I warn you.'"

"He repeated the last phrase in whispers, staring at me heavily: 'I warn you; I warn you.'"

"'Have you a pistol?' I asked him. Yes, Madame, I asked him that."

"He smiled at me. 'No, I haven't,' he said, still confidentially. 'You see how it is? I haven't even a pistol. But I know what she means.'"

"I was in field uniform, and I unbuttoned my holster and laid the revolver on the table before him. He looked at it with an empty smile. 'It is loaded,' I said, and left him."

"But I wondered. It seemed to me that there was a tension in the affairs of Bertin and his wife which could not endure, that the moment was at hand when the breaking-point would be reached. And it was this idea that carried me the same evening to visit Madame Bertin. The night about me was still, yet overhead there was wind, for great clouds marched in procession across the moon, trailing their shadows over the sand. Bertin inhabited a little house at the fringe of the village; it looked out at the emptiness of the desert. I was yet ten paces from the door when it opened and Madame Bertin came forth. She was wrapped in her bernouse, and she closed the door behind her quickly and stepped forward to meet me. She gave me greeting in her cool even tones, the pallor of her face shining forth from the hood of her garment."

"'Since you are so good as to come and see me,' she said, 'let us walk here for a while. Captain Bertin is occupied; and we can watch the clouds on the sand.'"

"We walked to and fro before the house. 'I saw your husband to-day,' I told her."

"'He said so,' she answered. 'It was pleasant for him to talk with an old comrade.'"

"One window in the house was lighted, with a curtain drawn across it. As we paused, I saw the shadow of a man on the curtain—a man who lurched and pressed both hands to his head. I could not tell whether Madame Bertin saw it also; she continued to walk, looking straight before her; her face was calm."

"'Doubtless he has his occupations here?' I ventured presently. 'There are matters in which he interests himself—non?'"

"'That is so,' she replied. 'And this evening he tells me he has a letter to write, concerning some matters of importance. I have promised him that for an hour he shall not be interrupted. What wonderful color there is yonder?'"

"The shadow of a great cloud, blue-black like a moonlit sea, was racing past us; it seemed to break like surf on a line of sandhills. But while I watched it awe was creeping upon me. She was erect and grave, with lips a little parted, staring before her; the heavy folds of the bernouse were like the marble robe of a statue. I glanced behind me at the lighted window, and the shadow of an arm moved upon it, an arm that gesticulated and conveyed to me a sense of agony, of appeal. I remembered the revolver; I felt a weakness overcome me."

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"'Madame!' I cried. 'I fear—I doubt that it is safe to leave him for an hour to-night.'"

"She turned to me with a faint movement of surprise. The moon showed her to me clearly. Before the deliberate strength of her eyes, my gaze faltered."

"'But I assure you,' she answered; 'nothing can be safer.'"

"I made one more effort. 'But if I might see him for an instant,' I pleaded."

"She smiled and shook her head. I might have been an importunate child. 'I promised him an hour,' she said. Her voice was indulgent, friendly, commonplace; it made me powerless. I had it on my lips to cry out, 'He is in there alone, working himself up to the point of suicide!' But I could not utter it. I could no more say it than I could have smitten her in the face. She was impregnable behind; that barrier of manners which she upheld so skillfully. She continued to look at me for some seconds and to smile—so gently, so mildly. I think I groaned."

"She began to talk again of the clouds, but I could not follow what she said. That was my hour of impotence. Madame, I have seen battles and slaughter and found no meaning in them. But that isolated tragedy boxed up in the little house between the squalid town and the lugubrious desert—it sucked the strength from my bones. She continued to speak; the cultivated sweetness of her voice came and went in my ears like a maddening distraction from some grave matter in hand. I think I was on the point of breaking in, violently, hysterically, when I cast a look at the lighted window again. I cried out to her."

"'Look! Look!' I cried."

"She did not turn. 'I have seen the sea like that at Naples,' she was saying, gazing out to the desert, with her back to the house. 'With the moon shining over Capri——'"

"'For the love of God!' I said, and made one step toward the house. But it was too late. The shadowed hand—and what it held—rose; the shadowed head bent to meet it."

"Even at the sound of the shot she did not turn. 'What was that?' she said tranquilly."

"For the moment I could not speak. I had to gulp and breathe to recover myself."

"'Let us go and see,' I said then. 'The hour is past, and the letter of importance is finished.'"

"She nodded. 'By all means,' she agreed carelessly, and I followed her into the house."

"Once again I will spare Madame la Comtesse the details. Bertin had evaded arrest. At the end of all his laborings and groanings, the instant of resolution had come to him and

he had made use of it. On the table were paper and writing-things; one note was finished."

"'It is not for me,' said Madame Bertin, as she leaned upon the table and read it. I was laying a sheet upon the body; when I rose she handed it to me. It bore neither name nor address; the poor futile life had blundered out without even this thing completed. It was short, and to some woman. 'Tres-chere amie,' it said; 'once I made a mistake. I have paid for it. You laughed at me once; You would not laugh now. If you could see ____'"

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The Colonel stopped; the Comtesse was holding out both hands as though supplicating him. Elsie Gray rose and bent over her. The Comtesse put her gently aside.

“You have that letter?” she asked.

The little Colonel passed a hand into a breast pocket and extracted a dainty Russia-leather letter-case. From it he drew a faded writing and handed it to the Comtesse.

“Madame la Comtesse is welcome to the letter,” he said. “Pray keep it.”

The Comtesse did not read it. She folded it in her thin smooth hands and sighed.

“And then?” she asked.

“This is the end of my tale,” said the Colonel. “I took the letter and placed it in my pocket. Madame Bertin watched me imperturbably.”

“‘I may leave the formalities to you?’ she asked me suddenly; ’the notification of death and so on?’”

“I bowed; I had still a difficulty in speaking.”

“‘Then I will thank you for all your friendship,’ she said.”

“I put up my hand. ‘At least do not thank me,’ I cried. I could not face her serene eyes, and that little lifting of the brows with which she answered my words. Awe, dread, passion—these were at war within me, and the dead man lay on the floor at my feet, I pushed the door open and fled.”

Colonel Saval sat up in his chair and uncrossed his legs.

“I saw her no more,” he said. “Madame la Comtesse knows how she returned to Algiers and presently died there? Yes.”

The Comtesse bowed. “I thank you, Monsieur,” she said. “You have done me a great service.”

“I am honored,” he replied, as he rose. “I wish you a good-night. Mademoiselle, good-night.”

He was gone. The white doors closed behind him. The Comtesse raised her face and kissed the tall, gentle girl.

“Leave me now,” she said. “I must read my letter alone.”

And Elsie went. The story was finished at last.

IX

LOLA

Rubies ripped from altar cloths Leered a-down her rich attire; Her mad shoes were scarlet moths In a rose of fire.

A. T. Quiller-Couch.

From the briskness of the street, with its lamps aglitter in the lingering May evening, O'Neill entered to the sober gloom and the restless echoes of the great studio. He had come to hate the place of late. The high poise of its walls, like the sides of a well, the pale shine of the north light in the roof, the lumber of naked marble and formal armor and the rest, peopling its shadows, were like a tainted atmosphere to him; they embarrassed the lungs of his mind. Only the name of friendship exacted these visits from him; Regnault, dying where he had worked, was secure against desertion.

Buscarlet opened the door to him, his eyes wide and bewildered behind his spectacles.

"How is he?" asked O'Neill curtly, entering the great room.

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“Ill,” answered the other. “Very ill, so that one cannot tell whether he sleeps or wakes. There should be a nun here to nurse him, only—”

O’Neill nodded. The sick man’s bed was set in the centre of the great room, shielded from the draughts of the door by a tall screen of gilt leather. From behind this screen, a shaded lamp by the bedside made an island of soft radiance in the darkness.

They went together past the screen and stopped to look at Regnault. He was lying on his back, with closed eyes, and his keen aquiline face upturned to the pallor of the “light” in the roof. The white hair tumbled on the pillow, and the long, beautiful hands that lay on the coverlet were oddly pathetic in contrast to the potency of the unconscious face. Even in sleep it preserved its cast of high assurance, its note of ideals outworn and discounted. It was the face of a man who had found a bitter answer for most of life’s questions. By the bed sat Truelove, his servant, ex-corporal of dragoons. He rose noiselessly as O’Neill approached.

“No change, sir,” he reported. “Talked a bit, an hour ago. Mr. Buscarlet was then ’ere.”

“Any attacks?” asked O’Neill.

“One, sir, but I ’ad the amyl under ‘is nose at the first gasp, an’ ’e came round all right.”

“Good,” said O’Neill. “You go and get some supper now, Truelove. I’ll attend to everything till you get back.”

The corporal bowed and went forthwith. O’Neill set the capsules out on the table to be easily accessible, and joined Buscarlet by the great fireplace at the end of the room, whence he could keep watch on the still profile that showed against the gold of the screen. From without there came the blurred noises of the Paris street, mingled and blended in a single hum, as though life were laying siege to that quiet chamber.

Buscarlet was eager to talk. He was a speciously amiable little man, blonde and plump, a creature of easy emotions, prone to panic and tears.

“Ah, he talked indeed!” he said, as soon as O’Neill was seated. “At first I thought: ’This is delirium. He is returning to the age of his innocence.’ But his eyes, as he looked at me, were wise and serious. My friend, it gave me a shock.”

“What did he talk about?” asked O’Neill.

Buscarlet coughed. “Of his wife,” he answered. “Fancy it!”

“His wife? Why, is he married?” demanded O’Neill in astonishment.

Buscarlet nodded two or three times. “Yes,” he replied; “that is one of the things that has happened to him. One might have guessed it, hein?—a life like that! Ah, my friend, there is one who has put out his hours at usury. What memories he must have!”

O’Neill grunted, with his eyes on the bed. “He’s had a beastly life, if that’s what you mean,” he said, “Who was the woman?’

“One might almost have guessed that, too,” said Buscarlet. He rose. “Come and see,” he said.

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There was a recess beside the great mantelpiece, and in it hung Regnault's famous picture, "The Dancer," all scarlet frock and white flesh against an amber background.

"That?" exclaimed O'Neill. "Lola?"

Buscarlet nodded; he had forced a good effect.

"That is she," he answered.

The picture was familiar to O'Neill; to him, as to many another young painter of that time, it was an upstanding landmark on the road of art. He looked at it now, in the sparse light from the bedside lamp, with a fresh interest in its significance. He saw with new understanding the conventionalism of the pose—hip thrust out, arm akimbo, shoulder cocked—contrasted against the dark vivacity of the face and all the pulsing opulence of the flesh. It was an epic, an epic of the savage triumphant against civilization, of the spirit victorious against the forms of art.

He stared at it, Buscarlet smiling mildly at his elbow; then he turned away and went back to his seat. The face on the bed was unchanged.

"So Regnault married Lola!" he said slowly. "When?"

"Ah, who knows?" Buscarlet shrugged graphically. "Many years ago, of course. It is twenty years since she danced."

"And what was he saying about her?" asked O'Neill.

"Nothing to any purpose," replied Buscarlet. "I think he had been dreaming of her. You know the manner he has of waking up—coming back to consciousness with eyes wide open and his mind alert, with no interval of drowsiness and reluctance? Yes? Well, he woke like that before I knew he had ceased to sleep. 'I should like to see her now,' he said. 'Whom?' I asked, and he smiled. 'Lola,' he answered, and he went on to say that she was the one woman he had never understood. 'That was her advantage,' he said, smiling still; 'for she understood me; yes, she knew me as if she had made me.' After a while, he smiled again, and said, 'Yes, I should like to see her now.'"

O'Neill frowned thoughtfully. "Well, she ought to be here if she's his wife," he said. "Is she in Paris, d'you know? We might send for her."

"I do not know," replied Buscarlet. "Nobody knows, but I have heard she retired upon religion."

Their talk dwindled a little then. O'Neill found himself dwelling in thought upon that long-ago marriage of the great artist with Lola, the dancer. To him she was but a name; her sun had set in his boyhood, and there remained only the spoken fame of her wonderful

dancing and a tale here and there of the fervor with which she had lived. It was an old chronicle of passion and undiscipline, of a vehement personality naming through the capitals of Europe, its trail marked by scandals and violences, ending in the quick oblivion which comes to compensate for such lives. On the whole, he thought, such a marriage was what one would have looked for in Regnault; as Buscarlet said, one might almost have guessed. He, with his genius and his restlessness, his great fame and his infamy, the high achievement of his art and the baseness of his relaxations, he was just such another as Lola.

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Friendship, or even the mere forms of friendship, are the touchstone of a man. O'Neill was credited in his world with the friendship of Regnault. It had even been to him a matter of some social profit; there were many who deferred willingly to the great man's intimate. O'Neill saw no reason to set them right, but he knew himself that he had come by a loss in his close acquaintance with the Master. To know him at a distance, to be sure of just enough to interpret his work by the clue of his personality, was a thing to be glad of. But if one went further, incurred a part of his confidence, and ascertained his real flavor, then, as O'Neill once said, it was like visiting one's kitchen; it killed one's appetite.

While he pondered, he was none the less watchful; he saw the change on the still face as soon as it showed. With a quick exclamation he crossed to the bed. Regnault's jaw had set; his eyes were wide and rigid. On the instant his forehead shone with sweat. Deftly and swiftly O'Neill laid his hands on a capsule, crushed it in his palm, and held it to the sick man's face. The volatile drug performed its due miracle.

The face that had been a livid shell slackened again; the fixed glare sank down; and Regnault shuddered and sighed. Buscarlet, trembling but officious, wiped his brow and babbled commiserations.

"Ah!" said Regnault, putting up a thin hand to stop him. "It takes one by the throat, this affair."

Though he spoke quietly, his voice had yet the conscious fullness, the deliberate inflection, of a man accustomed to speak to an audience.

"Yes," said O'Neill. "Were you sleeping?"

The sick man smiled. "A peu pres," he answered.

"I was remembering certain matters—dreaming, in effect."

He shifted his head on his pillow, and his eyes traveled to and fro about the great room.

"If this goes on," he said, "I shall have to ask a favor of somebody." His quick look, with its suggestion of mockery, rested on O'Neill. "And that would be dreadful," he concluded.

"If it's anything I can do, I'll do it, of course," said O'Neill awkwardly.

He aided Buscarlet to set the bed to rights and change the pillow-cover, conscious that Regnault was watching him all the time with a smile.

"One should have a nun here," remarked Buscarlet. "They come for so much a day, and do everything."

“Yes,” said Regnault;—“everything. Who could stand that!”

He shifted in his bed cautiously, for he knew that any movement might provoke another spasm.

“Now, tell me, O’Neill,” he said, in the tone of commonplace conversation. “That doctor—the one that walked like a duck—he was impressive, eh?”

O’Neill sat down on the foot of the bed.

“He’s the best man in Paris,” he answered. “He did his best to be impressive. He thought we weren’t taking your illness seriously enough.”

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“Well,” said Regnault, his fingers fidgeting on the coverlet, “I can be serious when I like. I’m serious now, foi de gentilhomme. Did he say when I should die!”

“Yes,” replied O’Neill. “He said you’d break like the stem of a pipe at the first strain.”

Regnault’s eyes were half closed. “Metaphor, eh?” he suggested dreamily.

“He said,” continued O’Neill, “that you were not to move sharply, not to laugh or cry, not to be much amused or surprised—in fact, you were to keep absolutely quiet. He suggested, too, that you’d had your share of emotions, and would be better without them now.”

Regnault smiled again. “Wonderful,” he said softly. “They teach them all that in the hospitals. Then, in effect, I hold this appointment during good Conduct?”

“That’s the idea,” said O’Neill gravely.

There was a long pause; Regnault seemed to be thinking deeply. The amyl had brought color back to his face; except for the disorder of his long white hair he seemed to be his normal self.

“It will not be amusing,” he said at length. “For you, I mean.”

“Oh, I shall be all right,” answered O’Neill, but the same thought had occurred to him.

“No, it will not be amusing to you,” repeated Regnault. “For this good Buscarlet it is another thing. I shall keep him busy. You like that, don’it you, Emile?”

Poor Buscarlet choked and gurgled. Regnault laughed softly.

“Take the lamp, Emile,” he said, “and carry it to ‘The Dancer.’ I want to see it.”

Buscarlet was eager to do his bidding. O’Neill frowned as he picked up the lamp.

“Careful,” he said, in a low voice to Regnault.

“Oh,” said Regnault, “this is not an emotion.” He laughed again.

Across the room Buscarlet lifted the shade from the lamp and held it up. Again there came into view the white and scarlet of the picture, the high light on the bare shoulder, the warm tint of the naked arm, the cheap diablerie of the posture, the splendid rebellion of the face. Regnault turned and stared at it under drawn brows.

“Thank you, Emile,” he said at last, and lay back on his pillow. For an instant of forgetfulness his delicate face was ingenuous and expressive; he caught himself back to control as he met O’Neill’s eyes.

“Il est un age dans la vie Ou chaque reve doit finir, Un age ou l’ame recueillie A besoin de se souvenir,”

he quoted softly. Buscarlet was fitting the shade on the lamp again.

“I think,” Regnault went on, “that I have come to that, after all. He told you, eh? Buscarlet told you that she—Lola—is my wife?”

“Yes,” answered O’Neill. “Would you like me to send for her?”

“She would not come for that,” said Regnault. He was studying the young man’s face with bright eyes. “Ah,” he sighed; “you don’t know these things. We parted—of course; but not in weariness, not in the grey staleness of fatigue and boredom. No; but in a splendid wreck of wrath and jealousy and hatred. We did not run aground tamely; we split in vehemence on the very rock of discord. She would not come for a letter.”

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“Is she in Paris?” asked O’Neill.

“No, in Spain,” answered Regnault. “At Ronda, in a great house on the edge of the hill, a house of small windows and strong doors. She is religious, Lola is; she fears hell. Let me see; she must be near to fifty now. It is twenty years and more since I saw her.”

“But if I wrote,” began O’Neill again.

“She would not come for a letter,” persisted Regnault. “What would you write? ‘He is dying,’ you would say, ‘Poof!’ she would answer, ‘he has been dead this twenty years to me.’”

“Well, then, what do you suggest?”

Regnault opened his eyes and looked up sharply. He stretched out one long slender hand in a sudden gesture of urgency. His face, upon the moment, recovered its wonted vivacity.

“Go to her,” he said. “Go to her, O’Neill; you are young and long-legged; you have the face of one to whom adventures are due. She will receive you. Speak to her; tell her—-tell her of this gloomy room and its booming echoes and the little white bed in the middle of it. Make your voice warm, O’Neill, and tell her of all of it. Then, perhaps, she will come.”

There was no mistaking his earnestness. O’Neill stared at him in astonishment. Regnault moistened his lips, breathing hard.

“Really,” said O’Neill, “I don’t quite know how to answer you, Regnault.”

Regnault put the empty phrase from him with a movement of impatience.

“Go to her,” he said again, and his brows creased in effort. “Is it because she is religious that you hesitate! You think I am an offence to her religion? O’Neill, I will offer it no offence. I have myself an instinct that way now. It is true. I have.”

“Wait,” said O’Neill. He was thinking confusedly. “You know you’re like a spoiled child, Regnault. You’d die for a thing so long as some one denied it you. Now, what strikes me is this. Your wife ought to be with you, as a matter of decent usage and—and all that. But if you want her here just so that you can flog up the thrill of one of your old beastly adventures, I’ll not lift a finger to help you. D’you see!”

Regnault nodded. Buscarlet, standing behind the bed, was trembling like a man in an ague.

“I’ll go to Ronda, and do what I can,” said O’Neill, “so long as you’re playing fair. But I’ve got to be sure of that, Regnault.”

Regnault nodded again. “I see,” he answered. “What shall I say to you? Will you not trust me, O’Neill, in a question of taste? Morals— I don’t say. But taste—come now!”

“You mean, you want to see your wife in ordinary affection and—well, and because she is your wife?” demanded O’Neill.

“You put it very well,” replied Regnault placidly. “Give me some paper and I will write you her name and address. And, O’Neill, I have an idea! I will give you, for your own, ‘The Dancer.’ It shall be my last joke. After this, I am earnest.”

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He wrote painfully on the paper which they gave him.

“There,” he said, when he had done. “And now I will compose myself.”

Buscarlet saw O’Neill forth of the door, for he was to leave for Spain in the morning. On the threshold he tapped O’Neill on the arm.

“It is worth a hundred thousand francs,” he whispered, with startled eyes. “And besides, what a souvenir!”

The little room in which they bade O’Neill wait for the Senora opened upon the patio of the house, where a sword of vivid sunlight sliced across the shadows on the warm brick flooring, and a little industrious fountain dribbled through a veil of ferns. There was a shrine in the room; its elaboration of gilt and rosy wax faced the open door, and from a window beside it one could see, below the abrupt hill of Ronda, the panorama of the sun-steeped countryside.

The cool of the room was grateful to O’Neill after the heat of the road. He set his hat on the small table and took a seat, marking the utter stillness that reigned in that great Moorish house. Save for the purr of the fountain no sounds reached him in all that nest of cool chambers. The thought of it awoke in him new speculation as to the woman he had come to see, who had buried the ashes of her fiery youth in this serene retreat. He had thought about her with growing curiosity throughout the journey from Paris, endeavoring to reduce to terms of his own understanding the spirit that had flamed and faded and guttered out in such a manner. The shrine at his elbow recalled to him that she was “religious.” It explained nothing.

He was staring at it in perplexity, when the doorway darkened, and he was conscious that he was not alone. He started to his feet and bowed confusedly to the woman on the threshold.

“Mr. O’Neill?” she inquired. Her pronunciation had the faultless precision of the English-speaking Spaniard. He bowed again, and drew out a chair for her.

It seemed that she hesitated a moment ere she came forward and accepted it. When she stood in the door, with the slanting sun at her back, O’Neill could see little of her save the trim outline of her figure, wrought to plain severity by the relentless black dress she wore. Now, when she was seated, he regarded her with all an artist’s quick curiosity. As Regnault had said, she was not much less than fifty years old, but they were years that had trodden lightly. There was nothing of age in the strong brows and the tempestuous eyes that were dark under them; the mouth was yet full and impetuous. Some discipline seemed to have laid a constraint on her; there was a somber seriousness in her regard; but O’Neill recognized without difficulty the proud, hardy, unquelled countenance that stared from the canvas in Regnault’s studio.

She had his visiting-card in her fingers. Lest he should be denied admittance he had penciled on it, below his name, “with a message from M. Regnault, who is very ill.”

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She was looking at him steadily, aware of his scrutiny.

“I will hear your message,” she said. “Please sit down.”

