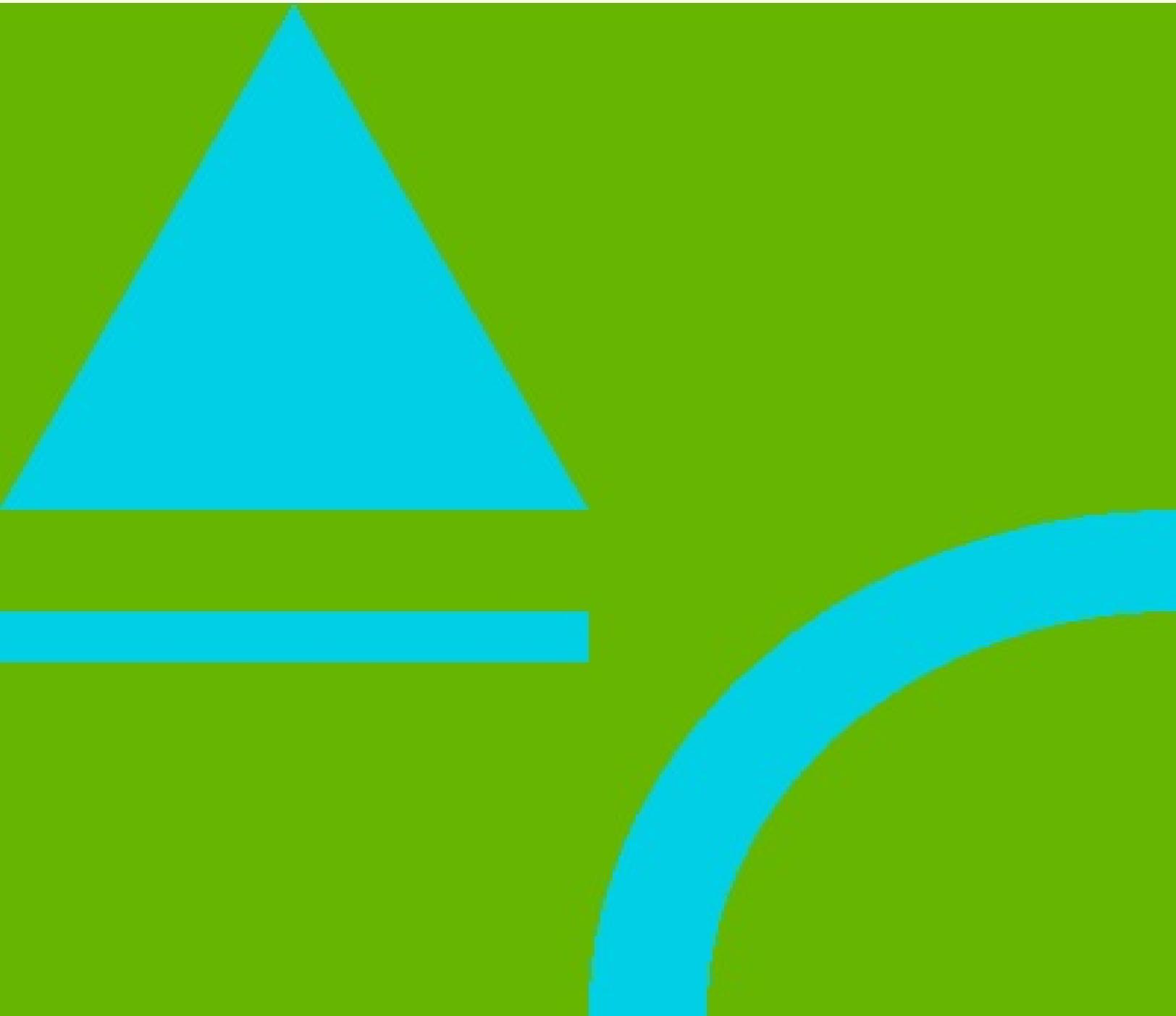


A Duel

Richard Marsh



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A DUEL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Crime and the Criminal

A DUEL

BY

RICHARD MARSH

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BOOK I

WIFE

A DUEL

CHAPTER I

THE END OF THE HONEYMOON

Isabel waited till the rat-tat was repeated a second time, then she went down to the front door. Since Mrs. Macconichie and her husband were both out, and she had the house to herself, there was nothing else for her to do, unless she wished the postman to depart with the letters. As it was, when she appeared at the door, he grumbled at being delayed.

"These Scotchmen are all boors," she told herself, in her bitterness.

She looked at the letter which had been thrust into her hand. It was addressed to "Mr. G. Lamb". The sight of it reopened the fountains of her scorn.

"They might at least have put G. Lamb, Esq. G. Lamb! What a fool I've been!"

Further consideration of the envelope led her to the conclusion that it was the letter they had both been waiting for--the answer to her husband's plea for help. She pressed it between her fingers to learn, if possible by the sense of touch, what the envelope contained.

"I believe there's only a letter--no cheque, nor anything. If there isn't, then we are done."

She hesitated a moment, then tore it open. It contained merely a sheet of common writing-paper, on the front page of which was this brief note:--

"DEAR GREGORY,

"I like the idea of your asking me to help you. You've had all the help you'll ever have from me. The shop won't bear it; business is getting worse. If it weren't, you'd get no more money out of me.

"You'd better get your wife to keep you.

"SUSAN LAMB."