O’Neill took a chair where he could continue to see her face.

“Senora,” he said, “I must tell you, first of all, that M. Regnault is ill beyond anything you can picture to yourself. He sends this message, in truth, from his last bed, the bed he is to die on. And that may be at any moment. His is a disease that touches the heart; any emotion or quick movement—anything at all, Senora, may cut off the very source of his life. I ask you to have this in mind while you hear me.”

Her dark face was intent upon him while he spoke.

“What do you call this disease?” she asked.

“The doctors call it angina pectoris,” he answered. She nodded slowly. Her interest encouraged him to speak with more liberty.

“I could tell you a great deal about it,” he went on; “but it might be aside from the point. Still—” he pondered a moment, studying her. “Still, imagine to yourself how such a malady sits upon a man like Regnault. It is a fetter upon the most sluggish; for him, with all his vivacity of temperament, his ardor, his quickness, it is a rack upon which he is stretched. You do not know the studio he has now, Senora! It is a great room, with walls of black panels and a wide window in the slope of the roof. Here and there are statues in marble, suits of armor—the wreck and debris of dead ages. And in one corner hangs a picture which the world values, Senora. It is called ‘The Dancer.’”

A spark, a quick gleam in her eyes, rewarded him. Her hands, crossed in her lap, trembled a little.

“It is all of a dark and somber splendor,” O’Neill continued. “A great, splendid room, Senora, uncanny with echoes. And in the middle of it, like a little white island, there is a narrow bed where he lies through the days and nights, camping on the borders of the grave. There are some of us that share the watches by his bedside, to be ready with the drug that holds him to life; and I can tell you that it is sad there, in the hush and the shadows, with the noises of Paris rising about one from without.”

He ceased. She was frowning as she listened to him, with her resemblance to the pictured face in Paris strangely accentuated by the emotions that warred within her. For a minute neither of them spoke.

“I can see what you would have me see,” she said at last, raising her head. “It belongs to that world in which I have now no part, Senior. No part at all. And it brings us no nearer to the message with which you are charged.”

“Your pardon,” said O’Neill. “It is a part of my message. And the rest is quickly told. It is Regnault’s request, his prayer to you, that you will come to him, to your husband.”

“Ah!” The constraint upon her features broke like ice under a quick sun. “I guessed it. I—to come to him! You should be his friend indeed, to be the bearer of such a message to me.”

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Her dark eyes, suddenly splendid, flashed at him with strong anger. The whole woman was transformed; she sat up in her chair, and her breast swelled. O'Neill saw before him the Lola of twenty years before.

He held up one hand to stay her.

"I should be his friend, as you say," he told her. "But he knows that it is not so. I came for two reasons: because now is not the time to be discriminating in my service to him, and also because I am glad to help him to do right. I will take back what answer you please, Senora, for I came here with no great hopes; but still I am glad I came, for the second reason."

"Help him to do right!" She repeated the words in a manner of perplexity. "What is it you mean to do right?"

O'Neill had a moment's clear insight into the aspects of his task which made him unfit for it. "Eight" was a term that puzzled his auditor.

"Senora," he answered gravely, "his passions are burned out. He is too sick a man to do evil. It is late, no doubt, and very late; but his mood is not to die as he has lived. He asks, not for those who would come at a word, but for his wife. And I am glad to be the bearer of that message even if I carry back a curse for an answer."

It was not in O'Neill to know how well and deftly Regnault had chosen his messenger. His lean, brown face and his earnestness were having their effect.

The Senora bent her keen gaze on him again.

"Ah," she cried, with a sort of bitterness, "he regrets, eh? He repents?" She laughed shortly.

"I do not think so," answered O'Neill.

"No?" She considered him anew. "Tell me,"—she leaned forward in a sudden eagerness—"why does he ask for me? If he is sober and composed for death, why—-why does he ask for me?"

O'Neill made a gesture of helplessness. "Senora," he said, "you should know; you have the key to him."

Gone was all the discipline to which her nature had deferred. Twenty years of quiet and atonement were stripped from her like a flimsy garment. The fire was alight in all her vivid face again as she brooded upon his answer.

“Ah!” she cried of a sudden. “Everything is stale for a stale soul. Does he count on that? Senor, you speak well; you have made me a picture of him. He has heard that I have made religion the pillow of my conscience, eh? He folds his hands, eh?—thin, waxen hands, clasping in piety upon his counterpane, eh? He will wear the air of a thin saint and bless me in a beautiful voice? Am I right? Am I right?”

She forced her questions into his face, leaning forward in a quick violence.

“Goodness knows!” said O’Neill. “I shouldn’t wonder.”

She nodded at him with tight lips. “I know,” she said. “I know. I have him by heart.” She rose from her seat and stood thinking. Suddenly she laughed, and strode to the middle of the room. Her gait had the impatience and lightness of a dancer’s. Quickly she wheeled and faced O’Neill, laughing again.

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“Now, by his salvation and mine,” she cried, “I will do what he asks. I will go to him. He thinks his heart is dry to me. I will show him! I will show him!” She opened her arms with a sweep. “Tell me,” she cried, “am I old? Am I the nun you looked for?” Her voice pealed scornfully. “Scarlet,” she said; “I will go to him in scarlet, as he pictured me when I posed for ‘The Dancer!’ His pulses shall welcome me; his soul was in its grave when I was in my cradle.”

O’Neill had risen too. “Senora,” he protested, “you must consider— he is a dying man!”

He spoke to her back. Laughing again, she had turned from him to the gilt shrine and plucked a flower from it. She was fixing it in her hair when she faced him.

“To-night,” she said, “we travel north. You are”—she paused, smiling—“you are my impresario, and Lola—Lola makes her curtsy again!”

She caught her black skirt in her hand and curtsied to him with an extravagant grace.

That was a strange journey to Paris that O’Neill made with the Senora. He had seen her humor change swiftly in response to his appeal; what was surprising was that that new humor should maintain its nervous height. It was soon enough apparent that the Lola of twenty years before lived yet, her flamboyant energy, her unstable caprice, her full-blooded force conserved and undiminished. It was like the bursting of one of those squalls that come up with a breathless loom of cloud, hang still and brooding, and then flash without warning into tempest. She faced him at the station with an electric vivacity; her voice was harsh and imperious to her servants who put her into the train and disposed of her luggage. It occurred to O’Neill that she traveled well equipped; there were boxes and baskets in full ampleness. When at last the train tooted its little horn and started, she flung herself down in the seat facing him and broke into shrill laughter.

“It is the second advent of Lola,” she cried. “There should be a special train for me.”

Her dress was still of black, but it had suffered some change O’Neill did not trouble to define. He saw that it no longer had the formal plainness of the gown she had worn earlier. It achieved an effect. But the main change was in the woman herself. It was impossible to think of her and her years in the same breath. She had cast the long restraint from her completely; all her sad days of quiet were obliterated. She was once again the stormy, uneasy thing that had dominated her loose world, a vital and indomitable personality untempered by reason or any conscience. Even when she sat still and seemingly deep in thought, one felt and deferred to the magnetism and power that were expressed in every feature of that dark and alert face.

O’Neill deemed himself fortunate that she did not speak of Regnault till Paris lay but a few hours away. The whirlwind of her mood was a thing that did not touch him, but it

would have been mere torment to battle on with that one topic. When she did speak of him it was with the suddenness with which she approached everything. She had been silent for nearly an hour, gazing through the window at the scurrying landscape.

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“Then,” she said, as though resuming some conversation—“then he is, in truth, sick to death?”

“You mean—Regnault!” asked O’Neill, caught unawares. “Yes, Senora. He is sick to death.”

Her steady gaze from under the level brows embarrassed him like an assault.

“And he is frightened?” she demanded.

“I don’t think he is in the least frightened,” replied O’Neill.

She nodded to him, with the shape of a smile on her full lips.

“I tell you, then, that he is frightened,” she said. “I know. There is nothing in all that man I do not know. He is frightened.”

She paused, still staring at him.

“People like us are always frightened in the end,” she went on. She lifted her forefinger like one who teaches a little child. “You see, with us, we guess. We guess at what comes after. We are sure—certain and very sure—that we, at least, deserve to suffer. And that is why I have lived under my confessor for ten lifetimes. You gee!”

O’Neill nodded. It was not hard to understand that the splendid animal in the Senora could never conceive the idea, of its utter extinction. Death—to Lola and her kind—is not the end, it is the beginning of bondage.

There was another interval of silence while she twisted her fingers in her lap.

“Ah,” she said. “I know. He will be beautiful in his bed, dying like an abbot. He is frightened—yes. But he thinks himself safe from me. He imagines me sour, decorous, with a skinny neck. Because he thinks me all but a nun, he will be all but a priest. We shall see, Senor O’Neill. We shall see!”

Soon after that she left him to retire to the compartment in which her maid traveled alone.

“We arrive at eight, do we not?” she asked him. “Then I must make my toilet.” She smiled down on him as she spoke, and gave him a little significant nod.

The train was already running into the station when she returned. O’Neill, nervous and apprehensive, gave her a quick glance. She was covered in a long cloak of black silk that hid her figure entirely; the hood of it rose over her hair and made a frame to her

face. Under the hood he could distinguish the soft brightness of a red rose stuck ever one ear.

“Senora,” he said, “I take the liberty to remind you that we are going to the bedside of a dying man.”

She turned on him with slow scorn. “Yes,” she replied. “It is, as you say, a liberty.”

The long robe rose and fell over her breast with her breathing; her eyes traveled over him from head to feet and back again deliberately.

O’Neill took his temper into custody. “Still,” he urged, “if you have it in mind to compass any surprising effect, remember—it may be his death.”

She laughed slowly. “What is a death?” she answered. And then, with a hissing vehemence: “He sent for me, and I am here. Should I wear a veil, then—Lola?”

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He put further remonstrances by, with a feeling of sickness in the throat. Again realization surged upon him that he had no words with which to speak to people like this. They lived on another plane, and saw by other lights. He was like a child wandering on a field of battle.

He found a carriage, and got into it beside her, and sat in silence while they drove through the throng of the streets. He saw, through the window, the brisk tides of the pavement, the lights and the cafes; they seemed remote from him, inaccessible. Inside the carriage, he could hear the steady, full breathing of the woman at his side.

“You will at least allow me to go first,” he said, as they drew up at last. He was prepared to carry this point if he had to lock her out of the house. But she made no demur.

“As you will,” she murmured.

He found her a place to wait, an alcove on the stairs. As he guided her to it, a touch on the arm showed him she was trembling.

“I will be a very little while,” he promised, and ran up the stairs.

It was Buscarlet who opened the door to him, with Truelove standing behind his shoulder.

“Welcome, welcome!” babbled Buscarlet. “Oh, but we have been eager for you! Tell me, will she—will she come?”

“She is waiting on the stairs, in the alcove,” answered O’Neill.

Buscarlet’s mild eyes opened in amaze. “You have brought her with you?” he cried.

O’Neill nodded.

“Thank God!” ejaculated Truelove.

“How is he?” asked O’Neill. “Still—er—living, eh?”

It was Truelove that replied. “Still keeping on, sir,” he answered. “But changed, as you might say. Softened would be the word, sir.”

“What d’ye mean?” demanded O’Neill.

“Well, sir,” said the ex-corporal of dragoons, with a touch of hesitation, “it isn’t for me to judge, but I should say he’s—he’s got religion. Or a taste of it, anyway.”

O’Neill stared at the pair of them in open dismay. “Let me see him,” he said shortly, and they followed him through the little anteroom to the great studio.

Behind the screen, the narrow bed was white, and on it Regnault lay in stillness, looking up.

He started slightly as O’Neill appeared at the foot of his bed, and the faint flush rose in his face. “Hush!” he said, with a forefinger uplifted, and poised for a few seconds on the brink of a spasm.

“Ah!” he said when he was safe. “That was a near thing, O’Neill. I am glad to see you back, my friend.”

He was tranquil; even that undertone of mockery, so familiar in his voice, was gone. A rosary sprawled on his breast; O’Neill recognized it for a splendid piece of Renaissance work that had lain about the room for months.

“I have found my happiness in meditation,” Regnault was saying, in a still, silken voice. “But tell me, O’Neill—will she come?”

“Yes,” said O’Neill, wearily, “she will come.” Regnault made a gentle gesture of thanks and closed his eyes. His long fingers slid on the ivory beads and his lips moved. O’Neill gazed down on him with a weakness of bewilderment; his landmarks were shifting.

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He was standing thus, looking in mere absence of mind, when a footfall beyond the screen reached his ear.

“Oh Lord!” he cried.

It was she. As his eyes fell upon her she was letting fall her long cloak. It lay on the floor about her feet, and she towered over it, in superb scarlet. Against her background of shadow her neck and arms and the abundance of her breast shone like silver. Ere he could go to her she waved him away with a sweep of a naked arm. A hand was on her hip, and she moved towards the bed with the sliding gait of the Spanish dancer.

It was an affair of an instant. Buscarlet and Truelove hastened upon his exclamation, and Buscarlet, stumbling, brushed against the screen. He caught at it to save it from falling, and the bed was bare to the room. Regnault and his wife looked into each other’s face. She, undisturbed by the suddenness of it all, held yet her posture of the stage, glowing in her silk with something dangerous and ominous about her, something blatant and yet potent, like a knife in a stocking. It was as though she wrought in violence for the admiration of the man on the bed. He, on his elbow, turned to her a thin face with lips parted and trembling; for an intolerable instant they hung, mute and motionless. Then, slowly, she turned with one foot sliding, and the light of the lamp was full on her face.

It seemed to break the tense spell; Regnault’s face was writhing; of a sudden he burst into shrill, hideous laughter, and his right hand flung out and pointed at her. None moved; none could. His laugh rang and broke, and rang again, outrageous and uncontrollable, merry and hearty and hateful. The woman, at the first peal of it, started and stood as though stricken to stone; they could see her shrivel under the blast of it, shrivel and shrink and age.

Then, as though it had been overdue and long awaited, the laugh checked and choked. It freed them from the thrall that held them. Regnault’s head fell back.

“The amyl!” cried O’Neill, and they were all about him. “The amyl— where is it?”

Regnault’s face was a mask of paralyzed pain; but the silver patch-box that held the capsules was not on the table. It took a minute to find it on the floor. O’Neill smashed a couple, and thrust his hand into the waxen face—and waited. Buscarlet was breathing like a man in a nightmare. Truelove stood to attention. But Regnault did not return to the shape of life.

O’Neill let his hand drop, and turned to Truelove. “He’s got it,” he said; “But fetch a doctor.”

His eyes fell on the dancer in her shimmering scarlet, where she knelt at the bedside, with her head bowed to the counterpane and her hands clasped over it.

He sighed. He did not understand.

X

THE POOR IN HEART

It was his habit of an evening to play the flute; and he was playing it faithfully, with the score propped up against a pile of books on his table, when the noises from the street reached him, and interrupted his music. With the silver-dotted flute in his hand he moved to the window and put aside the curtains to look out.

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The flute is the instrument of mild men; and Robert Lucas had mildness for a chief quality. At the age of thirty-five, in the high noon of his manhood, he showed to the world a friendly, unenterprising face, neatly bearded, and generally a little vacant. The accident that gave him a Russian mother was his main qualification for the post he now held—that of representative of a firm of leather manufacturers in the Russian town of Tambov. He spoke Russian, he knew leather, and he could ignore the smells of a tanyard; these facts entitled him to a livelihood.

To right and left, as he looked forth, the cobbled street was dark; but opposite, in the silversmith's shop, there were lights, and, below, a small crowd had gathered. He watched wonderingly. He knew the silversmith well enough to nod as he passed his door—a young, laborious man with a rapt, uncertain face and a tumbled mane of black hair. There were also a little, grave wife and a fat, grave baby; and these, when they were visible, received separate and distinctive nods, and always returned them. The hide-sellers and tanners were, for the most part, crude and sportive persons with whom he could have nothing in common; they lived, apparently, on drink and uproar; and he had come to regard the silversmith and his family as vague friends. He pressed his face closer to the glass of the double casement to see more certainly.

The little shop seemed to be full of lights and people, and outside its door there was a press of folk. The murmur of voices was audible, though he could distinguish nothing that was said. But now and again there was laughter. It was the laughter that held him gazing and apprehensive; it had a harsher note than mirth. It seemed to him, too, that some of the men in the doorway were in uniform; he could see them only in outline, mere black silhouettes against the interior lights; but there was about them the ominous cut of the official, that Russian bird of ill-omen. And then, while yet he doubted, there sounded the very keynote of disaster. From somewhere within the silversmith's shop a woman screamed, sudden and startling.

"Now, now!" said Robert Lucas, at his window, grasping his flute nervously. And, as though in answer to his remonstrance, there was again that guttural, animal laughter. He frowned.

"I must see into this," he told himself very seriously.

He turned from the window. His pleasant room, with the bright lamp on the table and the music leaning beside it, seemed to advise him to proceed with caution. He and his life were not devised for situations in which women screamed on that tense note of anguish and terror; he had never done a violent thing in all his days. There was no clear purpose in his mind as he pulled open his door to go out—merely an ill-ease that forced him to go nearer to the cause of those screams. He had descended the stairs and was fumbling at the latch of the street-door before he realized that he was still holding the flute.

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“Oh, bother!” he exclaimed, in extreme exasperation when the instrument proved too long for his pocket, and went out carrying it like some remarkable and ornate baton.

The small crowd before the silversmith’s shop numbered, perhaps, a hundred people, and even before his eyes were acclimatized to the darkness he smelt sheepskin coats and tan-bark. He touched one big man on the arm and asked a question. The lights in the shop lit up the fellow’s hairy face and loose grin as he turned to answer.

“Eh?” said the man. “Why, it’s a Jew that the police are clearing out. Did you hear the Jewess squeal?”

“Yes, I heard,” said Lucas, and moved away.

He was cut off from the door of the shop by the backs of the crowd, and passed along the street to get round them. Inside the lighted house the baby had begun to cry, but there was no more screaming. He had a sense that unless he hurried he might be too late for what was in preparation. The crowd seemed to be waiting for some culminating scene, with more than screams in it. A touch of nervous excitement came to fortify him, and he thrust in between two huge slaughterers, whose clothes reeked of the killing sheds.

“Make way!” he said breathlessly, as they turned on him.

One of them swore and would have shoved him back, and others looked round at the sound of strife. Lucas put up an uncertain hand to guard the blow. It, was the hand that held the flute, whose silver keys flashed in the lights from the shop.

“Ha!” grunted the slaughterer, arrested by that sight. He looked at Lucas doubtfully, his neat clothes, his general aspect of a superior. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Make way!” repeated Lucas.

It seemed to confirm the slaughterer in his suspicion that this was a personage to be deferred to.

“Hi, there!” he bellowed helpfully. “Give room for his Excellency. Let his Excellency come through! Don’t you see what he’s got in his hand? Make way, will you?”

He bent his huge, unclean shoulder to the business of clearing a path, and drove through like a snow-plough. Lucas followed along the lane that he made, and came to the pavement close by the shop.

It was fortunate that events marched sharply from that point, and forced him to act without thinking. He had some vague notion of finding the officer in charge of the police and speaking to him. But before he could move to do so there was a fresh activity of

the people within the bright windows; he saw something that had the look of a struggle. Voices babbled, and the crowd pressed closer; and suddenly, from the open doorway, two figures reeled forth, clutching and thrusting. One was in uniform, the other was a woman. For a couple of seconds they wrenched and fought, staged before the crowd on the lighted doorstep; and then the woman broke away and ran blindly towards the spot where Lucas stood. She had, he saw suddenly, a child in her arms that cried unceasingly.

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The uniformed man who had tried to hold her came plunging after her; his face was creased in clownish and cruel smiles. Lucas saw the thing stupidly; his mind prompted him to nothing; he stood where he was, empty of resource. He was directly in the flying woman's path, and she rushed at him as to a refuge. He was the sole thing in that narrow arena of dread which she did not recognize as a figure of oppression; and she floundered to her knees at his-feet and held forth the terrified child to him in an agony of appeal. Her tormented and fearful face was upturned to him; he knew her for the Jewess, the wife of the silversmith.

"Father!" she breathed, in the pitiful idiom of that land of orphans.

"Ye-es," said Robert Lucas vaguely, and put a hand on her head.

Never before, in all the orderly level of his life, had a human being chosen him for champion and savior. He was aware of something within him that surged, some spate of force and potency in his blood; he stood upright with a start to confront the policeman who was on the woman's heels. The man was grinning still, fatuously and consciously, like a buffoon who knows he will be applauded; Lucas fronted his smiling security with a still fury that wiped the mirth from his face and left him gaping.

"Get back!" said Lucas. He spoke in a low tone, and the crowd jostled nearer to hear.

The policeman stared at him, amazed and uncomprehending.

"Sir," he stammered; "Excellency—this Jewess she——"

He stopped. Lucas was pointing at him with the flute across the bowed head of the woman, who crouched over her child at his feet.

"You shall report the matter to the Governor," said Lucas, in the same tone of icy anger. "And I will report it to the Minister."

He touched the woman. "Get up," he said. "Come with me."

He had to repeat it before she understood; she was numb with terror. She rose with difficulty to her feet, clasping the child, whose wail was now weak with exhaustion. The peering crowd made a ring of brute faces about them, full of menace and mystery, but the new power in him moved them to right and left at his gesture, and they gave him passage, with the woman behind him, across the road. The stupefied policeman watched them go, and then ran off to place the matter in the hands of his superior.

Lucas was at his door when the officer whom the policeman had fetched touched him on the elbow. He was a young man; if he had been older Lucas's difficulties might have been increased. He peered in the darkness, and was visible as a narrow, black-moustached face, with heavy eyebrows and a brutal mouth. The one thing that deterred

him from brisk action was the fact that Lucas was a foreigner, whose rights and liabilities were therefore uncertain.

“This woman,” he said, “is arrested.”

Lucas was unlocking the door. He turned with his hand on the key, and the woman touched his arm. Perhaps that touch aided him to use big words. As a resident in Tambov he knew the officer by sight, and had always been a little daunted by his manner of power. In Russia one comes easily to fear the police. But now he was free of fear.

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“You be careful,” he said. “I saw what was being done.”

With his left hand he pushed the door, and it swung open. He motioned the woman to enter, and nodded as he saw her cross the threshold.

The officer vented a click of impatience.

“I tell you——” he began, and moved forward a step. Lucas extended an arm and the hand that held the flute across his chest.

“Back!” he said. “You mustn’t enter this house—you know that! You can go to the Governor, if you like, and I will go over his head. But you shall not touch that woman.”

“She is arrested,” said the officer obstinately, still studying his antagonist. “If you wish to aid her, you must go to the Bureau; but you cannot take her away like this.”

“Eh?” Lucas swung round on him; the time was fertile in inspirations. “Can’t I?!” he demanded threateningly. “But I have taken her, man. If you seize her now you must arrest me, too, and then—we shall see!”

“I must do my duty,” persisted the other.

“Do it, then,” said Lucas, standing square across the door. “Do it, and see if you can explain afterwards how you did it. I am not a woman who can be insulted with safety; my arrest will have to be explained to St. Petersburg, and you will have to pay for it. I saw how she was being handled, and how your duty was being done. I tell you, you’re in danger. Be careful!”

“So?” replied the officer slowly. He turned to the folk who were the absorbed audience of this conference. “Move away, there,” he commanded harshly. “This is none of your business. Off with you!”

They shifted back reluctantly, and he waited till he could speak unheard by them. Then he turned to Lucas again with a touch of the confidential in his manner.

“What do you want with her?” he asked.

“Want with her?” repeated Lucas, not immediately comprehending. Then, as the man’s meaning reached him he trembled. “I don’t want her,” he cried. “I don’t want her. You want her, not I; and you shan’t have her. Do you understand? You shan’t have her!”

“Shan’t I?” retorted the officer, but there was indecision in his voice.

“No!” said Lucas.

There was a pause. Neither of them was sure of himself. The officer found himself in face of a situation which he could not gauge; and it would never do for a provincial police official to attract notice in remote St. Petersburg. For all he knew, this flimsy little man, who had snatched his Jewess from him, might be able to set in motion those mills which grind erring servants of the State into disgrace and ruin. He certainly had a large and authoritative way with him.

“Will you come to the Bureau, then, and speak with the chief?” he suggested. “You see, your action causes a difficulty.”

“No, I won’t,” said Lucas flatly.

He also was in doubt. It seemed to him that he stood in a considerable peril, and he was aware that his mood of high temper was failing him. It needed an effort to maintain an assured and uncompromising front. Behind him, on the unlighted stairs, the woman breathed heavily. He summoned what he had of stubbornness to uphold him. The affair so far had gone valiantly; he meant that it should continue on the same plane.

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He saw the officer hesitate frowningly, and quaked. In a moment the man might make up his mind and seize him; there was an urgent necessity for some action that should quell him. Like all weak men, he saw a resource in violence, and as the officer opened his lips to speak again he interrupted.

“No more!” he shouted. “You have heard what I had to say; that is enough. Now go!”

He pointed frantically with his flute, and the officer, at the sudden lifting of his arm, made a surprised movement, which Lucas misunderstood.

With a cry that was half terror and half ecstasy he smote, and the flute beat the officer’s cap down over his eyes.

“Yei Bohu!” ejaculated the officer, falling back,

Lucas did not wait for him to thrust the cap away and recover himself. He had done his utmost, and the next step must rest with Providence. It was but two paces to the doorway. The officer was not quick enough to see his panic-stricken retirement. He recovered his sight only to see the slam of the door, which seemed to close in his face with a contemptuous and defiant emphasis. It was like a final fist shaken at him to drive home a warning. He shook his head despondently.

On the other side of the door Lucas, fighting with his loud breath, heard his slow footsteps on the cobbles as he departed. He waited, hardly daring to relax his mind to hope, till he heard the party of them drawing off. He was weak with unaccustomed emotions.

What struck him as marvelous was that the woman, whose face he had last seen as a writhen mask of fear, should appear in the light of his room with her calm restored, with nothing but some disorder of her hair and dress to betoken her troubles. Even the child in her arms, worn out with weeping perhaps, had fallen asleep. He stared at the pair of them vacantly. His lamp, his music, all the apparatus of his gentle and decorous existence were as he had left them; their familiar and prosaic quality made his adventure appear by contrast monstrous.

The Jewess was watching him. In her dark, serious way she had a certain striking beauty. Her grave eyes waited for him to look at her.

“What is it?” he said at last.

“If I might put the child down,” she suggested timidly.

Lucas pointed to the double-doors of his bedroom. “My bed is in there,” he answered. She lowered her head, as though in obedience to a command he had given, and carried

the child out. Lucas watched her go, and then crossed the room to a cupboard which contained, among other things, a bottle of brandy.

While he was drinking she returned, pausing in the door to look back at the child. He noticed that she left the door partly open to hear it if it should wake, and somehow this struck him as particularly moving.

She came across the room to him, with her steadfast eyes on his face, and, without speaking, fell on her knees before him and put the edge of his coat to her lips.

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Lucas stood while she did it; he hardly dared to move and interrupt that reverent and symbolic act of gratitude. But once again, as when on the pavement she had held the child to him in frantic appeal, the simple soul within him flamed into splendor, and he was in touch with great passions and mighty emotions. It is the mood of martyrs and heroes. He looked down to her dark eyes, bright with swimming tears, and helped her to her feet.

“You shall be safe here,” he told her. “Nobody shall touch you here.”

She believed it utterly; he was a champion sent straight from God; she had seen him conquering and irresistible. To fear now would be a blasphemy.

“I am quite safe,” she agreed. “I am not afraid. To-morrow some of my people will come for me.”

He nodded. “There is some food in the cupboard there,” he told her. “Milk, too, if the child wants it. And nobody can come up the stairs without meeting me; and if they try, God help them!”

She half smiled at the idea. “They would never dare,” she agreed confidently.

He would have been glad of his overcoat, but that was in his bedroom, and he dreaded the indelicacy of going there while she was present. So in the event he bade her a brief good-night, and found himself on the dark and chilly stairs without so much as a pillow or a blanket to make sleep possible. For lack of anything else in the shape of a weapon, he had brought his silver-keyed flute with him; if he were invaded in the small hours it might serve him again; it seemed to have a virtue for quelling police officials.

About three o’clock in the morning he awoke from an uneasy doze, chilled to the marrow, and was prompted to try if the flute would still make music. It would not. It is too much to ask of any instrument that has been used as an instrument of war. It had saved a Jewess and her child, magnified its owner into a man of action, and was thenceforth silent for ever.

“I must have hit that officer pretty hard,” was the reflection of Robert Lucas.

The episode closed shortly before noon next day, when two elderly men of affairs came to fetch his guests away. They entered the room while he was entertaining the baby with a whistled selection from his repertoire of flute music, and he broke off short as they regarded him from the doorway. The Jewess looked up alertly as they entered.

They bowed to Lucas with a manner of servility in which there was an ironic suggestion, while their eyes examined him shrewdly. They were bearded, aquiline persons, soft-spoken and withal formidable. He had a notion that they found him amusing, but suppressed their amusement.

“Then it is you we have to thank,” said the elder of them, when formal greetings had been exchanged, “for the safety of this girl and her child.”

“I don’t want any thanks,” protested Lucas.

He could not tell them how the thanks he had already received transcended any words they could speak.

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“It was a villainous thing,” he went on. “I’m glad I could help. Er— is the silversmith all, right?”

“Money was paid,” answered the grey-haired Jew; “he is safe, therefore. But he spent the night in chains, while his wife was here with you.”

He spoke with a pregnant gravity. The Jewess started up and addressed him in a tongue Lucas could not understand. He saw that she pointed to him and to the bedroom and to the stairs, and that she spoke with heat. The old Jew heard her intently.

“So!” he said, in his deep voice. “Then we have more to thank you for than we thought. You gave up your rooms, it seems?”

“It is nothing,” said Lucas. “You see, a lady—well, I could hardly—”

“Yes, I see,” agreed the old Jew. “I have to do with a noble spirit. And you do not want any thanks? So? But we Jews, we have more things to give than thanks, and better things.”

“I don’t want anything,” Lucas answered him. “I’m glad everything’s all right.”

“You are very good,” said the old man, “very good and generous. But some day, perhaps, you will have a need—and then you will find that our people do not forget.”

The Jewess had nothing to take with her but her child. She bowed her head and murmured something as she passed out, and the baby laughed at him.

“Our people do not forget,” repeated the old Jew, as he bowed himself forth.

“Well,” said Lucas, half aloud, when he was once more alone in his room, “that’s finished, anyhow.”

It was the knell of his greater self, of the man he had contrived to be for a few hours. He sat in his chair, dimly realizing it, with vague and wordless regrets. Then, upon the table, he saw the flute, and rose to put it in the cupboard. It would never be useful again, but he did not want to throw it away.

The old dramas, which somehow came so close to reality with so little art—or because of so little art—had a way of straddling time like life itself. “Twenty years elapse between Acts II and III,” the playbills said unblushingly, and the fact is that what most men sow at twenty they reap at forty; the twenty years do elapse between the acts. The curtain that goes down on Robert Lucas in his room at Tambov rises on Robert H. Lucas in New York, with the passage of time marked on him as clearly as on a clock. With grey in his beard and patches on his boots, and quarters in a boarding-house in

Long Island City, he is still concerned with leather, but no longer prosperous. His work involves much calling on dealers and manufacturers, and their manner of receiving him has done nothing to harden his manner of diffidence and incompetence. His linen strives to be inconspicuous; his clothes do not inspire respect; the total effect of him is that of a man who has been at great pains to plant himself in a wrong environment. Tambov now is no more than a memory; it is less than an experience, for it has left the man unchanged. It is a thing he has seen—not a thing he has lived.

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The accident that gave his name and the address of his boarding-house a place in the papers has no part in his story; he was an unimportant witness in the trial of a man whom he had seen in the street cutting blood-spots out of his clothing. He had bought a paper which mentioned him to read on the ferry as he returned home, and had been mildly thrilled to find that an artist had sketched him and immortalized him in his columns. And next morning came the letter.

“Guelder and Zorn” was the name engraved across the head of it, in a slender Italian script; it conveyed nothing to him. The body of the communication was typewritten, and stated that if Mr. Robert H. Lucas would present himself at the above address, the firm would be glad to serve him. Nothing more.

“Mean to say you haven’t heard of Guelder and Zorn?” demanded the young man whose place at breakfast in the boarding-house was opposite to him, when he asked a question. “Say—d’you know what money is? Hard, round flat stuff—money? You do know that, eh? Well, Guelder and Zorn is the same thing.”

Somebody laughed. Lucas looked round rather helplessly.

“They say,” he explained, referring to the letter, “that they’ll be glad to serve me.”

“Then you might lend me a couple of million,” suggested the young man opposite, with entire disbelief. “Them Jews would never miss it.”

Lucas had the sense to drop the matter there. He put the letter in his pocket and went on with his breakfast, and listened with incredulous interest to the talk that went on about the wealth, the greatness, the magnificence and power of the financial house which professed itself anxious to be of use to him. He was sorry to have to leave the table before it came to an end.

It is characteristic of him that the letter aroused no wild hopes, nor even an acute curiosity. He came, in the course of the morning, to the offices of Messrs. Guelder and Zorn in much the same frame of mind he brought to his business efforts. They were near, but not in, Wall Street—a fact of some symbolic quality which he, of course, could not appreciate. He stood on the edge of the side-walk for some moments, looking up at the solid, responsible block of building which anchored their fortunes to earth, till some one jostled him into the gutter. Then he recollected himself and prepared to enter the money-mill.

A hall porter like a comic German heard his inquiry, scrutinized him with a withering glare, and jerked a thumb towards a door. He found himself in such an office as may have seen the first Rothschild make his first profits—a room austere as a chapel, rigidly confined to the needs of business. A screen, pierced by pigeon-holes, cut it in half.

Experience has proved that no sum of money is too large to pass through a pigeon-hole.

“Veil?”

A whiskered, spectacled face, framed in the central pigeon-hole, with eyes magnified by the spectacles, regarded him sharply.

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“Oh!” He recalled himself to his concerns with a jerk, and fumbled in his pockets. “I had a letter,” he explained.

“Vere is de letter?”

He found it, after an exciting search, and passed it over. The whiskered face developed a hand to receive it.

“I don’t know what it’s about,” explained Lucas.

“Perhaps your people have made a mistake in the name, or something.”

“Our beoble,” said the face in the pigeon-hole, with malignant emphasis, “do nod make mistagues!”

There was an interval while the letter was read, and Lucas stood and fidgeted, with a sense that he was intrusive and petty and undesired. “Yes,” said the owner of the spectacles, at length. “You vait. I vill enguire.”

He left his pigeon-hole unshuttered, and to Lucas, while he waited, it seemed that several men came to it and glanced at him forbiddingly. None spoke; they just looked as though in righteous indignation at his presence, with seventy-five cents in his pocket, in that high temple of finance. Then the whiskered and spectacled face fitted itself again into the aperture.

“So you are Mr. Robert H. Lugas, are you?” it inquired. “Den vere vas you in de year 1886?”

“Where was I?” repeated Lucas vaguely. “Let me see! 1886—yes! I was in Russia then—in Tambov.”

“Yes.” The other’s regard was keen. “An’ now tell me aboud de man dat lived obbosite to you in Tambov?”

“Do you mean the silversmith?” said Lucas. The other nodded. “Oh, him! He was a Jew. They expelled him.”

“And his vife?”

“His wife! They expelled her too,” he answered. “I never heard of her again.”

“Vot vas de last you heard of her?”

“Oh, that!”

Lucas was staring at him vacantly. It did not occur to him that, by not answering promptly, he might give ground for doubt and suspicion. The question had re-illuminated in his mind—perhaps for the first time since the event which it touched—that night of twenty years before. He flavored again the heady and effervescent vintage of strong action, of crowded happenings and poignant emotions.

“Veil?” demanded the other.

“There was a police officer,” began Lucas obediently; “his name was Semianoff;” and in bald, halting words he told the story. He told it absently, languidly, for no words within his reach could convey the thing as it dwelt in his memory, the warmth and color of it, its uplifting and transfiguring quality.

The man behind the pigeon-hole heard him intently.

“Yes,” he said again, as Lucas finished. “You are de man. Ve do not reguire further broof, Mr. Lugas.”

He produced a slip of paper and a pen which he laid on the ledge before his pigeon-hole.

“I am instrugted to say dat if you vill fill in and sign dis cheque, ve vill cash it.”

“Eh?” Lucas was slow to understand.

“Ve vill cash it,” repeated the other. “You fill it in—and sign it— and I vill cash it now.”

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“But”—Lucas took the pen from him in mere obedience to his gesture— “but—what for?”

“My instrugtions are to cash it—no more!”

Lucas stared at the tight-lipped, elderly face, like the face of a wise and distrustful gnome, and held the pen uncertainly above the cheque form.

“How much am I to write?” he asked.

“I haf no instrugtions about de amount,” was the reply.

“But,” cried Lucas, “I might write fifty thousand dollars!”

“My instrugtions are to cash de cheque ven you haf written it.”

“Oh!” said Lucas.

He stared incredulously at the face for some moments and then wrote a cheque for the sum he had named—fifty thousand dollars. He was about to add his signature when something occurred to him.

“Is it because I went across the road to that little woman in Tambov?” he asked suddenly.

The whiskered face answered composedly: “No. It is because you went out of your rooms and slept on de stairs.”

“Because”—he seemed puzzled—“but that is a thing—why, any gentleman would do it.”

“Dose are my instrugtions,” said the man behind the pigeon-hole.

“I see.”

Lucas stood upright, the uncompleted cheque in his fingers. All surprise and excitement had vanished from his regard; he seemed taller and stronger than he had been a minute before. He had yet many calls to make, and, in the nature of things, many rebuffs to receive, before he went home to supper; and the money in his pocket totaled seventy-five cents. He needed new boots, new clothes, leisure, consideration, and a sight of his native land; in short, he needed fifty thousand dollars.

“You will cash this because I didn’t fail to respect a helpless woman?” he asked, in level tones.

The whiskered cashier replied: “Yes. Because you gave up your room and kept watch on de stairs.”

Lucas laughed gently. “That is not the way to deal with a gentleman,” he said. “I will make your firm a present of fifty thousand dollars.”

He showed the cheque he had written, with the figures clear and large. And then, with leisurely motions, he tore it across and again across.

“Much obliged,” said Robert H. Lucas, and made for the door.

XI

THE MAN WHO KNEW

Bearded, bowed, with hard blue eyes that questioned always, so we knew David Uys as children; an old, remotely quiet man, who was to be passed on the other side of the street and in silence. I have wondered sometimes if the old man ever noticed the hush that, ran before him and the clamor that grew up behind, the games that held breath, while he went by, and the children that judged him with wide eyes. He alone, of all the people in the little dorp, made his own world and possessed it in solitude; about him, the folk held all interest in community and measured

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life by a trivial common standard. At his doorstep, though, lay the frontier of little things; he was something beyond us all, and therefore greater or less than we. The mere pictorial value of his tall figure, the dignity of his long, forked beard, and the expectancy of his patient eyes, must have settled it that he was greater. I was a child when he died, and remember only what I saw, but the rest was talk, and so, perhaps, grew the more upon me.

One day he died. For years he had walked forth in the morning and back to his house at noon, a purple spot on the raw color of the town. He had always been still and somewhat ominous, and conveyed to all who saw him a sense of looking for something. But on this day he went back briskly, walking well and striding long, with the gait of one that has good news, and he smiled at those he passed and nodded to them, unheeding or not seeing their strong surprise nor the alarm he wrought to the children. He went straight to his little house, that overlooks a crowded garden and a pool of the dorp spruit, entered, and was seen no more alive. His servant, a sullen Kafir, found him in his bed when supper-time came, called him, looked, made sure, and ran off to spread the news that David Uys was dead. He was lying, I have learned, as one would lie who wished to die formally, with a smile on his face and his arms duly crossed. This is copiously confirmed by many women who crowded, after the manner of Boers, to see the corpse; and of all connected with him, I think, his end and the studied manner of it, implying an ultimate deference to the conventions, have most to do with the awe in which his memory is preserved.

Now, a death so well conceived, so aptly preluded, must, in the nature of things, crown and complete a life of singular and strong quality. A murder without a good motive is mere folly; properly actuated, it is tragedy, and therefore of worth. So with a death one seldom dies well, in the technical sense, without having lived well, in the artistic sense; and a man who will furnish forth a good death-bed scene seldom goes naked of an excellent tradition. I have been at some pains to discover the story of David Uys; and though some or the greater part of it may throw no further back than to the vrouws of the dorp, it seems to me that they have done their part at least as well as David Uys did his, and this is the tale I gleaned.

When David was a young man the Boers were not yet scattered abroad all over the veldt, and the farms lay in to the dorps, and men saw one another every day. There was still trouble with the Kafirs at times, little risings and occasional murders, with the sacking and burning of homesteads, and it was well to have the men within a couple of days' ride of the field-cornet, for purposes of defense and retaliation. But when David married all this weighed little with him.

"What need of neighbors?" he said to his young wife. "We have more need of land—-good land and much of it. We will trek."

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“It shall be as you will, David,” answered Christina. “I have no wish but yours, and neighbors are nothing to me.”

There was a pair of them, you see—both Boers of the best, caring more for a good fire of their own than to see the smoke from another’s chimney soiling the sky. Within a week of their agreement the wagons were creaking towards the rising sun, and the whips were saluting the morning. David and Christina fronted a new world together, and sought virgin soil. For a full month they journeyed out, and out-spanned at last, on a mellow evening, on their home.

“Could you live here, do you think, Christina?” asked David, smiling, and she smiled back at him and made no other answer.

There was no need for one, indeed, for no Boer could pass such a place. It was a rise, a little rand, flowing out from a tall kopje, grass and bush to its crown, and at its skirts ran a wide spruit of clear water. The veldt waved like a sea—not nakedly and forlorn, but dotted with grey mimosa and big green dropsical aloes, that here and there showed a scarlet plume like a flame. The country was thigh-deep in grass and spoke of game; as they looked, a springbok got up and fled. So here they stayed.

David and his Kafirs built the house, such a house as you see only when the man who is to make his home in it puts his hand to the building. David knew but one architecture, that of the great hills and the sky, and when all was done, the house and its background clove together like a picture in a fit frame, the one enhancing the other, the two being one in perfection. It was thatched, with deep eaves, and these made a cool stoep and cast shadows on the windows; while the door was red, and took the eye at once, as do the plumes of the aloes. It was not well devised—to say so would be to lend David a credit not due to him; but it occurred excellently.

The next thing that occurred was a child, a son, and this set the pinnacle on their happiness. His arrival was the one great event in many years, for the multiplication of David’s flocks and herds was so well graduated, the growth of his prosperity so steady and of so even a process, that it tended rather to content than to joy. It was like having money rather than like getting it. In the same barefoot quiet their youth left them, and the constant passing of days marked them, tenderly at first and then more deeply. Their boy, Frikkie, was a man, and thinking of marrying, when the consciousness of the leak in their lives, stood up before them.

They were sitting of an evening on the stoep, watching the sun go down and pull his ribbons after him, when Christina spoke.

“David,” she said, “yesterday was twenty-five years since our marriage. We—we are growing old, David.”

She spoke with a falter, believing what she said. For though the blood is running strong and warm, and the eye is as clear as the heart is loyal, twenty-five years is a weary while to count back to one's youth.

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David turned and looked at her. He saw for a moment with her eyes— saw that the tenseness of her girlhood had vanished, and he was astonished. But he knew he was strong and hale, well set-up and a good man to be friends with, and as he gripped his knees, he felt the tough muscle under his fingers, and it restored him.

“Christina,” he said, seeing she was troubled, “it is the same with both of us. You are not afraid to grow old with me, little cousin?”

She came closer to him but said nothing. It was soon after that, and a wonderful thing in its way, such as David had never heard of before, that there came to them another boy, a wee rascal that shattered all the cobwebs of twenty-five years, and gave Christina something better to think of than the footsteps of time.

Frikkie had been glorious enough in his time, and was glorious enough still, for the matter of that; but this was a creature with exceptional points, which neither David nor Christina—nor, to do him justice, Frikkie—could possibly overlook. Frikkie had a voice like a bell, and whiskers like the father of a family, and stood six foot two in his naked feet, and lacked no excellence that a sturdy bachelor should possess. But the other, who was born to the name of Paul, lamented his arrival with a vociferous note of disappointment in the world that was indescribably endearing; had a head clothed in down like the intimate garments of an ostrich chick, and was small enough for David to put in his pocket. He brought a new horizon with him and imposed it on his parents; he was, in brief, a thing to make a deacon of a Jew peddler.

Thereafter, life for David and Christina was no longer a single phenomenon, but a series of developments. It was like sailing in agreeably rough water. No pensive mood could survive the sight of mighty Frikkie gambolling like a young bull in the company of Paul; nor could quiet hours impart a melancholy while the welkin rang with the voice of the kleintje bullying the adoring Kafirs. Where before life had glided, now it steeplechased, taking its days bull-headed, and Paul grew to the age of four as a bamboo grows, in leaps.

Then Frikkie, the huge, the hairy, the heavy-footed, the man who prided himself on his ability to make circumstances, discovered, in a revealing flash, that he was, after all, a poor creature, and that the brightest being on earth was Katje Voss, whose people had settled about thirty miles off—next door, as it were. Katje held views not entirely dissimilar, but she consented to marry him, and the big youth walked on air. Katje was a dumpy Boer girl, with a face all cream and roses, and a figure that gave promise of much fat hereafter. Christina had imagined other things, but the ideal is a rickety structure, and she yielded; while David had never considered such an emergency, and consented heartily. Behind Frikkie’s back he talked of grandchildren, and was exceedingly happy.

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Then his dream-fabric tumbled about his ears.

Frikkie had ridden off to worship his beloved, and David and Christina, as was their wont, sat on the stoep. They' watched the figure of their son out of sight, and talked a while, and then lapsed into the silence of perfect companionship. The veldt was all about them, as silent and friendly as they, and the distance was mellow with a haze of heat. From the kraals came at intervals the voice of little Paul in fluent Kafir; David smiled over his pipe and nodded to his wife once when the boy's voice was raised in a shout. Christina was sewing; her thoughts were on Katje, and were still vaguely hostile.

Of a sudden she heard David's pipe clatter on the ground, and looked sharply round at him. He was staring intently into the void sky; his brows were knitted and his face was drawn; even as she turned he gave a hoarse cry.

She rose quickly, but he rose too, and spoke to her in an unfamiliar voice.

"Go in," he said. "Have all ready, for our son has met with a mishap. He has fallen from his horse."

She gasped, and stared at him, but could not speak.

"Go and do it," he said again, looking at her with hard eyes; and suddenly she saw, as by an inward light, that here was not madness, but truth. It spurred her.

"I will do it," she said swiftly. "But you will go and bring him in?"

"At once," he replied, and was away to the shed for the cart. The Kafirs came running to inspan the horses, and shrank from him as they worked. He was white through his tan, and he breathed loud. Little Paul saw him, and sat down on the ground and cried quietly.

Before David went his wife touched him on the arm, and he turned. She was white to the lips.

"David," she said, and struggled with her speech. "David."

"Well?" he answered, with a pregnant calm.

"David, he is not—not dead?"

"Not yet," he answered; "but I cannot say how it will be when I get there." A tenderness overwhelmed him, and he caught a great sob and put his arm about her. "All must be ready, little cousin. Time enough to grieve afterwards—all our lives, Christina, all our lives!"

She put her hand on his breast.

“All shall be ready, David,” she answered. “Trust me, David.”

He drove off, and she watched him lash the horses down the hill and force them at the drift—he, the man who loved horses, and knew them as he knew his children. His children! She fled into the house to do her office, and to drink to the bottom of the cup the bitterness of motherhood. A cool bed, linen, cold water and hot water, brandy and milk, all the insignia of the valley of the shadow did she put to hand, and con over and adjust and think upon, and then there was the waiting. She waited on the stoep, burning and tortured, boring at the horizon with dry eyes, and praying and hoping. A lifetime went in those hours, and the sun was slanting down before the road yielded, far and far away, a speck that grew into a cart going slowly. By and by she was able to see her husband driving, but nobody with him—only a rag or a garment that fluttered from the side. Her mind snatched at it; was it—God! what was it?

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David drove into the yard soberly; she was at the stoep.

“All is ready,” she said, in a low voice. “Will you bring him in?”

“Yes,” he said; and she went inside with her heart thrashing like a kicking horse.

David carried in his son in his arms; he was not yet past that. On the white bed inside they laid him, and where his fair head touched the pillow it dyed it red. Frikkie’s face was white and blue, and his jaw hung oddly; but once he was within the door, some reinforcement of association came to Christina, and she went about her ministry purposefully and swiftly, a little comforted. At the back of her brain dwelt some idea such as this: here was her house, her home, there David, there Frikkie, here she, and where these were together Death could never make the fourth. The same thought sends a stricken child to its mother. David leant on the foot of the bed, his burning eyes on the face of his son, and his brows tortured with anxiety. Christina brought some drink in a cup and held it to the still lips of the young man.

“Drink. Frikkie,” she pleaded softly. “Drink, my kleintje. Only a drop, Frikkie, and the pain will fly away.”

She spoke as though he were yet a child, for a mother knows nothing of manhood when her son lies helpless. The arts that made him a man shall keep him a man; so she coaxed the closed eyes and the dumb mouth.

But Frikkie would not drink, heard nothing, gave no sign. Christina laid drenched cloths to his forehead, deftly cleansed and bandaged the gaping rent in the base of the skull whence the life whistled forth, and talked to her boy all the while in the low crooning mother voice. David never moved from the foot of the bed, and never loosed his drawn brows. In came little Paul silently and took his hand, but he never looked down, and the father and the child remained there throughout the languid afternoon.

Evening cool was growing up when Frikkie opened his eyes. Christina was wetting towels for bandages, and her back was towards him, but she knew instantly, and came swiftly to his side. David leaned forward breathlessly, and little Paul cried out with the grip of his hand. They saw a waver of recognition in Frikkie’s eyes, a fond light, and it seemed that his lips moved. Christina laid her ear to them.

“And—a—shod—horse!” murmured Frikkie. Nothing more. An hour after he was cold, and David was alone on the stoep, questioning pitiless skies and groping for God, while Christina knelt beside the bed within and wept blood from her soul.

They buried Frikkie in a little kraal on the hillside, and David made the coffin. When he nailed down the lid he was an old man; when the first red clod rang on it, he felt that life had emptied itself. When they were back in the house again, Christina turned to him.

“You knew,” she said, in a strange voice—“you knew, but you could not save him.” And she laughed aloud. David covered his face with his hands and groaned, but the next instant Christina’s arms were about him.

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Yet of their old life, before the deluge of grief, too much was happy to be all swamped. Time softened the ruggedness of their wound somewhat, and a day came when all the world was no longer black. Little Paul helped them much, for what had once been Frikkie's was now his; and as he grew before their eyes, his young strength and beauty were a balm to them. David was much abroad in the lands now, for he was growing mealies and rapidly becoming a rich man; and as he rode oft in the morning and rode in at sundown, his new gravity of mind and mien broke up to the youngster who jumped at the stirrup with shouts and laughter, and demanded to ride on the saddle-bow. At intervals, also, Paul laid claim to a gun, to spurs, to a watch, to all the things that go in procession across a child's horizon, and Christina was not proof against the impulse to smile at him.

It is not to be thought, of course, that the shock of foreknowledge, of omnipotent vision, had left David scathless. Though the other details of the tragedy shared his memory, and elbowed the terrifying sense of revelation, he would find himself now and again peering at the future, straining to foresee, as a sailor bores at a fog-bank. Then he would catch himself, and start back shuddering to the instant matters about him. Eventualities he could meet, but in their season and hand to hand; afar off they mastered him. Christina, too, dwelt on it at seasons; but, by some process of her woman's mind, it was less dreadful to her than to David: she, too, could dream at times.

One day she was at work within the house, and Paul ran in and out. She spoke to him once about introducing an evil-smelling water-tortoise; he went forth to exploit it in the yard. From time to time his shrill voice reached her; then the frayed edges of David's black trousers of ceremony engaged her, to the exclusion of all else. Between the scissors and the needle, at last, there stole on her ear a faint tap, tap—such a sound as water dropping on to a board makes. It left her unconscious for a while, and then grew a little louder, with a note of vehemence. At last she looked up and listened. Tap, tap, it went, and she sprang from her chair and went to the stoep and looked out along the road. Far off on the hillside was a horse, ridden furiously on the downward road, and though dwarfed by the miles, she could see the rider flogging and his urgent crouch over the horse's withers. It was a picture of mad speed, of terror and violence, and struck her with a chill. Were the Kafirs risen? she queried. Was there war abroad? Was this mad rider her husband?

The last question struck her sharply, and she glanced about. Little Paul was sitting on a stone, plaguing the water-tortoise with a stick, and speaking to himself and it. The sight reassured her, and she viewed the rider again with equanimity. But now she was able to place him: it was David, and the horse was his big roan. The pace at which he rode was winding up the distance, and the hoofs no longer tap-tapped, but rang insistently. There was war, then; it could be nothing else. Her category of calamities was brief, and war and the death of her dear ones nearly exhausted it.

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David galloped the last furlongs with a tightened rein, and froth snowed from the bit. He pulled up in the yard and slipped from the saddle. Christina saw again on his face the white stricken look and the furrowed frown that had stared on Frikkie's death. David stood with the bridle in his hand and the horse's muzzle against his arm and looked around. He saw Christina coming toward him with quick steps, and little Paul, abandoning the skellpot, running to greet him. He staggered and drew his hand across his forehead.

Christina had trouble to make him speak. "A dream," he kept saying, "an evil dream."

"A lying dream," suggested Christina anxiously.

"Yes," he hastened to add, "a lying dream."

"About—about little Paul?" was her timid question.

David was silent for a while, and then answered. "I saw him dead," he replied, with a shudder. "God! I saw it as plain as I saw him a moment ago in the kraal."

They heard the child's gleeful shout the same instant. "I've got you! I've got you!" he cried from without.

"He has a water-tortoise," explained Christina with a smile. "Paul," she called aloud, "come indoors."

"Ja," shouted the child, and they heard him run up the steps of the stoep.

"Look," he said, standing at the door, "I found this in the grass. What sort is it, father?"

David saw something lithe and sinuous in the child's hands, and stiffened in every limb. Paul had a skaapstikker in his grip, the green-and-yellow death-snake that abounds in the veldt. Its head lay on his arm, its pin-point eyes maliciously agleam, and the child gripped it by the middle. Christina stood petrified, but the boy laughed and dandled the reptile in glee.

"Be still, Paul," said David, in a voice that was new to him—"be still; do not move."

The child looked up at him in astonishment. "Why?" he began.

"Be still," commanded David, and went over to him cautiously. The serpent's evil head was raised as he approached, and it hissed at him. Paul stood quite quiet, and David advanced his naked hand to his certain death and the delivery of his child. The reptile poised, and as David snatched at it, it struck—but on his sleeve. The next instant was a delirious vision of writhing green and yellow; there was a cry from Paul, and the snake was on the floor. David crushed it furiously with his boot.

Christina snatched the child. “Did it bite you, Paul!” she screamed. “Did it bite you?”

The boy shook his head, but David interposed with a voice of thunder.

“Of course it did!” he vociferated with blazing eyes; “what else did my dream point to? But we’ll fight with God yet. Bring me the child, Christina.”

On the plump forearm of Paul they found two minute punctures and two tiny points of blood. David drew his knife, and the child shrieked and struggled.

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“Get a hot iron, Christina,” cried David, and gripped Paul with his knees.

In the morning the room was wild and grisly with blood and the smell of burnt flesh, and David lay face downwards on the floor, writhing as the echoes of Paul’s shrieks tortured his ears. But in the next room little Paul was still for ever, and all the ghostly labor was to no purpose.

I suppose there is some provision in the make of humanity for overflow grief, some limit impregnable to affliction; for when little Paul was laid beside his brother, there were still David and Christina to walk aimlessly in their empty world. Their scars were deep, and they were crippled with woe, and it seemed to them they lived as paralytics live, dead in all save in their susceptibility to torture. Moreover, there was a barrier between them in David’s disastrous foreknowledge, for Christina could not throw off the thought that it contained the causal elements which had robbed her of her sons. Pain had fogged her; she could not probe the matter, and sensations tyrannised over her mind. David, too, was bowed with a sense of guilt that he could not rise to throw off. All motive was buried in the kraal; and he and his wife sat apart and spent days and nights without the traffic of speech.

But Christina was seized with an idea. She woke David in the night and spoke to him tensely.

“David,” she cried, gripping him by the arm. “David! We cannot live for ever. Do you hear me? Look, David, look hard! Look where you looked before. Can you see nothing for me—for us, David?”

He was sitting up, and the spell of her inspiration claimed him. He opened his eyes wide and searched the barren darkness for a sign. He groped with his mind, tore at the bonds of the present.

“Do you see nothing?” whispered Christina. “Oh, David, there must be something. Look—look hard!”

For the space of a hundred seconds they huddled on the bed, David fumbling with the keys of destiny, Christina waiting, breathless.

“Lie down,” said David at last. “You are going to die, little cousin. It is all well.” His voice was the calmest in the world. “And you!” cried Christina; “David, and you?”

“I see nothing,” he said.

“Poor David!” murmured his wife, clinging to him. “But I am sure all will yet be well, David. Have no fear, my husband.”

She murmured on in the dark, with his arm about her, and promised him death, entreated him to believe with her, and coaxed him with the bait of the grave. They were bride and groom again, they two, and slept at last in one another's arms.

In the morning all was well with Christina, and she bustled about as of old. David was still, and hoped ever, with a tired content in what should happen, a languor that forbade him from railing on fate. Together they prepared matters as for a journey.

"If the black trousers come frayed again," said Christina, "try to remember that the scissors are better than a knife. And the seeds are all in the box under our bed."

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“In the box under our bed,” repeated David carefully. “Yes, under the bed. I will remember.”

“And this, David,” holding up piles of white linen, “this is for me. You will not forget?”

“For you?” he queried, not understanding.

“Yes,” she answered softly. “I will be buried in this.”

He started, but recovered himself with a quivering lip.

“Of course,” he answered. “I will see to it. I must be very old, Christina.”

She came over and kissed him on the forehead.

In the middle of the afternoon she went to bed, and he came in and sat beside her. She held his hand, and smiled at him.

“Are you dying now?” he asked at length.

“Yes,” she said. “What shall I tell Frikkie and the kleintje from you?”

“Tell them nothing,” he said, after a pause. “It cannot be that I shall be apart from you all long. No; I am very sure of that.”

She pressed his hand, and soon afterwards felt some pain. It was little, and she made no outcry. Her death was calm and not strongly distressing, and the next day David put her into the ground where her sons lay.

But, as I have made clear, he did not die till long afterwards, when he had sold his farm and come to live in the little white house in the dorp, where colors jostled each other in the garden, and fascinated children watched him go in and come out. I think the story explains that perpetual search of which his vacant eyes gave news, and the joyous alacrity of his last home-coming, and the perfect technique of his death. It all points to the conclusion, that however brave the figures, however aspiring their capers, they but respond to strings which are pulled and loosened elsewhere.

XII

THE HIDDEN WAY

A veil ’twixt us and Thee, dread Lord, A veil ’twixt us and Thee! Lest we should hear too clear, too clear, And unto madness see.

Carrick crossed the fields in time to see, from the low bank above the churchyard, the children coming forth from Sunday school in the church, blinking contentedly at the late summer sunlight and all the familiar world from which, for two hours, they had been exiles. A little behind them came Mr. Newman, carrying his sober hat in his hand, and the curate.

“Hi!” called Carrick, and they turned toward him as he came down the bank, with his sly spaniel shambling at his heels.

The curate looked with disfavor at Carrick’s worn tweed clothes and his general week-day effect. “I think,” he said primly, “I’ll be getting along.”

“I should,” said Carrick shortly, turning his back on him. “I want to speak to you, Newman.”

“Then we will walk together,” agreed Mr. Newman. “Good-bye till this evening,” he called after the departing curate.

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It was an afternoon of June, languid and fragrant; the declining sun was in their faces as they went in company under the high arches of the elms, in a queer contrast of costume and personality. Carrick, the man of science, the adventurer in the bypaths of knowledge, affronted the Sabbath in the clothes which gave offence to the curate. He was a thin, impatient man, standing on the brink of middle age, with the hard, intent face of one accustomed to verify the evidence of his own senses. A habit he had of doing his thinking in the open air had left him tanned and limber; he walked easily, with the light foot of an athlete, while Mr. Newman, decorous in the black clothes which are the uniform of the regular churchgoer, trod deliberately at his side and mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

“It was very warm in the church this afternoon,” explained Mr. Newman mildly. “Very warm.”

He was an older man than Carrick, and altogether a riper and most complacent figure. He had a large and benevolent face, which would have been common-place but for a touch of steadfastness and serenity which dignified it, and an occasional vivacity of the kindly eyes. One perceived in him a man who had come smoothly through life, secure in plain faiths and clear hopes, unafraid of destiny. Something reverend in his general effect accentuated his difference from his companion.

“Ventilation,” Carrick was saying. “On an afternoon like this you might as well shut those children up in a family vault. Twenty of them, all breathing carbonic acid gas, besides yourself—and that ass!”

“You mean the curate?” inquired Mr. Newman. “Really, he isn’t an ass. He didn’t like your clothes—that was all.”

“What’s the matter with ’em?” demanded Carrick, inspecting his shabby sleeve. “You don’t want me to dress up like—like you, do you?”

“My dear fellow!” Mr. Newman smiled protestingly, lifting a suave hand. “I don’t care how you dress. I don’t want you to ’make broad your phylacteries,’ you know.”

Carrick snorted, and they walked in silence through the little village that lay below the church.

The matter they had in common, which bridged their diversity and made it possible for them to be, after their fashion, friends, was their interest in the subject which Carrick had made his own—experimental psychology. Like all successful business men, Mr. Newman had an unschooled aptitude for the science, and had practised it with profit on his competitors and employees before he knew a word of its technology. In Carrick’s bare and lamp-lit study they had joined forces to bewilder and undermine the intelligence of the sly spaniel, and there had been sessions of hypnotism, with Mr.

Newman rigid in trances, while Carrick groped, as it were, among the springs of his mind. The pair of them had incurred the indignation of European authorities, writing in obscure and costly little journals whose names the general public never heard. The bond of martyrdom— martyrdom in print—united them.

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“By the way,” suggested Mr. Newman, when the village was behind them and they were walking between high hedgerows flamboyant with summer growth. “By the way, wasn’t there something you wanted to speak to me about?”

“Eh? Oh yes,” replied Carrick. “Bother! I want you to come to my place to-night to try something—something new, a big thing.”

“To-night?” said Mr. Newman. “No, not to-night, Carrick.”

“Why not?” demanded Carrick. “I tell you, it’s a big thing. I’ve had an idea of it for some time; those clairvoyant tests put me on to it; but I’ve only just got it clear. It’s big.”

Mr. Newman shook his head. “Not to-night,” he said. “You’re a queer fellow, Carrick; you never can remember what day of the week it is for more than five minutes at a time.”

“Oh!” Carrick scowled. “You mean it’s Sunday. But this—I tell you, this isn’t just an ordinary thing, Newman. I’ll explain—it’s new and it’s big!”

“No,” said Newman. “Not to-night, Carrick, please!”

“Hang it!” said Carrick. He would have spoken more liberally, but the choice was between restraint in language and the loss of Mr. Newman as an acquaintance. That had been made clear soon after their first meeting.

Mr. Newman smiled, and rested a large hand on Carrick’s arm.

“We go by different roads to our goal, Carrick,” he said, “but it is the same goal. We serve the same Master, under different names and in different ways. You call Him Science and I call Him Christ—the same Master, though; and my services take me to church to-night. But to-morrow, if you like, I will come over to your place.”

“Get back,” said Carrick violently to the dog. “To heel, you beast!”

The fork of the road was in front of them; they paused at the division of the way.

“Will that suit you?” inquired Mr. Newman. “I can come round after dinner.”

Carrick gave him a look in which contempt, fury, and a certainly involuntary liking were strangely at war.

“Of all the sanctimonious asses,” he said, and broke off. “Good-night!” he concluded abruptly.

“I’ll come, then,” said Mr. Newman, smiling. “Good-night, my dear fellow.”

He went off at his deliberate gait, humming to himself the tune of the last hymn which the children had sung at the Sunday school. Evening was settling about him on the trees and fields; after the still heat of the sun, it was like an amen to the day, a vast low note of organ music. There was a pond gleaming among the trees.

“He leadeth me beside the still waters,” he said aloud to himself, and then Carrick’s footsteps were audible behind him. He turned. Carrick came up swiftly.

“Don’t eat much dinner to-morrow night,” he said, with immense seriousness.

“It’s more hypnotism, then?” inquired Mr. Newman.

Carrick nodded. “Yes,” he said. “But—it’s a big thing, all the same.”

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He clicked to his dog and went off abruptly, passing with long, jerky strides into the enveloping stillness of the evening, and Mr. Newman resumed his homeward walk, taking up his mood of reflective quiet at the point where Carrick had broken in upon it. He was a man made for the Sabbath; he breathed its atmosphere of a day consecrated to observances with a pleasure that was almost sensuous. For him, piety was that manner of life which gave the quality of Sunday to each other of the seven days of the week, softening them and rendering them august with the sense of a great adorable Presence presiding over their hours.

The curate who disliked Carrick occupied the pulpit that evening; he preached from half a text, after the manner of curates. "For they shall see God"—he repeated it in a poignant undertone—he, tall and young and priestly in his vestments, seen against the dim glory of a stained window—and Mr. Newman, attentive in his pew, leaned forward suddenly to hear, like a man touched by excitement.

Carrick's study was one of a pair of rooms he had added to the farmhouse which he inhabited, a long apartment of many windows, designed for spaciousness, and possessing no other good quality. No fire could warm more than an end of it, and his lamp, wherever it was placed, was but a heart of light in a body of shadow. He had furnished it with the things he required; a desk was here, a table there, bookcases were along the walls, a variety of chairs stood where he happened to push them. It had the air of a waiting-room or a mortuary.

Carrick was at his desk when Mr. Newman, on the Monday evening, was shown in to him by the ironclad widow who kept house for him. He looked up with impatience as his guest entered.

"Oh, it's you?" was his greeting.

"Good evening," said Mr. Newman cheerfully. "You'd forgotten to expect me, I suppose. But I'm here, all the same."

"All right," said Carrick. "Sit down somewhere, will you?"

He rose and shoved a chair forward with his foot for Mr. Newman's accommodation, and began to walk slowly to and fro with his hands in his pockets.

"Well," said Newman; "and what's this miracle we're to work?"

"I'll show you," said Carrick, still walking. He stopped and turned toward his guest. "Newman," he said, "where do you reckon you were a hundred years ago?"

Mr. Newman laughed, crossing his legs as he sat.

"I'm not as old as that," he replied. "Whatever place you're thinking of, I wasn't there."

Carrick was frowning thoughtfully. “I’m not thinking of places,” he said. “You—you exist; the matter that composes you is indestructible; the—the essential you, the thing in that matter that makes it mean something, the soul, if you like—that’s indestructible, too. Everything’s indestructible. A hundred years hence, you’ll be somewhere; but where were you—you, that is—a hundred years ago?”

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He pointed the “you” with a jabbing forefinger as he spoke it, standing in front of Mr. Newman in the lamplight and talking down to him.

“Oh!” said Mr. Newman, “I see—yes! A hundred years, ago I was part of my Maker’s unfinished plan of to-day.”

“Were you?” said Carrick, snapping at him. “You were, eh? Part of— we’ll see! Come over to the big chair and undo your collar.”

Mr. Newman rose; the big arm-chair was his place when Carrick hypnotised him, and the loosening of his collar was part of the ritual.

“What is the idea?” he asked, fumbling at his stud.

“Tell you afterwards,” said Carrick. “If I told you now, you’d not get it out of your mind. Can’t you get that collar off, man?”

“It was stiff,” apologised Mr. Newman, arranging himself in the large chair. “How are you going to do it?”

Carrick’s hot hand pressed his head back on the cushions.

“Shut up,” he was told. “Let yourself go, now; just let yourself go.”

The chair faced the blank, bare wall of the room; there was nothing in front of Mr. Newman for his eyes to rest on and take hold of. Carrick’s hands no longer touched his head; he was alone in his chair, in a posture of ease, with the gear of his mind slacked off, his consciousness unmoored to drift with what-ever current should flow about it. He knew, without noting it, that something like a fog was creeping up about him; the pale wall became a bank of mist, stirring slowly; his pulse was a rhythm that lulled him faintly. He— the aggregate of powers, capacities habits that made the sum of him— was adrift, flowing like a vapor that leaks into the air and thins abroad. A coolness was on his forehead as of a little breeze.

Carrick, behind the chair, saw that his head drooped, and came round to look at him. He seemed to slumber with his eyes half open, and his plump hands, white and luxurious, were clasped in his lap. Carrick considered him and then crossed to his desk to get his pipe. He expected to have to wait for some time.

But it was less than five minutes before Mr. Newman stirred like a man who moves in his-sleep and emitted a long gusty sigh. His hands unclasped; he drove up to consciousness like a diver who shoots up through strangling fathoms of water to the generous air above. Life was compelling him; through the confusion of his senses he felt Carrick’s hand on his shoulder and heard him speaking.

“Feeling quite all right—what? Here, drink some of this. It’s only water. A drop more? Right!”

Mr. Newman pushed the glass away and sat upright, staring wide-eyed into the curious face of Carrick, who bent over him, tumbler in hand.

“All right?” asked Carrick again.

“Yes—now,” replied Mr. Newman slowly. “But—what did you do to me, Carrick?”

Carrick gave a relieved snort and set the tumbler down on the mantelshelf.

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“What did I do?” he repeated. “Opened a door for you—that’s all. What did you find the other side?”

Mr. Newman passed an uncertain hand across his eyes. The feeling with which he had returned to consciousness, that liberties had been taken with him, was leaving him as the familiar ugly room grew about him again.

“It was queer,” he said doubtfully, and Carrick bent his head in eagerness to listen.

“You’ve been hypnotised before, often enough. What was queer?”

“Hypnotism is unconsciousness, so far as I’m concerned,” said Mr. Newman. “But this—wasn’t! Not dreams, either; the thing was so absolutely real.”

“Go on,” said Carrick, as he paused to ponder.

“I felt myself going off, you know, just as usual—the mistiness, the reposefulness, the last moment when one would rebel if one could—but one can’t; that was all ordinary. And then came the blank, that second of utter emptiness, as though one were alone in the wilderness of outer space, and light were not yet created. As a rule, that ends it; one’s asleep then. But this time I wasn’t. It seemed—it sort of dawned toward me——” Mr. Newman groped for a word which eluded him, with a face that brooded heavily.

“What did?” demanded Carrick.

“It was a lightness, first of all, a thinning of the dark, that grew and broadened till it was like a thing coming at me—like something thrown at me. And suddenly it was all about me, and I was in it, and it was daylight—just ordinary daylight, you know. There was a white, flat road, with a hedge on one side and a low leaning fence on the other, and over the fence there were fields; and I was walking along by the roadside, with the thick powdery dust kicking up from under my feet as I went.”

He paused. “Yes?” cried Carrick. “Yes? Yes?”

“I don’t remember what I was thinking,” said Mr. Newman. “Perhaps I wasn’t thinking. I saw a signpost farther along the road with something like a long bundle—it was rather like a limp bolster, I fancy—hanging from it. I was staring toward it, when there came a noise behind me, like a trumpet being blown, and I turned to see a coach with four horses come tearing along toward me, with a red-coated man at the back, blowing a horn. The roof of it was crowded with people curiously dressed; they all looked down on me as they came abreast, and their faces had a sort of strange roughness. I saw them as clearly as all that—a coarseness, it was—a kind of cruel stupidity. Several of them seemed to be pock-marked, too. It struck me; I wondered how a coach-load of such people had been gathered together; and I might have wondered longer; but one of them laughed, a great neighing guffaw of a laugh, as the coachman swung his whip.”

Mr. Newman paused, and his hand floated to his face again.

“It cut me across here,” he said thoughtfully. “It—it hurt. Awfully!”

Carrick nodded.

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“And that was all,” Mr. Newman went on. “At the sting of the lash, as though some one had turned a switch, the daylight went out—to the sound of that gross animal laugh. There was again the frozen dark, the solitude—the chill—and I heard you saying, as from another planet, across great gulfs of space: ‘Drink some of this!’ Only—”

“Yes?”

“It’s like a memory of something that actually took place. I ought to have a weal just below my eyes where the whip took me-it wasn’t five minutes ago. I remember the dusty smell of that white road-and how the thing that hung on the signpost was-some-how-ugly and nasty. It’s awfully queer, Carrick.”

“Yes!” Carrick sank his hands in his pockets and walked away to the shadowy far end of the room. Mr. Newman sat in thought, flavoring the vivid quality of his vision, with his underlip caught up between his teeth. The great room was silent for a space of minutes.

“I say!” Carrick spoke from the other end of it.

“What?”

“That signpost you saw-it wasn’t a signpost, you know.”

“What was it, then?”

“It was a gallows,” said Carrick, “with a man hanging on it.”

There was a pause. “Eh?” said Mr. Newman, and rose from his chair. “Carrick, what exactly did you do to me?”

“I sent you back a hundred years,” Carrick answered, in a measured voice. His excitement got the better of his restraint and his voice cracked. “Part of the-what was it you said you were, Newman?” he cried, on a note of shrillness. “I tell you, man, you’ve proved a hundred things you never dreamed of-theories of mine. You’ve proved them, I tell you. I’ve dipped you back into the past as I dip my hands into water. What you saw was what happened; it was you-you, man, a hundred years ago. Oh, why did I stop at a hundred? A thousand, a dozen thousand years would have been as easy.”

He came down the long room almost at a run.

“Newman,” he said, taking the elder man by the arm with a swift, feverish hand; “we’ve got ’em, all those old diploma-screened fools that call us quacks-Zinzau, Berlier, von Rascowicz, Scott-Evans-we’ve got ’em. We’ll make ’em squeal. Before I’ve done with you, we’ll see what the earth was like when it was in the pot, being cooked. You shall

be a batwinged lizard again, and a cave-dweller, and a flint man. We'll turn you loose through history-our special correspondent at the siege of Troy-what?"

He broke into high, uncontrollable laughter.

"The Wandering Jew," he babbled. "We'll show him!"

Mr. Newman heard him with growing wonder, but now he shook his arm loose.

"Get yourself a drink," he said. "You're raving. I want to talk to you."

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The word was enough; Carrick stopped laughing, and walked away toward his desk. Mr. Newman, standing by the big arm-chair from which he had just risen, looked after him with a sudden liveliness growing in his face. The experience through which he had just come, abiding with him as so secure a memory, precluded the doubts he might otherwise have felt; Carrick's words and his excitement, so unusual in him, and the clear, unquestionable sense of recollection with which he summoned again to his mind the white dusty road, the swaying body of the hanged man, the drum of the hoofs of the coach-horses-these stormed his reason and forced conviction on him.

"The siege of Troy, you said?" he asked, with a nervous titter. The thing was gripping him.

Carrick had seated himself at his desk, as though to steady himself by the sight of its prosaic litter. He looked up now, his face composed and usual in the light of the reading lamp.

"Or anywhere," he said shortly. He nodded two or three times impressively; he was master of himself again. "It's true, Newman; I can do it; I've opened the door. We must have a few more tests and verify the method by trying it on another subject. Then we'll go to war with the professors."

"Ye-es," agreed Mr. Newman absently. "Anywhere, you said? You can open my eyes at any period in time? You can do that, Carrick?"

"Well," began Carrick, and paused. "Why?" he demanded. "What have you got in your mind?"

Mr. Newman came slowly down toward him till he leaned across the top of the desk facing the younger man. He was smiling still, but a fire had lit in his eyes, something adventurous and strong looked out through them. The elderly stout man was braced and exalted like a martyr going to the stake.

"Can you?" he repeated. "Can you, Carrick? Say—can you do that?"

"Unless——" hesitated the other, staring at him. "But—you must have been somewhere, at any time. Yes, I can do it."

Mr. Newman's eyes looked over his head and beyond him.

"Then," he said, and a deep note reverberated in his even voice— "then show me the day on which Christ died!"

He continued to look past Carrick at the shadowy end of the room, still smiling his strange and uplifted smile.

Carrick moved in his chair, with a half-gesture as of irritation.

“Look here,” he said. “Pull yourself together, Newman. There are limits, you know, after all.”

Two days elapsed before the evening on which the attempt was to be made; Carrick, alleging difficulties and dangers with long scientific names, had refused to try it earlier. He had been unwilling to try it at all.

“I don’t want to mix up a matter of clear science with your religious emotions,” he had declared. “And I’ve got a certain amount of religion of my own, for that matter. I manage to believe in it without corroboration; what’s the matter with yours, that you can’t do the same?”

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But it was not corroboration which Mr. Newman desired. He had not so much argued as insisted; and it had been difficult to reason with his manner of one buoyed up, exalted, inspired. He had had his way, on the sole condition that he should wait two days—"and give sanity a chance," Carrick had added.

But on the stroke of nine, on the appointed evening, he was standing within the door of Carrick's study, his hat in his hand, a white silk muffler about his neck, instead of a collar.

"I was very careful to eat very little at dinner," were his first words.

Carrick, who had been looking forward to his arrival with nervous dread, glanced up sharply with an affectation of annoyance at an interruption.

"More fool you," he barked, in his harshest voice. Mr. Newman smiled, and laid his hat down on the table and began to unwind his muffler.

Carrick frowned at him. "I'm rather busy to-night, Newman," he said. That had no effect. He rose. "Besides, something has occurred to me, and—it is not safe, you know."

Mr. Newman laid his muffler beside his hat; without it he had a curiously incomplete and undressed appearance. He turned round.

"Oh yes, it is," he contradicted mildly. "As safe as it was on Monday, at any rate!"

"Ah!" Carrick caught him up eagerly. "But that wasn't safe, either. I hadn't thought of this then. You see, we don't understand yet how the thing applies. What is it that becomes conscious in the period you see? Is it you, in an earlier incarnation? If so, supposing I—I let go of you at a time when you were dead! What happens then? Do I get you back—or what?"

He tried to make the consideration graphic, driving it at Mr. Newman's serenity with a knit brow and a moving forefinger.

Mr. Newman shook his head. "I don't know," he answered, unmoved by Carrick's fervor. "I can't tell you that. But—you leave me where you found me—in the hands of my God."

With the same quiet cheerfulness, he crossed to the big chair, turned it to face the wall, and sat down in it. "I'm quite ready," he said.

Carrick was still standing by the table. He was frowning heavily; the proceeding was utterly against his inclination. When Mr. Newman spoke, he sighed windily, a sigh of resignation, of defeat.

“I warned you,” he said, and wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers for what he had to do.

A less honest man than Carrick, finding himself in the like predicament, might plausibly have contrived a failure. Nothing easier than to tell Mr. Newman that nerves, a mental burden, or what not, stood in the way of the adventure. Mr. Carrick got to work forthwith.

Mr. Newman, supine in his chair, knew the preliminary stages of the process well. They took longer than usual to-night; both of them were unkeyed and had to compose themselves to the affair. But at last the visible world, the wall before him, commenced to dislimn; it shifted; it became mist, writhing and tinged with faint colors, that submerged his will and his consciousness, till they sank, gathering impetus, into a void below—the vacancy of the spirit that looses its hold on the body and is rudderless. He knew the blackness which is death, the momentary throe of entering it, the shock, the sense of chill, the dumbness.

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“Ah!” Carrick saw that his head fell, and ceased his labors. He stood, gaunt and perplexed, contemplating the body from which he had expelled the will, the life—the soul. It was a plump body, well clad, well fed, a carcase that had absorbed much of its world. It cost labor and the pains of innumerable toilers to clothe it, nourish it, maintain it, guard, comfort, and embellish it. And an effort of ten minutes was enough to drain it of all save the fleshly, the mere bestial. The habit of his mind impelled him to sneer as he stood above it, to moralise in the tune of cynicism. “Ecce homo!” were the words he chanced upon; but the flavor of them troubled him when he remembered the goal of the journey upon which that absent spirit had departed.

“Oh, Lord!” said Carrick, in a kind of whispering panic.

He cast scared looks to and fro, as though he feared the great room should contain a spy upon him. It was empty save for him and that witless body. He put his hands together with the gesture of a child and shut his eyes tight.

“Our Father,” he began, “Which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name!”

The place was as still as a church. He recited his prayer aloud, in a quiet, careful voice that echoed faintly among the book-shelves.

He bad got as far as “Thine is the kingdom, the power”—no farther— when Mr. Newman stirred, and he gabbled the words to an end hastily before he opened his eyes. Mr. Newman came back to consciousness with a rush; his body inflated with life, his still face woke, and his vacant eyes, meeting Carrick’s and recognising him, suddenly lit with sense—and terror.

“I say!” exclaimed Carrick; “will you have some water?”

His hand groped for the glass on the mantelshelf, but he continued to look at Mr. Newman, and presently he forgot the glass. Terror was the word, the terror of a man who finds—unawaited, ambushed in his being—depths and capacities unguessed and appalling. A blank, horror-ridden face fronted his own, till Mr. Newman put his hands before his face and shuddered. “What is it?” cried Carrick. “Old chap, what’s up?”

“My God!”

It was not an expletive, but a prayer, a supplication. Mr. Newman dashed the hands from his face and sprang up. Carrick caught him by the arm.

“I say,” he cried. “It’s rot. It’s a fake—it must be! Whatever happened—it’s not a sure thing. Pull yourself together, Newman. I—I may be wrong; perhaps it’s all an induced —you know, an illusion. I say, look here——”

“No!”

Gently, but with decision, Mr. Newman put his friendly hand away. “It’s not an illusion,” he said.

He walked away. Carrick stood staring after him, a battlefield of compunctions and a growing curiosity. Mr. Newman was wrestling with his trouble in the shadows; minutes passed before he came again into the lamplight. His face was blenched, but something like a stricken purpose dwelt on it.

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“I’ll tell you,” he said. Then, wildly, “Oh, man! why did you let me? This trick of yours—-it’s the knowledge of good and evil; it’s the forbidden fruit. Why did you let me?”

Carrick stammered futilely; there was no answer possible to give.

“I am a Christian,” went on Mr. Newman, as though he appealed for justification. “By my lights I serve God. I try not to judge others. I’ve not judged you, have I, Carrick? You—you don’t go to church, but I make a friend of you, don’t I?”

“Yes,” said Carrick.

“Then—why—” cried Mr. Newman—“why, of all people, should I—oh, Carrick, I don’t know how to tell you.”

Let Carrick’s answer be remembered when his epitaph is written.

“Then don’t tell me,” he said. “I don’t want to hear.”

Mr. Newman shook his head. He had come to a standstill at the side of the big chair. He looked old and stricken and sad.

“Ah,” he said. “But listen all the same.”

He remained standing while he told his tale, with eyes that sought Carrick’s listening face and fell away again.

“It took you longer than it usually does,” he said; “to send me on, I mean. I expect I wasn’t as good a subject as usual, too. I know I was full of a sort of gladness and expectation, for I didn’t doubt that you could do it. I had a feeling that I was going to see—really to see, with mortal eyes—Him, my Redeemer, the Son of God! I wasn’t afraid—only joyful with a great solemnity. I carried it with me, that joy, into the fog and darkness; it was all that I knew when the utter night surged up and gulfed me, and even life was forgotten. I was to see Him, like the pure in heart who are to see God. I had had that wonder in my mind since Sunday evening; the curate preached on it—and I—I thought my heart was pure.”

His fearful eyes fluttered to Carrick’s face and sank.

“The light came as it came before,” he went on, quickly and miserably. “First a sense of something that was not mere darkness, infinitely distant, but swooping down upon me at an unimaginable speed, broadening more quickly than the sense could follow—and then it was daylight all about me, and I was in the world, seeing, hearing, and—yes, and speaking, speaking, Carrick. Oh, my God!”

He shivered and put a hand out to the arm of the big chair. Carrick said nothing.

“It’s so clear,” said Mr. Newman. “If it weren’t so clear, I might persuade myself that it was an illusion, a vision—but it’s not. It happened. The first thing I know was that it was very hot. A sun stood in the sky; its rays beat on me, and they were strong. I was in a crowd of people, and they—we, that is—we all stood facing a building, a white building with a great door. There were many of us; I was thrust between two big hairy men, and there was a great noise. Everybody was shouting. I was shouting too. I had both my arms raised above my head, with my fists clenched—like that——”

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Mr. Newman raised his shut hands as high as he could; his tragic face compelled Carrick's eyes.

"But my arms were bare and very brown, I noticed. I was shouting vehemently, frantically, in some strange tongue. It was a language I do not know; but I knew what I was shouting, and I know still."

He stopped. Carrick waited.

"What was it?" he asked at last.

For answer Mr. Newman raised his arms again, the hands clenched, in a sudden and savage gesture.

"I was shouting like this," he said, and raised a voice that Carrick did not recognize. "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

He dropped his arms and stood staring at Carrick; then covered his face with his hands.

Carrick stood aghast and shaken. At last he went to his friend and took his arm.

XIII

THE STRANGE PATIENT

There were only two arrivals by the train from London when it stopped at the little flower-banked station of Barthiam; and Mary, who was waiting for it, had no difficulty in deciding which of them was Professor Fish. That great man never failed to look the part. His tall, lean figure, stooping at the shoulders, his big, smooth-shaven face, mildly abstracted behind his glasses, but retaining always something of a keen and formidable character, his soft hat and great flapping ulster, made up a noticeable personality anywhere. He seemed alone to crowd the little platform; the small man who accompanied him was lost in his shadow.

"Professor Fish?" accosted Mary primly, at his elbow.

He turned upon her with a movement like a swoop.

"I am Mary Pond," she explained. "My father was called away to a case, so he sent me to meet you and bring you up to the house. I have a fly waiting."

"Ah!" The Professor nodded and was bland. "Very good of you to take the trouble, Miss Pond. I am much obliged." He stepped aside to let his companion be seen. "This," he explained, "is your—er—guest."

Mary put out her hand, but the little man, who had been standing behind the Professor, made no motion to take it. He was staring at the planks of the platform; he lifted his eyes for an instant to glance at her, and dropped them again at once. Mary saw a listless, empty face, pale eyes, and pale hair, a mere effect of vacuity and weakness. The man drooped where he stood as though he were no more than half alive; his clothes were grotesquely ill-fitting. A little puzzled, she looked up to the Professor, and saw that he was watching her.

“How do you do?” she asked gently of the little man.

The Professor answered for him. “He does very well, Miss Pond,” he said robustly. “Much better than he thinks. Between ourselves,” dropping his voice and nodding at her with intention, “a most remarkable case. Very remarkable indeed. And now, if I can find a porter, we might as well be moving.”

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He seemed to hesitate for a moment before leaving them; then he set off down the platform. He walked with long strides in great spasms of energy, as he did everything. Mary turned from looking after him to the little creature beside her with a sense of absurd contrast. As she did so she saw that he too was looking after the Professor, and his empty face had suddenly become intent; it was hardened and vicious, with the parted lips and narrow eyes of hate. The man had discovered some spring of life within his listless body. It lasted only while one might draw a full breath; then he saw her scrutiny, and sank again to his still dreariness. It was a startling thing to see that flabby little insignificance strengthen to such a force of feeling, and Mary was conscious of a sort of alarm. But before she could frame a thing to say the Professor was back again, and the atmosphere of his vigour had enveloped them.

Professor Fish sat next to her in the cab, and the new patient, who was to be an inmate of her house for some time to come, leaned against the cushions opposite, with eyes half closed and his coarse hands folded in his lap. The Professor talked without ceasing, gazing through the open window at the fat lands of Kent unfolded beside the road and torpid under the July sun; but Mary found more of interest in the still face before her, cryptic and mysterious in its utter vacancy. So little it expressed besides weakness that Mary wondered what illness could thus have cut the man off from the world. She was used to the waste products of life; one “resident patient” succeeded another at her father’s house, and to each she was a deft nurse and a supple companion. They had in common, she found, a certain paltriness; most of them had been overtaxed by easy burdens; but this man’s aspect conveyed suggestions of a long struggle with a burden beyond all strength. The meanness of him, all his appearance of having begun in the gutter and failed there, touched her not at all; Mary had had too much to do with human flesh in the raw to be greatly concerned about such matters as that.

Dr. Pond was at home to meet them when the cab drew up at the door, an elderly, good-natured man, white-haired and sprucely white-bearded. He greeted Professor Fish with some deference, and helped the new patient carefully forth from the cab. It was Mary’s duty to see the one trunk of new shining tin carried in and placed in the room that was prepared for the house’s new inmate. This done, she went to the others in the little drawing-room. Her father and Professor Fish were seated in the window, busy with talk; the new patient had an upright chair against the wall, and sat in it with the same lassitude and downcast gaze which had already drawn Mary’s wondering compassion. The Professor rose at her entry.

“Ah! Miss Pond,” he said in his cheerful, booming voice, “I was just giving your father a few particulars about our young friend.”

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“I should like to hear them,” she answered, taking the chair he reached for her. “You see, I shall have a good deal to do with him.”

Old Dr. Pond nodded. “Mary,” he said, “is my right hand, Professor.”

“Of course,” agreed the Professor. “I can see that.”

He was seated again, and he leaned across to Mary confidentially, with an explanatory forefinger hovering.

“As I told your father, Miss Pond, it isn’t necessary to go far back in the case,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I took this case up— experimentally. The subject was a good one for a—well, call it a theory of mine, a new idea in pathology. You see? I wanted to try it on the dog before publishing it, and our young friend there”—he nodded at the back of the room and sank his voice—“he was the dog. You understand?”

Mary nodded, and the Professor smiled.

“Well,” he said, “I have succeeded. The patient is convalescent, but—you see how he is. He has very little vital force, and also, occasionally, delusions. Merely ephemeral, you know, but delusions. He wants quiet chiefly, and very little else—just that atmosphere of repose and—er—peace which you can create for him, Miss Pond.”

“These delusions,” put in Dr. Pond, “are they of any special character!”

“H’m!” The Professor stroked his chin. “No,” he said. “Curious, you know, but not symptomatic.” His hard eye scanned the old doctor purposely. “Sometimes,” he said slowly, “he thinks he has been dead, and that I brought him back to life.”

“And he hates you for it,” suggested Mary. The Professor stared at her in open astonishment.

“How on earth did you know that?” he cried.

“I saw him looking after you in the station,” Mary explained. “He just—glared.”

“I see.” Professor Fish was always rather extravagant in manner and speech; his relief now seemed a little exaggerated. He drew a deep breath and glanced past Mary to the patient on his chair at the far end of the room. “Yes,” he said, “at such times he is distinctly resentful. I don’t wonder you noticed it.”

“Your letter didn’t mention his name,” said Mary.

“I should call him Smith,” answered the Professor.

“It’s a good name. And that, I think, is all there is to tell. Oh, by the way, though he has no suicidal tendency, of course, or I shouldn’t put him here; but all the same——”

Mary nodded. “Quite so,” she said. “No razor.”

“Exactly,” said the Professor. “And no money. Give him the things he needs, and let me have the bill.”

He rose and reached for his hat.

“But you will stay and have something to eat,” protested old Dr. Pond.

“Can’t,” answered the Professor. “Got an engagement in town. I’ve just time to catch the train back. Now, you quite understand about this case? Just quietness and soothing companionship, you know, fresh air and sleep, and all that.”

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“We quite understand,” said Mary. “We’ll do our best.”

“I’m sure you will,” said Professor Fish cordially. He moved over to where the patient sat; he had not moved at all. He continued to gaze at the carpet while the tall Professor stood over him.

“Now, Smith,” said the Professor in his loud voice, “I’m off. You’re in good hands here, you know. You’ve only to take it easy and rest.”

“Rest?” Smith repeated the word in a hoarse whisper; it was the first he had spoken. He looked up, and his eye went to the Professor’s face with a sort of challenge.

“Yes,” said the Professor. “Good-bye.”

Smith continued to look at him, but answered nothing. Professor Fish shrugged his shoulders and turned away sharply.

“He’ll soon pick up,” he said to Dr. Pond. “And now I really must go.”

He shook hands with Mary with a manner of cheerful vigour, beaming at her through his gold-rimmed glasses, big, whimsical, and quick. A moment later, Dr. Pond was showing him out, and Mary, alone with her patient, had another glimpse of hate and contempt animating and enlivening that weak and formless face.

She waited till she heard the front door close and the Professor’s departing feet crunch on the gravel of the garden path. Then she went and put a hand on the little man’s shoulder.

“You look very tired,” she said, quietly, in her level, pleasant voice. “Would you like to go to your room and lie down? And I will send you up some tea.”

There was a long pause, and she thought he was not going to answer. But she waited restfully, and at last he sighed.

“Yes,” he said wearily, “that’s what I want.”

His voice had the flat tones of Cockneydom, but Mary took no note of it.

“Then let me show you the way,” she said, still gently; and he rose at the word and followed her upstairs.

In this manner the new patient was installed in the household of Dr. Pond. He slipped into his place like a shadow, displacing nothing. The Doctor, swollen with the distinction of a visit by Professor Fish in person, would willingly have made a fuss of him, if it had been possible. But Smith was not amenable to polite attentions. To attempts to render

him particular consideration he opposed a barren inertia; one could as easily have been obliging to a lamp-post. The man's consciousness seemed to exist in a vacuum; he lived in a solitude to which the kindly Doctor could never penetrate. Once, certainly, his persistent geniality won him a rebuff. It was at breakfast, and he was following his custom of endeavoring to trap Smith into conversation. Smith sat opposite him at the table, staring vacantly at the tablecloth.

"It is a fine morning," the Doctor observed, "I wonder, now, Mr. Smith, if you would care for a little drive with me. I have some brief visits to pay here and there, and I could drop you here again before I go on. The fresh air would do you good—freshen you up, you know; put a little life into you. Come, now! what do you say to accompanying me?"

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Smith said nothing, but his cheek twitched once. “Come now!” pressed the Doctor persuasively. “See what a lovely day it is. Sun, fresh air, the smell and sight of the fields—it’ll put fresh life into you.”

Smith’s white face worked slightly. “Ere,” he said, and paused. The Doctor bent forward, pleased. “Go to ’ell!” said Smith thoughtfully.

Mary had much more success with him; a slender link of sympathy had established itself between the healthy, tranquil girl and this dreary wisp of a man. She asked him no questions, and in return for her forbearance he would sometimes speak to her voluntarily. He would emerge from his trance-like apathy to watch her as she went about her household duties. Professor Fish had spoken truly when he said that Mary Pond knew how to create about her an atmosphere of serenity. The tones of her quiet voice, the gentleness of her movements, the kindly sobriety of her regard seemed to fortify her patient. For her part, a genuine compassion for the little man was mixed with some liking; he was a furtive and vulgar creature at the best, but his dependence on her, his helplessness and trouble, reached to the maternal in her honest heart. She could manage him; but for her strategy he would have lived in his bed, day and night, in a sort of half torpor.

“It’s remarkable what a control you have over these low natures, Mary,” Dr. Pond said to her. He had come home one afternoon to find that she had actually sent Smith out for a walk. “I confess it’s a case that’s beyond me altogether. There doesn’t seem to be any thing to take hold of in the man. It would be better if he felt a little pain now and again; it would give one an opening, as it were.”

Seated in a low chair in the window, Mary was hemming dusters. She looked up at him thoughtfully.

“Father,” she said, “what do you think was the matter with him in the first place? What was the disease that Professor Fish cured?”

Dr. Pond shook his white head vaguely.

“Impossible to say,” he answered. “It looks like, a mental case, doesn’t it? And yet——-You see, Fish has had so many specialities. He was in practice in Harley Street as a nerve man. Then, next thing, one hears of him in heart surgery. He’s had a go at electricity lately. And between you and me—he’s a great man, of course—but if it wasn’t for his position and all that, we’d be calling him a quack.”

“Then you can’t tell what the disease was?” persisted Mary.

“No,” said Dr. Pond. “Nor even if there was a disease. For all I know, Fish may have been vivisecting him. He wouldn’t stop at a thing like that, if I know anything about him.”

“He ought to have told us,” said Mary.

“Yes,” agreed the Doctor. “But Fish always does as he likes. How long has Smith been out now, Mary?”

“He went out at three,” she answered. “And now it’s half-past five. He ought to be in. I think I’ll put my hat on, father, and go after him.”

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Dr. Pond nodded. “I would,” he said.

The road along which Smith had departed ran past the village, and Mary walked forth by it to seek her patient. It was a splendid still afternoon; the trees by the wayside stood motionless in the late heat, their shadows in jet black twined and laced upon the white road. Far ahead of her she could see the land undulating in easy green bosoms against the radiant west; the sun was in her face as she walked. She had no fear that Smith had wandered far; for one thing, he had no strength to do so, and for another, she knew intuitively that the man lacked any purpose to carry him away. Therefore she walked at her ease, keeping cool and comely, and at the first corner in the road met a slim youth on horseback, who stopped to salute her. It was Harry Wylde, son of the great man of the neighborhood.

“Afternoon, Miss Pond,” he called cheerfully. “Have you lost a little thing about the size of a pickpocket?”

“A little bigger than that, I think,” she answered. “Have you seen him, Mr. Wylde?”

“Yes,” said Harry Wylde. “I’ve seen him before, too, I’ll swear. I knew the little beast at once. I say, Miss Pond, how the dickens did you manage to get mixed up with him?”

“He’s my patient,” said Mary. “Where did you see him, please?”

Harry Wylde pointed down the road. “I passed him just now,” he said. “He was in the churchyard.”

“The churchyard?”

“Yes, sitting on the grass, having no end of a time. Looked as happy as a trout in a sand-bath. I knew him at once.”

“How did you know him?” demanded Mary.

Harry Wylde leaned forward over his saddle. “Miss Pond,” he said seriously, “there’s hardly a man that goes to races in all England that doesn’t know him. His name’s Woolley—that’s one of his names, anyhow. He was a kind of jockey once, and since then he’s been the lowest, meanest little sharper in all the dirty little turf swindles that was ever kicked off a racecourse. If I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t say so; but you ought to know whom you are entertaining.”

“But you must be utterly mistaken,” cried Mary. “Professor Fish brought him to us. It’s impossible.”

“Case of Fish and foul,” suggested the youth. “But I’m not mistaken. The man I mean has lost the tip of his ear, the left one. Somebody bit it off, I believe. Now, have you noticed your chap’s ear?”

He looked at her acutely, and she colored in hot distress.

“I see you have,” he said. “I’d ask this Fish person for an explanation, if I were you; particularly as Woolley is supposed to be dead. The police want him pretty badly, you know. It looks queer, doesn’t it?”

“I—I can’t understand it,” said Mary. “I’m sure there’s a mistake somewhere.”

Young Wylde nodded. “We’ll call it a mistake,” he said. “He was injured on the Underground in London and taken to St. Brigid’s Hospital, where he died. I remember reading about it. Now, of course, I shan’t say anything to anybody; but you ought to have an explanation. Fish—is that his name—seems to have played it pretty low down on you.” He gathered up his bridle and nodded to her with intent.

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“Good afternoon, Miss Pond,” he said. “Sorry to make trouble, but I couldn’t leave you in the dark about a thing like this.”

Mary walked on to the churchyard in considerable bewilderment. With the character of a patient who came under her care she had no particular concern; a nurse must be as little discriminating as death. But she did not like the story; it troubled and offended her — its connexion with matters that interested the police, and all its suggestion that she and her father were being used as a means of hiding, touched her with a sense of disgust. It did not occur to her to doubt Harry Wylde; he had been altogether too circumstantial to be doubted.

She reached the low wall that separated the churchyard from the road. The old graces, with their tombstones leaning awry, like gapped, uneven teeth, reminded her of her errand, and soon she saw Smith. He had found himself a seat where an old tomb with railings and monument was overrun with ground ivy; he sat among the coarse green of it, staring before him with his chin propped on one hand. All the glory of the western sky was beyond him; his profile stood out against it like a sharp silhouette. Mary stopped to look, and for the time forgot the wretched story she had just heard. The man was as motionless as the stone on which he sat-still with such a stillness as one sees not in the living. But it was not that which held. Mary gazing; it came suddenly to her that in his attitude there was something apt; and significant, something with a meaning, requiring only a key to interpret it. She wondered about it, vaguely, and without framing words for her thoughts it occurred to her that the stillness, the attitude, the mute surrender that spoke in every contour of the silhouetted figure, the very posture of rest, bespoke contentment, tile welcome of relief which one feels on reaching one’s own place, one’s familiar atmosphere, one’s due haven.

Minutes passed, and still she stood gazing; then, as though restive under the impressions that invaded her, she moved forward and entered the churchyard. It was not till she stood before him that Smith was aware of her; with a wrinkling of his brow and a sigh, he came back to his surroundings. Mary saw and noted how the raptness of his face gave way to its usual feebleness as he roused himself.

“You have been out a long time, nearly three hours,” he said. “I think you ought to come in now.”

He sighed again. “All right,” he said slowly. But he did not rise, and Mary did not hurry him. She stood looking down at him, while his slack lips fidgeted and his pale eyes flitted here and there over the ancient graves.

“Why did you come here to this place?” she asked him presently. Her voice was very low.

He hesitated. “It’s where I ought to be,” he said heavily. “Only I didn’t have no luck.” One hand went out uncertainly and he pointed to the graves. “Them chaps is past bothering,” he said. “There’s no gettin’ at them.”

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He shook his head—it was as though he shivered—and relapsed into silence again.

“You shouldn’t think about things like that,” Mary said.

He looked up at her almost shrewdly. “Think!” he repeated. “I got no need to think. I know.”

“Know—what?”

“Ah!” he said, and gat brooding. “I’m alive, I am,” he said, at last; “but I been better off once. There’s no way of tellin’ it, ’cos it don’t’ fit into words. Words wasn’t meant to show such things. But I wasn’t just a limpin’, squintin’ little welsher; I was something that could feel the meaning of things and the reason for them, just like you can feel ’eat and cold. Could feel and know things such as nobody can’t feel or know till ‘e’s done with this rotten bustle of livin’ and doin’ things. That’s what I know, Miss; that’s what I found out when I died in that there ’orspital.”

Mary stared at him; a brief vivacity was in his face as he spoke, a tone of certainty in his voice.

“But,” she cried, “you’re alive.”

“Ay,” he said. “I’m alive. That’s the doin’ of that Fish. He’s the man; proddin’ and workin’ away there in that big room of his with the bottles and machines, and bits of dead men on the tables. ’E thinks I’m a bit touched in the brain, but I know, I do! I remember all right that mornin’, with the grey sky showin’ over the wire blinds and the noise of the carts just beginnin’ in the streets. There was sparkles in my eyes, flashes and colors, you know, and a feelin’ as if I was all wet with warm water. I couldn’t see at first, but by an’ by I put up my ’and and cleared my eyes—all pins and needles, my ’and was. Then I got on my elbow, and saw—the room and the bottles and all, and me naked on a table under a big light. An’ against the wall, at the other side o’ the room, there was ’im—Fish—in a white-rubber gown and a face like chalk, shakin’ an’ sweatin’ an’ starin’ at me. His eyes were all big an’ flat; an’ I lay there an’ looked at him, while he bit his lips an’ got a hold on himself. At last ’e come over to me. ‘’Ow are you feeling?’ ’e says. I’d been thinking. ’You devil, you’ve brought me back,’ I shouted. He was shakin’ still like a flag in the wind. ‘Yes,’ he says, ’unless I’m mad, I’ve brought you back.’ I ’adn’t the strength to do no more than lie still; so I just watched ’im while ’e got brandy and drank it from the bottle. Oh, I remember; I remember the whole thing. That Fish can fool you an’ old Pond, but there’s no foolin’ me. I know!”

He leaned forward and spat; the gesture emphasised the hard deliberation of his speech. The look he gave her now was much more assured than her own.

“We must be getting back,” Mary said uneasily. She remembered what Professor Fish had mentioned of Smith’s delusions. But the strangeness and assurance of what he had said were not in accord with what she knew of unstable minds.

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He rose and accompanied her docilely enough, but the strength that had furnished him with force to speak seemed to last only while he was in the churchyard. As they went along the quiet road he was again the flimsy, unlovely shell of a man she had first known. They went slowly, for Mary accommodated her gait to his; he walked weakly, looking down always. Where the road passed the end of the village a few people turned to look after them with slow curiosity. The village policeman, chin in hand, stared with bovine intensity; his big, simple face was clenched in careful observation. Mary recalled Harry Wylde's story, and his warning that the authorities had been seeking for Smith; she quickened her pace a little to get out of that mild publicity.

"What were you before you—before you met Professor Fish?" she asked him suddenly.

"A bettin' tout," he answered, "and a thief." He spoke absently and with complete composure.

"Well," said Mary, "will you do something for me if I ask you?"

He looked aside at her. "Don't ask," he said. "Don't ask me to do anything. 'Cos I can't."

"It's only this," said Mary. "What you told me in the churchyard was very wonderful and dreadful; but even if it was true, it would be a bad thing for you to think much about. It couldn't help you to live; it could only come between you and being well. So I want you, as far as you can, not to think about it. Try to forget it. Will you?"

He made some inarticulate sound with his lips. "Did Fish warn you?" he asked. "Did he tell you I was crazy and had notions? Ah!" he exclaimed, "I can see he did. He's as cunning as a fox, he is. He's got me tied hand and foot!"

"Hush! Don't talk like that!" bade Mary. "Do as I ask you. You know I'm your friend. Don't you?"

He shrugged uncertainly. "You would be if you knew how," he said slowly. "But, Lord! you don't know nothing that matters. It's only us that knows what's what—only us."

"Who's us?" asked Mary involuntarily.

He looked full at her. "The dead," he answered, and after that they went on in silence.

It was not easy for Mary to marshal her thoughts that evening, when Smith, after a silent meal, had gone to bed, and left her alone with her father. He had spoken with such an effect of intensity that the impression of it persisted in her memory like the pain that remains from a blow; the figure of him, sitting on the grave, telling his strange story in words of impressive simplicity, haunted her obstinately. She could see easily the picture he had conjured for her of a big electric-lighted room, silent save for remote noises from

without, and its equipment of dissecting-tables, bottles, and the machinery of an anatomist. Wylde's story had sunk into the background of her concerns; yet it was of that she had to speak to her father, and she was glad rather than surprised when he made an opening for her himself.

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“Smith seems to be rather a mystery at the village,” he remarked. “That manner of his is causing talk.” He laughed gently. “White—you know Ephraim White, the policeman—he asked me what I knew about him.”

“Yes?” said Mary. “Well, young Mr. Wylde asked me the same thing. He was sure he had recognized him.”

“Ah! And who was he supposed to be?”

Mary told him what Harry Wylde had said to her in the afternoon, not omitting the mention of the mutilated ear. Dr. Pond heard it without disturbance, nodding thoughtfully as she spoke.

“Ye-es,” he said. “It’s curious. It would explain the delusions, you know. Smith, bearing a marked resemblance to somebody who is dead—a resemblance that even extends to a certain wound—identifies himself with that person. A rather dramatic position, isn’t it? Still, I hope we are not going to have a police inquiry. I shall certainly let Fish know that people are becoming suspicious. What did young Wylde say the other man’s name was?”

“Woolley,” answered Mary. “Then you will write to Professor Fish, father?”

“Yes,” said the Doctor; “He ought to know. I’ll write to-night.”

“I think I would,” agreed Mary thoughtfully, and rose to get him writing materials. But some inward function of her was uneasy; she felt as though she had failed the little man whose reliance was in her. “You know I’m your friend,” she had said to him, and this reference to the Professor had not the flavor of full friendship. The same compunction remained with her next morning, and made her specially gentle with Smith. He had fallen back to his usual condition of vacuity and inertia; she had to rouse him to eat and drink when he sat at table with a face as void of life as a death-mask, and eyes empty and unseeing. Dr. Pond had given up his attempts to make conversation with him, and saw him with a slight exasperation which he was sedulous to conceal, so that he was altogether dependent on Mary’s unfailing patience.

Professor Fish was not slow to reply to the letter. A telegram from him arrived at lunch time, stating that he would come down next day, and asking that his train might be met.

“That means you’ll have to go again, Mary,” said Dr. Pond. “I’ve an appointment at that very hour.”

Mary nodded, not displeased at having an opportunity of sounding the Professor before anybody else. She saw that Smith had looked up at the mention of Fish’s name with some quickening of interest. She smiled to him and helped him to salad.

The morning of the next day came in squally and wild, with starts of rain, a sharp interruption to the summer's tranquillity. Mary was rather troubled to dispose of Smith during her absence, but ensconced him at last in the room which was known as "the study," an upper chamber where Dr. Pond kept his books and those other possessions which were not in frequent use. Here was a window giving a view over the rain-blurred hedgerows, clear to the swell of the downs, and an arm-chair in which Smith could sit in peace and wear undisturbed his semblance of a man in a trance. With some notion of leaving nothing undone, Mary routed out for him a bundle of old illustrated magazines, and left them on the unused writing-table at his side; he did not glance at them.

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“Now,” she said, when all was done, “I must go. I shall be back soon. Shake hands with me and say thank you.”

She smiled down into his face, as he looked slowly up at her, huddled like a lay figure between the arms of the big chair.

“Yes?” she said encouragingly, for his lips had moved.

“I feel,” he said in a whisper——

“Yes,” urged Mary. “What?”

“Hope!” he said, aloud, and gave her his hand.

The cab of the village bore her to the station over roads tearful with rain, and arrived there just as the London train came to a stop. The tall figure of Professor Fish, jumping from his compartment and turning to slam the door vehemently, struck her as oddly familiar; the man’s personality stood in high relief from his surroundings. Yet there was a certain disturbance in his manner as he greeted her—a touch of the confidential, which added to her curiosity. He sat opposite to her in the cab, so that when he leaned forward to speak, with his hat pushed impatiently back, his big insistent face was thrust forward close to hers, and his great shoulders humped as though in effort.

“This is a very annoying thing, Miss Pond,” he began, as the cab started back along the tree-bordered road. “A most annoying thing; privacy was absolutely essential. Here is something done, a big thing, too; and when only privacy, reticence, quiet are essential, we have this infernal fuss on our hands.”

He spoke with all his habitual force and volume; but something in him suggested to Mary that he did so consciously and of purpose.

“Well,” she said; “there’s nobody about here that is likely to guess at your experiment. That isn’t the trouble, you know. The trouble is that people say they recognize Mr. Smith as a man who is wanted by the police, who is supposed, too, to be dead. So, you see, the only thing wanted is an explanation.”

“Explanation!” He put the word from him with a gesture of his big, smooth hands.

Mary nodded, scanning him coolly. “Yes,” she said; “I can understand that an explanation might be difficult.”

Professor Fish laughed shortly, a mere bark of sour mirth, and turned to look through the rain-splashed window of the cab.

“Difficult!” he repeated, and turned his face to her again. “Not at all difficult, my dear Miss Pond, but awkward. Lord! it wouldn’t do at all!” His eyes behind his glasses became keen and lively. He looked at her carefully.

“He’s talked to you, eh? You’ve heard his story?”

“Yes,” answered Mary. “Once; it was very wonderful.”

He nodded, still scrutinising her. “I wish I could make him talk,” he said thoughtfully. “However——” he shrugged his big shoulders and was silent.

There was a pause then, while the wheels squelched through the mud below, and the rain beat rhythmically on the windows and roof of the cab. Its noise seemed to ally itself to the interior smell of the vehicle, an odor of damp leather and stale straw and ancient stables. The Professor stared intently through the wet glass, and Mary remembered, with a touch of amusement, her first meeting with him, when she had sat beside him and occupied her thoughts with the flabby phantom of Smith.

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“You know,” she said, at length, “there’ll have to be some sort of explanation.”

“Well?” demanded the Professor.

“If I knew what you had done to Mr. Smith,” she went on, “I could help you to keep things as quiet as possible.”

He heard her with a frown and shook his head. “If you knew, you’d do anything but keep it quiet,” he answered shortly.

“Then it was something horrible?” asked Mary quickly.

He smiled. “I expect to have many patients for the same treatment,” he replied. “Very many; I expect half the world. Where is Smith now?” he asked abruptly.

“At home by himself,” replied Mary. “We’ll be there in two minutes. You’d like to see him first?”

“Yes, please,” he said. “I must have a word or two with him.”

Dr Pond had not returned when they drew up at the house, and, as soon as the Professor had rid himself of his ulster and hat, she led him upstairs to the “study.”

“You’ll find him in here,” she said, when they came to the door. “I shall be downstairs when you want me.”

The Professor nodded absently and turned the handle. Mary was at the top of the stairs when he entered. She turned even before he cried out, conscious of something happening.

“Stop!” cried the Professor sharply. “Put that down!”

Mary ran to the open door and uttered a cry. Near the window stood Smith, erect and buoyant. The contents of desk-drawers were littered on the floor—papers, old pipes, a corkscrew, various rubbish—and in his hand he held something that Mary recognized with a catch of the breath.

“Father’s old pistol!” she said, and shuddered. The Professor had advanced as far as the middle of the room; the desk was between him and Smith, who was looking at him with a smile. Even in the weakness of fear that came over her, Mary wondered at the change in him. His very stature seemed to be greater; there was a grave power in that face she knew as a mask of witlessness and futility. He held the revolver in his right hand with the barrel resting in his left, and looked at the tall Professor with a smile that had no mirth in it, but something like compassion.

“Drop it!” said the Professor again. “Drop it, you fool!” But his voice of authority cracked, and he cried out: “For God’s sake don’t make a mess of it now.”

Smith continued to look at him with that ghost of a smile on his lips, and answered with slow words. He patted the pistol.

“This’ll put me out of your reach,” he said. “This is what’ll do it. You won’t be able to patch up the hole this’ll make.”

He raised the pistol, Mary, powerless to move clenched her hands and whole being for the shock of imminent tragedy.

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“Wait!” cried the Professor, and cast a furtive deprecating glance back at Mary. “Wait! I tell you it’s no use; you can hurt yourself and disfigure yourself and weaken and impair your body, but not the life! Not the life! I tell you—it’s no good!” He flung out a long arm and his great forefinger pointed at Smith imperatively. “I’ll have you back,” he said. “I’ll have you back. You’re mine, my man; and I’ll hold you. Put that pistol down; put it down, I tell you! Or else——” his arm dropped, and the command failed from his voice. He spoke in the tones of tired indifference. “Do it,” he said. “Shoot yourself, if you want to. I’ll deal with you afterwards.”

There was a pause, measured in heart-beats. Smith showed yet his face of serene gravity. When he spoke, it was strange to hear the voice of the back-streets, the gutter’s phrase, expressing that quiet assurance.

“If it wasn’t you,” he said, “it wouldn’t be nobody else. It’s only you as can do it.” He paused, with lips pursed in deliberation. “If you knowed what I know,” he went on, “you’d see it wasn’t right. I reckon you’ll have to come too.”

“Eh?” The Professor looked up quickly, and threw up an arm as though to guard a blow. Mary screamed, and the noise of the shot startled her from her posture and she fell on her knees. The Professor took one pace forward, turned sharply, and fell full length on his face. She heard Smith say something, but the words passed her undistinguished; then the second shot sounded, and the fire-irons clattered as he tumbled among them.

Those that ran up to the room upon the sound of the shooting found her kneeling in the door with her hand over her face.

“Bury them! bury them!” she was crying. “Bury them and let them go!”

XIV

THE CAPTAIN’S ARM

Seafaring men knew it for a chief characteristic of Captain Price— his quiet, unresting watchfulness. Forty years of sun and brine had bunched the puckers at the corners of his eyes and hardened the lines of his big brown face; but the outstanding thing about him was still that silent wariness, as of a man who had warning of something impending. It went a little strangely with his figure of a massive, steel-and-hickory shipmaster, soaked to the soul with the routine of his calling. It seemed to give token of some faculty held in reserve, to hint at an inner life, as it were; and not a few of the frank and simple men who went to sea with him found it disconcerting. Captains who could handle a big steamship as a cyclist manages a bicycle they had seen before; they recognized in him the supreme skill, the salt-pickled nerve, the iron endurance of a proven sailor; but there their experience ended and the depths began.

Sooner or later, most of them went to the Burdock's chief mate for an explanation of the unknown quality. "What makes your father act so?" was a common form of the question. Arthur Price would smile and shake his handsome head.

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“It’s not acting,” he would say. “You drop off to sleep some night on this bridge, and you’ll find out what he’s after. He’s after you if you don’t keep your weather eye liftin’; and don’t you forget it!”

In those days the Burdock had a standing charter from Cardiff to Barcelona and back with ore to Swansea, a comfortable round trip which brought the Captain and his son home for one week in every six.

It suited the mate’s convenience excellently, for he was a man of social habits, and he had at last succeeded in interesting Miss Minnie Davis in his movements. She was the daughter of the Burdock’s owner, and Arthur Price’s cousin in some remote degree, a plump, clean, clever Welsh girl, of quick intelligence and pleasant good nature. He was a tall young man, a little leggy in his way, who filled the eye splendidly. Women said of him that he “looked every inch a sailor”; matrons who watched his progress with Minnie Davis considered that they would make a handsome couple. Captain Price, for all his watchfulness, saw nothing of the affair. He approved of Minnie, though; she was born to a share in that life in which ships are breadwinners, and never had to be shoo’d out of the way of hauling or hoisting gear when she came down aboard the Burdock in dock. Her way was straight across the deck to the poop ladder and for’ard to the chart-house along the fore-and-aft bridge, trim, quiet-footed, familiar. “What did you find in the Bay?” she would ask, as she shook hands with Captain Price; and he would answer as to one who understood: “It was piling up a bit from the sou’west;” or “smooth enough to skate on,” as the case might be. Then, without further formality, he would return to his papers, and Arthur Price would hand over his work to the third mate and wash his hands before coming up to make himself agreeable. He always had more to say about the trip than his father, and he was prone to translate the weather into shore speech. Minnie only half liked his fashion of talking of “storms” and “tempests”; but there was plenty else in him she liked well enough. Best of all, perhaps, she liked the sight of him—a head taller than his father, clean-shaven and accurately groomed, smiling readily and moving easily; he was a capital picture.

She fell into a way of driving down to see the Burdock off. It was thus that Captain Price learned how matters stood. He came straight from the office to the ship, on a brisk July day and went off to her at her buoys in the mud-pilot’s boat. All was clear for a start and the lock was waiting; Arthur Price, in the gold-laced cap he used as due to his rank, was standing by to cast off. The Captain went forthwith to the bridge; Minnie on the dock-head could see his black shore-hat over the weather-cloths and his white collar of ceremony. She smiled a little, for she did not know quite enough to see the art with which the Captain drew off from his moorings under his own steam, nor his splendid handling of the big boat as he bustled her down the crowded dock and laid her blunt nose cleanly between the piers of the lock. She was watching the brass-buttoned chief mate lording it on the fo’c’sle head, as he passed the lines to haul into the lock.

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Captain Price was watching him, too. He saw him smiling and talking over the rail to the girl.

“Slack off that spring,” he roared suddenly, as they began to let the ship down to the sea level; and the mate jumped for the coil on the bitts.

“Keep your eyes about you, for’ard there,” ordered the Captain tersely.

“Aye, aye, sir,” sang out the mate cheerfully.

The mud pilot, beside the Captain on the bridge, grinned agreeably.

“Arthur’s got an eye in his head, indeed,” he remarked, and lifted his cap to Minnie.

The Captain snorted, and gave his whole attention to hauling out, only turning his head at the last minute to wave a farewell to his owner’s daughter. The mud pilot took charge and brought her clear; and as soon as he had gone over to his boat, the Captain rang for full steam ahead and waited for the mate to take the bridge.

The young man came up smiling. “It’s a fine morning, father,” he remarked, as he walked over to the binnacle.

“Mister Mate,” said the Captain harshly, “you all but lost me that hawser.”

“Just in time, wasn’t it?” replied the mate pleasantly.

“I don’t reckon to slack off and take in my lines myself,” went on the Captain. “I reckon to leave that to my officers. And if an officer carries; away a five-inch manila through makin’ eyes at girls on the pier-head, I dock his wages for the cost of it, and I log him for neglectin’ his duty.”

The mate looked: at him sharply for a moment; the Captain scowled back.

“Have you got anything to say to me?” demanded the Captain.

“Yes,” said the mate, “I have.” He broke into a smile. “But it’s something I can’t say while you’re actin’ the man-o’-war captain on your bridge. It doesn’t concern the work o’ the ship.”

“What does it concern?” asked the Captain.

“Me,” said the mate. He folded his arms across the binnacle and looked into his father’s face confidently. The Captain softened.

“Well, Arthur?” he said.

“That was Minnie on the pier-head,” said the mate. The Captain nodded. “I was up at their place last night,” the young man continued, “and we had a talk—she and I—and so it came about that we fixed things between us. Mr. Davis is agreeable, so long-----”

“Hey, what’s this?” The Captain stared at his son amazedly. “What was it you fixed up with Minnie?”

“Why, to get married,” replied the mate, reddening. “I was telling you. Her father’s willing, as long as we wait till I get a command before we splice.”

“You to marry Minnie!” The mate stiffened at the emphasis on the “you.” The Captain was fighting for expression. “Why,” he said, “why —why, you’ld ‘a’ carried away that hawser if I hadn’t sung out at ye.”

“Father,” said the mate. “Mr. Davis’ll give me a ship.”

“What ship?” demanded the Captain.

“The first he can,” replied the other. “He’s thinkin’ of buyin’ the Stormberg, Wrench Wylie’s big freighter, and he’d shift you on to her. Then I’d have the Burdock.”

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“Then you’d have the Burdock!” The Captain leaned his elbow on the engine-room telegraph and faced his son. His expression was wholly compounded of perplexity and surprise. He let his eyes wander aft, along the big ship’s trim perspective to the short poop, and forward to where her bluff bows sawed at the skyline.

“She’s a fine old boat,” he said at last, and stood up with a sigh. “but she needs watching.” The mate felt a thrill of relief. “I’ll watch her,” he said comfortably. “But don’t you want to wish me luck, father?”

“Not luck,” said the Captain; “not luck, my boy. You run her to a hair and keep your eyes slit and you won’t want luck. Luck’s a lubber’s standby. But Minnie’s a fine girl.” He shook his head thoughtfully. “She’ll rouse you up, maybe.”

The mate laughed, and at the sound of it the Captain frowned again.

“Now, lean off that binnacle,” he said shortly. “I want to get the bearings.”

It was not till an hour later that he went to his cabin to shed his shore-going gear for ordinary apparel; and as soon as this was done he reached down the register from the book-shelf over his bunk to look up the Stormberg.

“H’m,” he growled, standing over the book at his desk. “Built in 1889 on the Clyde. I know her style. Five thousand tons, and touch the steam steering-gear if you dare! Blast her, and blast Davis for a junk-buying fool!”

He closed the book with a slam and glanced mechanically up at the tell-tale compass that hung over his bed.

“There’s Arthur half a point off already,” he said, and made for the bridge.

Arthur Price believed honestly that more was exacted from him than from other chief mates; and early in that passage he concluded that the Old Man was severer than ever. The Burdock butted into a summer gale before she was clear of the Bristol Channel, a free wind that came from the south-west driving a biggish sea before it. It was nothing to give real trouble, but Captain Price took charge in the dog watch and set the mate and his men to making all fast about decks. With his sou’wester flapped back from his forehead and his oilskin coat shrouding him to the heels, he leaned on the bridge rail, vociferous and imperative, and his harsh voice hunted the workers from one task to another. He had lashings on the anchors and fresh wedges to the battens of all hatches; the winches chocked off and covered over and new pins in the davit blocks. This took time, but when it was done he was not yet satisfied; the mate had to get out gear and rig a couple of preventer funnel stays. The men looked ahead at the weather and wondered what the skipper saw in it to make such a bother; the second and third mates winked at one another behind Arthur Price’s back; and he, the chief mate, sulked.

“That’s all, I suppose?” he asked the Captain when he got on the bridge again at last.

“No,” was the sharp answer. “It’s not all. Speak the engine-room and ask the chief how he’s hitting it.”

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“All sweet,” reported the mate as he hung up the speaking tube.

“That’s right,” said the Captain. “You always want to know that, Mister Mate. And the lights?”

“All bright, sir,” said the mate.

“Then you can go down and get something to eat,” said the Captain. “And see that the hand wheel’s clear as you go.”

It breezed up that night, and as the Burdock cleared the tail of Cornwall, the heavy Atlantic water came aboard. She was a sound ship, though, and Captain Price knew her as he knew the palms of his hands. Screened behind the high weather-cloths, he drove her into it, while the tall seas filled her forward main deck rail-deep and her bows pounded away in a mast-high smother of spray. From the binnacle amidships to the weather wing of the bridge was his dominion, while the watch officer straddled down to leeward; both with eyes boring at the darkness ahead and on either beam, where there came and went the pin-point lights of ships.

Arthur Price relieved the bridge at midnight, but the Captain held on.

“Ye see how she takes it?” he bawled down the wind to his son. “No excuse for steaming wide; ye can drive her to a hair. Keep your eyes on that light to port; we don’t want anything bumping into us.”

“You wouldn’t ease her a bit, then?” shouted the mate, the wind snatching his words.

“Ease her!” was the reply. “You’d have her edging into France. She’ll lie her course while we drive her.”

When dawn came up the sea had mounted; the Bay was going to be true to its name. Captain Price went to his chart-house at midnight, to sleep on a settle; but by his orders the Burdock was kept to her course and her gait, battering away at the gale contentedly.

After breakfast, he took another look round and then went below to rest in his bunk, while the tell-tale swam in wild eccentrics above his upturned face. After a while he dozed off to sleep, lulled by the click of furnishings that rendered to the ship’s roll, the drum of the seas on her plates, and the swish of loose water across the deck.

He was roused by his steward. That menial laid a hand on his shoulder and he was forthwith awake and competent.

“A ship to windward, sir, showin’ flags,” said the steward. “The mate ’ud be glad if you’d go to the bridge.”

“A’ right,” said the Captain, and stood up. “In distress, eh?”

“By the looks of her, sir,” admitted the steward, who had been a waiter ashore. “She seems to be a mast or two short, sir, so far as I can tell. But I couldn’t be sure.”

He helped the Captain into his oilskins deftly, pulling his jacket down under the long coat, and held the door open for him.

Some three miles to windward the stranger lay, an appealing vagabond. The Captain found his son standing on the flag-chest, braced against a stanchion, watching her through a pair of glasses, when she peeped up, a momentary silhouette, over the tall seas. He turned as the Captain approached.

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“Can’t make out her flags, sir,” he said. “Too much wind. Looks like a barque with only her mizzen standing.”

“Gimme the glass,” said the Captain, climbing up beside him. He braced himself against the irons and took a look at her, swinging accurately to the roll of the ship. Beneath him the wind-whipped water tumbled in grey leagues; the stranger seemed poised on the rim of it. From her gaff, a dot of a flag showed a blur against the sky, and a string from her mast-head was equally vague.

“That’ll be her ensign upside down at the gaff,” he said. “Port your helm there; we’ll go down and look at her.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” The mate passed the word and came over. “How would it be to see one of the boats clear, father!”

“Aren’t the boats clear?” demanded the Captain.

“Oh yes, they’re clear,” replied the mate. “You had us put new pins in the blocks, you know.” He met his father’s steady eye defiantly. “When are a steamer’s boats ever clear for hoisting out?” he asked.

“Always, when the mate’s fit for his job,” was the answer. “Go and make sure of the starboard lifeboat, and call the watch.”

The Captain took his ship round to windward of the distressed vessel, running astern of her within a quarter of a mile. She proved to be the remains of a barque, as the mate had guessed, a deep-laden wooden ship badly swept by the sea. From the wing of the bridge the Captain’s glasses showed him the length of her deck, cluttered with the wreck of houses torn up by the roots, while the fall of the spars had taken her starboard bulwarks with it. Her boats were gone; a davit stuck up at the end of the poop crumpled like a ram’s horn; and by the taffrail her worn and sodden crew clustered and cheered the Burdock.

The Captain rang off his engines and rang again to stand by in the engine-room. The mate came up the ladder to him while his hand was yet at the telegraph.

“Lifeboat’s all clear for lowering, sir,” he said. “Noble, Peters, Hansen, and Kyland are to go in her.” He waited.

The old captain stood looking at the wreck, while the steamship rolled tumultuously in the trough.

“Who goes in charge?” he asked, after a minute’s silence.

“I’ll go, father,” said the mate eagerly. He paused, but the Captain said nothing.

“You know,” proceeded the mate, “father, you do know there’s none of ’em here can handle a boat like me.”

“Aye,” said the Captain, “you can do it.” He looked at his son keenly. “It ’ud make a good yarn to spin to Minnie,” he said, with an unwilling smile.

The mate laughed agreeably. “Dear Minnie,” he said. “Then I’ll go, father.”

“And I’ll just see to the hoisting out of that boat,” said the Captain. “Good thing I had you put in the new pins.”

The third mate on the bridge rang for steam and made a lee for the lowering of the lifeboat, the hands put a strain on the tackles, and the carpenter and bo’sun went to work to knock out the chocks on which she rested. Her steel-shod keel had rusted into them.

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“Hoist away on your forward tackle,” ordered the Captain. “Belay! Make fast! Now get a hold of this guy. Lively there, you men. Noble, aloft on the booms and shoulder her over.”

She canted clear of the groove in the chocks as they swung the forward davit out and the Captain stepped abaft the men who hauled.

“Lively now,” he called. “Don’t keep those chaps waiting, men. After davit tackle, haul! Up with her.”

The bo’sun, stooping, looped the fall of the tackle into the snatch-block; the men, under the Captain’s eye, tumbled to and gave way, holding the weight gallantly as the rail swung down and putting their backs into the pull as she rolled back.

“Up with her!” shouted the Captain, and she tore loose from her bed. “Vast hauling! Belay! Now out with the davit, men.”

He stepped a pace forward as they passed out the line. “Haul away,” he was saying, when the bo’sun shouted hoarsely and tried to reach him with a dash across the slippery deck planks. The mate screamed, the Captain humped his shoulders for the blow. It all happened in a flash of disaster; the boat’s weight pulled the pin from the cheeks of the block and down she came, her stern thudding thickly into the deck, while the Captain, limp and senseless, rolled inertly to the scuppers.

When he came to he was in his bunk. He opened his eyes with a shiver upon the familiar cabin, with its atmosphere of compact neatness, its gleaming paint and bright-work. A throb of brutal pain in his head wrung a grunt from him, and then he realized that something was wrong with his right arm. He tried to move it, to bring it above the bedclothes to look at it, and the effort surprised an oath from him, and left him dizzy and shaking. The white jacket of the steward came through a mist that was about him.

“Better, I hope, sir?” the steward was saying. “Beggin’ your pardon, but you’d better lie still, sir. Is there anything I could bring you, sir?”

“Did the boat fall on me?” asked the Captain, carefully. His voice seemed thin to himself.

“Not on you, sir,” replied the steward. “Not so to speak, on top of you. The keel ‘it you on the shoulder, sir, an’ you contracted a thump on the ’ead.”

“And the wreck?” asked the Captain.

“The wreck’s crew is aboard, sir; barque Vavasour, of London, sir. The mate brought ’em off most gallantly, sir. I was to tell ’im when you come to, sir.”

“Tell him, then,” said the Captain, and closed his eyes wearily. The pain in his head blurred his thoughts, but his lifelong habit of waking from sleep to full consciousness, with no twilight of muddled faculties intervening, held good yet. He remembered, now, the new pins in the blocks, and there was even a tincture of amusement in his reflections. A soft tread beside him made him open his eyes.

“Well, Arthur,” he said.

The tall young mate was beside him.

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“Ah, father,” he said cheerfully. “Picking up a bit, eh? That’s good. Ugly accident, that.”

“Yes,” replied the Captain, looking up into his face. “Block split, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said the mate. “That’s it. How do you feel?”

“You didn’t notice the block, I suppose, when you put the new pins in?” asked the Captain.

“Can’t say I did,” answered the mate, “or I’d have changed it. You’re not going to blame me surely, father?”

The Captain smiled. “No, Arthur, I’m not going to blame you,” he said. “I want to hear how you brought off that barque’s crew. Is it a good yarn for Minnie?”

At Barcelona the Captain went to hospital and they took off his right arm at the shoulder. The Burdock went back without him, and he lay in his bed wondering how it was that the loss of an arm should make a man feel lonely.

He was quickly about again. His body was clean from the bone out, clean and hard, and he had never been ill. When the time came to take a walk, he arrayed himself in shore-going black. It cost him an infinity of trouble and more than an hour of the morning to dress himself with one hand, but he would not have help. Then it was that he discovered a strange thing; it was his right arm, the arm that was gone, that hindered him. The scars of the amputation had healed, but unless he bore the fact deliberately in mind, he felt the arm to be there. He tried to button his braces with it, to knot his tie, to lace his boots, and had to overtake the impulse and correct it with an effort. When his clothes were on, he put his right hand in his trousers pocket, then remembered that it was not there, and withdrew hastily the hand he had not got. During the walk the same trouble remained with him; it muddled him when he bought tobacco and tried to pick up the change. Before he slept that night, he dropped on his knees at his bedside, and folded the left hand of flesh against the right hand of dreamstuff in prayer.

When his time came to go home in the Burdock, he was an altered man. The quiet, all-observant scrutiny had gone, and the officers who greeted him as he came up the accommodation ladder saw it at once. Arthur Price was now in command, a breezy, good-looking captain in blue serge and gold braid.

“You’ve got her, then, Arthur?” said the old man, as he reached the deck and stood looking about him.

“Yes, I’ve got her,” answered his son. “That your kit, father? Sewell (to the chief mate), send a couple of hands to get that dunnage aboard. Come along below, father.”

He tucked his arm into his father's and led him down. Mildly taking stock of the well-remembered surroundings, the old man noticed he was being taken to the Captain's state-room, and an impulse of gratitude moved him. But he was glad he did not speak of it when his son put aside the curtains at the door for him, and he saw that this was not to be his room. New chintzes took the place of his old leather cushions; a big photograph of Minnie stood on the lid of the chronometer case, and the broken-backed Admiralty guides, ocean directories and the rest were reinforced by a brigade of smartly bound novels.

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“Sit down,” said Arthur, “and make yourself at home till they get your dunnage in. I’ve put you in the spare cabin in the port alleyway; you’ll find it nice and quiet there. How are you feeling, father? Would you care for a drink?”

“Yes, I’d like a tot,” replied the old man. “Shall I ring for your steward?”

“Don’t you trouble,” said Arthur. “I’ve got it here.” It was in the cupboard under the chronometer, a whole case of whisky. “I carry my own,” explained the mate; “I don’t believe in old Davis’s taste in whisky. Help yourself, father.”

“How is Minnie?” asked the old man as he set down his glass.

“She’s all right,” was the reply. “I wanted to tell you about that. We go into dry dock when we get back from this trip, and Minnie and I’ll get married before I take her out again. Quick work, isn’t it?”

The old Captain nodded; the young Captain smiled.

“You’ll be bringing Minnie out for the trip, I suppose?” asked the elder.

“That’s my idea,” agreed Arthur.

“You’re a lucky chap,” said the old man slowly. He hesitated. “You’ve got your ship in hand, eh, Arthur?”

“I’ve got her down to a fine point,” said Arthur emphatically. “You needn’t bother about me, father. I know my job, and I don’t need more teaching. I wish you’d get to understand that. You know Davis has bought the Stormberg?”

“I didn’t know,” said the old man with a sigh. “It don’t matter to me, anyhow. I’d be reaching for the engine telegraph with my right hand as like as not. No, Arthur, I’ve done. I’ll bother young officers no more.”

The run home was an easy one, but it confirmed old Captain Price in his resolution to have done with the sea. Two or three times he fell about decks; a small roll, the commonplace movement of a well-driven steamship in a seaway shook him from his balance, and that missing arm, which always seemed to be there, let him down. He would reach for a stanchion with it to steady himself, and none of his falls served to cure him of the persistent delusion that he was not a cripple. He tried to pick things up with it, and let glasses and the like fall every day. The officers and engineers, men who had sailed with him at his ablest, saw his weakness quickly, and, with the ready tact that comes to efficient seafarers, never showed by increased deference or any sign that they were conscious of the change. It was only Arthur who went aside to make things easy for him, to cut his food for him at table, and so forth.

From Swansea he went home by train; Minnie and her kindly old father met him and made much of him. Old Davis was a man who had built up his own fortune, scraping tonnage together bit by bit, from the time when, as a captain, he had salved a crazy derelict and had her turned over to him by the underwriters in quittance of his claims. Now he owned a little fleet of good steamships of respectable burthen, and was an esteemed owner. He did not press the Stormberg on Captain Price. The two old men understood each other.

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“I don’t want her,” Captain Price told him. “There’s a time for nursin’ tender engines and a time for scrappin’ them. I’m for the scrap heap, David. I’m not the man I was. I don’t put faith in myself no more. It’s Arthur’s turn now.”

David Davis nodded. “Yes, then. Well, well, now! It’s a pity, too, John. But you know what’s best, to be sure. I don’t want you to go without a ship while I’ve got a bottom afloat, but I don’t want you to put the Stormberg to roost on the rocks of Lundy neither. So you wouldn’t put faith in yourself no more!”

“No,” said Captain Price, frowning reflectively “I wouldn’t, and that’s the truth.” He was seated in a plush-covered arm-chair in Davis’s parlour, and now he leaned forward. “It’s this arm of mine. It isn’t there, but I can’t get rid of the feeling of it. I’m always reachin’ for things with it. I’d be reachin’ for the telegraph in a hurry, I make no doubt.”

“That’s funny,” said Davis, in sympathy. “Well, then, you just stop visiting with me. I’ve no mind to be alone in the house when your Arthur’s gone off with my Minnie. He’ll push the Burdock back an’ fore for us, and we’ll sit ashore like gentlemen. He makes a good figure of a skipper, don’t he, John?”

Old Captain Price sighed. “Aye, he looks well on the bridge,” he said. “I hope he’ll watch the ship, though; she’s a big old tub to handle.”

He saw the Burdock into dry dock and strolled down each day to look at her. Minnie and Arthur were busy with preparations for the wedding. But the girl found time to go down once with the old man, and he took her into the dock under the steamship.

“A big thing she looks from here,” he said, half to himself.

The girl looked forward. Over them the bottom plates of the Burdock made a great sloping roof; her rolling chocks stood out like galleries. Her lines bulged heavily out, and the girl saw the immensity of the great fabric, the power of the tool her husband should wield.

“She’s big, indeed,” she answered. “Five thousand tons and forty lives in one man’s hands. It’s splendid, uncle. And Arthur,” her voice softened pleasantly, “is the man.”

The old Captain wheeled on her sharply. “Tons and lives!” he cried. “Tons and lives be damned! It’s not for them she’s been run to a thumb-span and tended like a sick baby. It’s for the clean honesty of it, to do a captain’s work like a wise captain and not soil a record. D’ye think I stump my bridge for forty-eight hours on end because of the underwriters and the deck hands? Not me, my girl, not me! It’s my trade to lay her sweetly in Barcelona bay, and it’s my honor to know my work and do it.”

He seemed to shrug his shoulder. The girl could not know it was his right hand he flung up to the scarred steel plates above him.

“There’s your Burdock,” he said. “She’s your dividend-grinder; she’s my ship. And if I’d thought of no more than your five thousand tons and your forty lives, she’d not be where she is.”

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He held out his left hand, palm uppermost, and started and blinked when there came no smack of the right fist descending into it.

“There’s me talking again,” he said. “Never mind, Minnie dear, it’s only your old uncle. Let’s be back up town.”

The wedding day was a Thursday. The ceremony was to take place in the chapel of which David Davis was a member; the subsequent festivities were arranged for at an hotel. It wag to be a notable affair, an epochmaker in the local shipping world, and when all was over there would be time for the newly-wedded to go aboard the Burdock and take her out on the tide. Old Captain Price, decorous in stiff black, drove to the church with his son in a two-horse brougham. Neither spoke a word till they were close to the chapel door. Then the old man burst out suddenly.

“For God’s sake, Arthur boy, do the right thing by your ship.”

Arthur Price was a little moved. “I will, father,” he said. “Here’s my hand on it.” There was a pause. “Why don’t you take my hand, father?” he asked.

“Eh?” The old man started. “I thought I’d took it, Arthur. I’ll be going soft next. Here’s the other hand for you.”

The reception at the hotel and the breakfast there were notable affairs. Everybody who counted for anything with the hosts were there, and after a little preliminary formality and awkwardness the function grew to animation. The shipping folk of Cardiff know champagne less as a beverage than as a symbol, and there was plenty of it. Serious men became frivolous; David Davis made a speech in Welsh; Minnie glowed and blossomed; Arthur was everybody’s friend. The old Captain, seated at the bottom of the table with an iron-clad matron on one side and a bored reporter on the other, watched him with a groan. The man who was to take the Burdock out of dock was drinking. Even one glass at such a time would have breached the old man’s code; it was a crime against shipmastership. But Arthur, with his bride beside him, her brown eyes alight, her shoulder against his shoulder, had gone much further than the one glass. The exhilaration of the day dazzled him; a waiter with a bottle to refill his glass was ever at his shoulder. His voice rattled on untiringly; already the old man saw how the muscles or the jaw were slack and the eyes moved loosely. The young Captain hid a toast to respond to; he swayed as he stood up to speak, and his tongue stumbled on his consonants. The reporter on Captain Price’s left offered him champagne at the moment.

“Take it away,” rumbled the old man. “Swill it yourself.”

The pressman nodded. “It is pretty shocking stuff,” he agreed. “I’m going nap on the coffee myself.”

It came to a finish at last. The bride went up to change, and old Captain Price took a cab to the docks. The Burdock was smart in new paint, and even the deck hands had been washed for the occasion.

“I’ll go down with you a bit,” he explained to Sewell, the chief mate. “The pilot’ll bring me back. I suppose I can go up to the chart-house?”

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“Of course, sir,” said Sewell. “If you can’t go where you like aboard of us, who can?”

The old man smiled. “That’ll be for the Captain to say,” he answered, and went up the ladder.

She was very smart, the old Burdock, and Arthur had made changes in the chart-house, but she had the same feel for her old Captain. Under her paint and frills, the steel of her structure was unaltered; the old engines would heave her along; the old seas conspire against her. Shift and bedeck and bedrape her as they might, she was yet the Burdock; her lights would run down the Channel with no new consciousness in their stare, and there was work and peril for men aboard of her as of old.

“Ah, father,” said Arthur Price, as he came on the bridge. “Come to shee me chase her roun’ the d-dock, eh?” Even as he spoke he tottered. “Damn shiip-pery deck, eh!” he said. “Well, you’ll shee shome shteering, ’tanyrate.”

He wiped his forehead and his cap fell off. The old man stooped hurriedly and picked it up for him.

“Brace up, Arthur,” he said, in an urgent whisper, “an’ let the pilot take her down the dock. For God’s sake, don’t run any risks.”

“I’m Captain,” said the younger man. “Aren’t I Capt’n? Well, then, ’nough said!” He went to the bridge rail.

“All ready, Mish’ Mate?” he demanded, and proceeded to get his moorings in.

The mud pilot came to the old Captain’s side.

“Captain,” he said, “that man’s drunk.”

The old man shuddered a little. “Don’t make a noise,” he said. “He— he was married to-day.”

“Aye.” The pilot shook his head. “You know me, Captain; it’s not me that would give a son of yours away. But I can’t let him bump her about. He isn’t you at handling a steamship, and he’s drunk.”

The old Captain turned to him. “Help me out,” he said. “Pilot, give me a help in this. I’ll stand by him and handy to the telegraph. We’ll get her through all right. There’s that crowd on the dock”—he signed to the festive guests—“waiting to see him off, and we mustn’t make a show of him. And his wife’s aboard.”

The pilot nodded shortly. “I’m willing.”

Arthur, leaning on the rail, was cursing the dock boat at the buoy. The lock was waiting for them, and he lurched to the telegraph, slammed the handle over with a clatter and rang for steam. The pilot and the old man leaned quickly to the indicator; he had ordered full speed ahead.

“Stop her!” snapped the pilot as the decks beneath them pulsed to the awakening engines. Arthur’s hand was yet on the handle, but the old man’s grip on his wrist was firm, and the bell below clanged again. The young Captain wheeled on them furiously.

“Get off my brish,” he shouted. “Down with you, th’ pair of you.” He made to advance on them, those two square old shipmen; he projected a general ruin; but his feet were not his own. He reeled against the rail.

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“Port your helm!” commanded the pilot calmly. “Slow ahead!” Old Captain Price rang for him and they began to draw out. Ashore the wedding guests were a flutter of waving handkerchiefs and hats. They thanked God Minnie was not on the bridge. At the rail, Arthur lolled stupidly and seemed to be fighting down a nausea.

“Steady!” came the sure voice of the pilot. “Steady as you go! Stop her!”

Arthur Price slipped then and came to his knees. Ashore, the party was cheering.

“Up with you, Arthur,” cried the old man in an agony. “Them people’s looking. Stiffen up, my boy.”

“Half speed ahead!” droned the pilot, never turning his head.

The old man rattled the handle over and stooped to his son.

“You can lie down when you turn her over to the mate,” he said grimly. “Till then you’ll stand up and show yourself, if your feet perish under you. I’ll hold you.”

They were drawing round a tier of big vessels, going cautiously, not with the speed and knife-edge accuracy with which the old man had been wont to take her out, but groping safely through the craft about them. Arthur swayed and smiled and slackened, his head nodding as though in response to the friends on the dock who never abated their farewell clamor. The grip on his arm held him up, for he had weakened on his drink, as excitable men will.

“Starboard!” ordered the pilot, and Captain Price half turned to pass the word. It was then that it happened. The drunken man pivoted where he stood and stumbled sideways, catching himself on the telegraph. The old man snatched him upright, for his knees were melting under him, and from below there came the clang of the bell. Arthur Price had pulled the handle over. Forthwith she quickened; she drove ahead for the stern of the ship she was being conned to clear; her prow was aimed at it, like a descending sword.

“Hard a-port!” roared the pilot, jumping back to bellow to the wheel. “Spin her round, sheer over with her!” The wheel engine set up its clatter; with a savage wrench the old Captain shook his son to steadiness for an instant and lifted his eyes to see the Burdock charging to disaster.

“Stop her!” cried the pilot. “Full astern!” Captain Price tightened his grip on his son’s arm and reached for the handle with his other hand.

Clang! clang! went the deep-toned bell below, and swoosh went the reversed propeller. The pilot’s orders rattled like hail on a roof; she came round, and old Captain Price had

a glimpse of a knot of frantic men at the taff-rail of the ship they barely cleared. Then, slowly they wedged her into the lock-mouth and hauled in.

“Close thing!” said the pilot, panting a little.

The old man let his son lean against the rail, and turned-to him.

“P’raps not,” he said. “Pilot, what did I ring them engines with?” The other stared. “I had a hold of him with this hand of mine; I reached for the handle with my—other—-hand.”

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“But,” the pilot was perplexed—“but, Captain, you ain’t got no other hand..”

“No!” Captain Price shook his head. “But I rang the engines with it all the same. I rang the Burdock out of a bump with it; and—” he hesitated a moment and nodded his head sideways at the limp, lolling body of his son—“I rang his honor off the mud with it.”

The pilot cleared his brow; he simply gave the matter up. “And what about now?” he asked. “He ain’t fit to be trusted with her?”

“No,” said Captain Price firmly. “He’s going to retire from the sea; and till he does I’ll sail as a passenger. And then I’ll take the Burdock again. She don’t care about that old spar of mine, the Burdock don’t.”

XV

THE WIDOWER

In the evening they sat together, John Morrison and his mother, with the curtains drawn, and the clear fire glowing on the red bricks of the fireplace. The old lady, after her custom, was prone to silence. Since Hilda’s death she had said little, sparing the occasion the triviality of useless words. That afternoon she had ridden with her son to the funeral, holding him up with her strength, fortifying him with her courage. But now that his wife was gone for ever, and the pleasant house was overcast with its haunting emptiness, it seemed that her power was gone.

She had a piece of knitting to occupy her fingers, and over it she watched her son. He had been stunned when Hilda died, bewildered and uncomprehending; for no young man fully grasps the meaning of death. Now, as he sat, he seemed to be convincing himself. He had brought down his dead wife’s work-basket and a drawer from her dressing-table. He sat in a low arm-chair, and had them beside him on the floor, and fingered deliberately among their contents for definite things, little landmarks of lost days that stabbed him with their associations. But what stirred his mother was not the sorrow of his loss so much as the uncertainty of parted lips and knitted brows that softened his thin, aquiline face, so strongly in contrast with his habit of brisk assurance.

She spoke at last. “John, dear, you should go to bed now,” she said. “It’s past eleven, my boy; and I’m afraid you’ll wear yourself out.”

He had a small silver-backed hand-mirror in his hands. He had been staring into the glass of it for ten minutes. He looked up now and shook his head. “I couldn’t,” he answered. “I couldn’t, mother. There’s no sleep in me.”

“But John——” began the mother again.

“Please don’t bother about me,” he interrupted. “I couldn’t sleep, really. And I couldn’t bear to lie awake—alone.” His eyes dropped toward the mirror again. “You know,” he said, “it’s only now, mother, that I realize that Hilda is really gone. I can’t explain it very well, but before this evening it seemed—well, it seemed idiotic to think that my wife was dead. It felt impossible, somehow.”

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“My poor boy!” said the old lady gently.

“And even now,” he went on, with bowed head, “I have fancies.”

“What fancies, John?” asked Mrs. Morrison.

He laid the mirror down on the floor, and glanced over his shoulder toward the door of the room before he answered. Then he looked at his mother squarely.

“I’ll tell you,” he said. And then he sat for some seconds in thought. “You know, mother, how close together we lived—Hilda and I. I suppose it’s the same with all husbands and wives who are young and love one another. We had a world of familiar little household jokes and tricks of our own. There was one in particular. Whenever I was in here, and Hilda came in, she’d tiptoe through the door and try to get close and surprise me before I heard her. Does it sound foolish to you, mother? If it does, you don’t understand at all.”

Mrs. Morrison picked up her knitting and worked a dozen quick stitches. “No; it doesn’t seem foolish. I understand it all, my dear,” she replied.

He nodded. “Well,” he said, “that’s what my fancies are about. There are moments when I seem to hear something; and I feel quite sure— absolutely, utterly certain—that if I turn round I shall see her there, coming up behind me, all sparkling with laughter. But I’ve looked, and——”

He dropped his head into his hands, and his shoulders heaved.

Mrs. Morrison laid her knitting down and went over to him. “John, dear,” she said, laying a hand lightly on his arm—“John, dear, this won’t do at all. I want to help you, my boy. You know that, don’t you? But I can’t let you comfort yourself with these dreams, dear. They’re bad—very bad for you. It’s not that way that we shall see our Hilda again, John.”

“Oh, I know,” he answered. “I know, mother.” He sat up again, and put her hand away with a warm pressure of thanks.

The old lady went back to her chair with a grave face, and for a while they sat again in silence. The fire was burning now a little dull, and about the room were sober shadows. John fell again to handling trifles from the work-basket and the drawer, lifting each to look at it carefully, and laying it aside again.

“Are you looking for something, dear?” asked Mrs. Morrison at last.

“Eh? Oh no,” he answered absently. “But I was thinking.”

“Don’t think too much, my boy,” she said.

“It was nothing much,” he said, frowning. “But, mother, what horrible things these are!” He pointed with a sharp thrust of his finger to the trinkets on the floor. “She used them, mother. She had them about her every day. She handled them, and used them for her momentary purposes and necessities and there is no trace of her on any one of them.”

“John, John!” Mrs. Morrison appealed to him with an outstretched hand, for he spoke with a kind of passion that hurt her like an impropriety.

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He went on as though he had heard nothing. “Look at this thing,” he said. “It was the silver mirror. She used it a dozen times a day. Her face was bright in it a thousand times—when she put up her hair, and when she let it down in a cascade over her shoulders. She was beautiful, and it was the companion of her beauty. And—yet it’s empty now, as empty as her bed, as empty as all this stricken house. As though she had never lived, mother—as though there had been no Hilda.”

He dropped the mirror beside him, and rose from his chair, to pace up and down the room with quick, nervous strides.

Mrs. Morrison rose too. “John, dear,” she said, stopping him with outstretched hands, “don’t talk like that. We know better—you and I. The mirror can tell us nothing, nor any of those things you are torturing yourself with. She gave them nothing, my boy; it was for us she lived, not them. Our love, dear, and the pain of our loss, and all our memories; these are Hilda’s witnesses. They remain to prove her to us and fulfil the beauty and goodness of her life. Don’t speak as though Hilda had been wasted on us, dear.”

“Wasted!” He started at the word. “Wasted! Oh God!”

She took him by the arm and drew him back to his chair by the fire. But even as he sat down he glanced again over his shoulder at the door. To all her entreaties to go to bed he remained obdurate.

“Do you know that I am very tired, John?” she said at last.

He looked up quickly. “Then you go to bed, mother,” he urged. “I—I wish you would. I’d like to be alone for a little.

“If I leave you, will you promise you will not stay long?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “All right. I’ll promise, mother.”

When she had left him he stood for a while in the centre of the floor, hands in pockets, his head drooping, in deep thought. He was a spare man, lean and tall, bred to composure, and serenity. Thus when there came a tragedy to overwhelm his training, he had few reserves; his propriety of demeanor lost, his soul was raw. His very attitude, as he stood, was eloquent of pain and helplessness. He had been married a little more than a year, and it seemed now as though that year stood vignetted on a broad border of sadness.

The fire rustled and clicked as the coals spent themselves. He had a feeling of chill and faintness, and he went back slowly to his chair. Seated there again, the silver toys were all round him, gleaming slyly at him with a sort of suggestiveness. He packed up the mirror, once more, and looked into the oval glass at it. He was feeling a little dizzy,

these last days had burdened him heavily, and the afternoon had been a long stress of emotion. Thus, for a space of minutes he sat, the glass before him, his eyes half closed.

It seemed to him that he must have dozed, for he sat up with the start of a man who arrests himself on the brink of sleep. The mirror was in his hand. He stared at it with wide eyes, thrusting it at arm's length before him. For in it he saw—not a flicker of the firelight swaying on the wall, but a face that moved across from the door—the face of his dead wife.

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He saw it cross the field of the little mirror, reflected in profile, and pass beyond it. He sat yet a moment, enthralled in senseless amazement, then let the glass fall from his outstretched hand, and turned where he sat.

He sprang to his feet. “Hilda!” he cried. “Hilda!”

Her face welcomed him with a little smile, sober and kind.

“Yes, dear,” she said gently; “it is Hilda!”

He did not go to her, but stood staring, and groping for the key to his understanding. She was about five paces from him—Hilda undeniably, to the soft contour of her cheek and the shaded gold of her hair.

He found words: “Are you here with me, Hilda? Or have I gone mad? Or perhaps I’ve been mad all along!”

She smiled again, and through the fog of his bewilderment and wonder he recognized the smile.

“Not mad, dear,” she was saying. “Not mad. But it is very strange and wonderful at first, isn’t it?”

“Strange and wonderful?” He put an uncertain hand to his face and passed it over his eyes. “Something has happened to me,” he said. “To my eyes, I think. Things look strange. And—and there is Hilda!” He paused. “I’d been longing for Hilda.”

She came a step nearer to him then. “I know,” she murmured softly. “I know, dear. But that is past now.”

There was an infinite tenderness in her tone, the tenderness of a mother who uplifts her child through a season of pain. He felt it, and it seemed to help him to clear away some of the dimness that besieged his senses.

“Then——” he began, but stayed himself. “You know,” he said haltingly, “you died. Hilda died. I saw it: my arms were round her.”

“Yes, dear,” she answered. “Hilda died. But don’t you understand?”

“No,” he replied, but none the less understanding was dawning upon him. “How—how did you come here?” he asked.

“I came by the same way as you, John, dear,” she said. As again she seemed to take one step toward him. “There is no other way.”

“No other way!” He repeated the words twice.

“Hilda,” he said, and went to her.

“Yes, dear?”

He took her hand; it lay close and familiarly in his palm.

“Everything seems to be far away from me—except you,” he said. “I see you; I hear you speak. What does it mean, my darling?”

Her eyes were full of love. “Don’t you know yet, John?” she asked.

“No,” he answered slowly; “unless—unless——Hilda, am I dead?”

She did not speak to answer him, but nodded thrice, very slowly.

They found him in his chair before the ashes of the fire. At his feet the mirror was broken across, where it had dropped from his hand. And the lips were parted in a sort of uncertainty.

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