Susan Lamb! That was his mother, the mother of the man she had married. So the truth was out at last. His mother kept a shop; he had been sponging on her for the money he had scattered broadcast. There was neither address nor date upon the letter, but the postmark on the envelope was Islington. Islington! His mother was a small shopkeeper in that haunt of the needy clerk! And she had believed him when he had posed before her as a "swell"--an aristocrat; when he had talked about his "coin" and his "gees". He had jockeyed her into supposing that money was a matter of complete indifference to him; that, as she boasted

to her friends and rivals, "he rolled in it". So successfully had he hoodwinked her that she married him within a month of their first meeting--she, Belle Burney, the queen of song and dance! Had thrown up all her engagements to do it, too; and she was beginning to get some engagements which were not to be despised.

At the commencement he had done things in style: had taken her up to Edinburgh, leisurely, in a motor. She had imagined that the motor was his own. At Edinburgh it vanished; he told her to receive some trifling repairs. But she, having already discovered he was a liar, suspected him of having sold it. Later she learned that the machine had only been hired for a fortnight.

Already, at Edinburgh, money began to run short. He did his best to conceal from her the state of the case, but the thing was so obvious that his attempts at concealment were vain. He had lied bravely, protesting that, in some inexplicable way, his remittances had gone wrong; that in the course of a post or two he would be in possession of an indefinitely large sum of money. The posts came and went, but they brought no money. So they drifted hither and thither, each time to humbler quarters. Now, within six weeks of marriage, they were stranded at a remote spot in Forfarshire, within a drive of Carnoustie. Isabel had reason to suspect that, at the time of their marriage, her husband had less than two hundred pounds in the world. He had squandered more than that already; the motor had made a hole in it. The pawnbroker had come to the rescue when the coin was gone. They were penniless; owed for a week's food and lodging; their landlady was already showing signs of anxiety. Now the much-talked-of and long-expected letter had arrived which was to bring the munificent remittance.

It turned out to be half-a-dozen lines from his shopkeeping mother, who declined to advance him a single stiver!

When the young wife realised, or thought she realised, all that the curt epistle meant, she told herself that now indeed the worst had come. She had just had another bitter scene with her husband; had, in fact, driven him out into the night before the tempest of her scorn and opprobrium. The landlady had departed on an errand of her own. Isabel told herself that now, if ever, an opportunity presented itself to cut herself free from the bonds in which she had foolishly allowed herself to be entwined. She went upstairs, put on her hat and jacket, crammed a few of her scanty possessions into a leather handbag, and then--and only then--paused to think.

It was nearly nine o'clock, late for that part of the world. The nearest railway station was at Carnoustie, more than seven miles away. She knew that there was an early train which would take her to Dundee, and thence to London; but, supposing she caught it, how about the fare? The fare to London was nearly two pounds; she had not a shilling. She did not doubt that, once in London, she could live, as she always had lived; but she had to get there first, across five hundred miles of intervening country.

She arrived at a sudden resolution, one, however, which had probably been at the back of her mind from the first. Yesterday, going suddenly into the landlady's own sitting-room, she had taken the old lady unawares. Mrs. Macconichie had what Isabel felt sure were coins--gold coins--in one hand, and in the other the lid of a tobacco jar which stood in a corner of the china cupboard. Although seeming to notice nothing, Mrs. Lamb, struck by the old lady's state of fluster, leaped to the conclusion that that tobacco jar was her cash-box. Now, bag in hand, she came downstairs to learn if her surmise had been correct.

Although she was aware that the sitting-room was empty, she was conscious of an odd disinclination to enter, dallying for some seconds with the handle in her hand. Once in, she lost no time in ascertaining

what she wished to learn, meeting, however, with an unlooked-for obstacle. The china cupboard was locked; no doubt Mrs. Macconichie had the key in her pocket. She took out her own keys; not one of them was any use. She could see the tobacco jar on the other side of the glass door. She did not hesitate long; moments were precious. Taking a metal paper-weight off the mantelshelf she smashed the pane, breaking it right away to enable her to gain free access to the jar. She removed the lid. The jar was full of odds and ends; she did not examine them closely enough to gather what they were. At the bottom, under everything else, was a canvas bag. She took it out. It was tied round the neck with pink tape. It undoubtedly contained coins; perhaps twenty or thirty. Should she open it, and borrow two or three? or should she take it as it was?

The answer was acted, not spoken. Slipping the bag between the buttons of her bodice, she passed from the room and from the house. So soon as she was in the open air she thought she heard the sound of approaching footsteps; as if involuntarily she shrank back into the doorway, listening. She had been mistaken; there was not a sound. She came out into the street again, drawing a long breath. She looked to the right and left; not a creature was in sight. She set off in the direction of Carnoustie.

Her knowledge of the surrounding country was of the vaguest kind. She had not gone far before it began to dawn on her that this was a foolhardy venture in which she was engaged. It was a habit of hers to act first and think afterwards, or she would never have become Mrs. Gregory Lamb. Hard-headed enough when she chose to give her wits fair play, she was, at that period of her career, too much inclined to become a creature of impulse. The impulses to which she was prone to yield were only too apt to be wrong ones. For instance, she had not long left Mrs. Macconichie's before she perceived clearly enough that the chances were possibly a hundred to one against her reaching Carnoustie in the darkness on foot. Houses were few and far between; the road was a lonely one; it was quite on the cards that she might not meet a soul from whom to make inquiries. If she had given the thing any thought at all, she would have perceived from the first how slight her chances were, in which case, since it was no use jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, she would certainly have postponed her departure. Now it was too late to return. The pane of glass in the china cupboard was broken; the canvas bag was inside her bodice. With the best will in the world she might find it difficult to conceal what had happened, not to speak of the possibility of Mrs. Macconichie's having already discovered her loss. So she pressed on.

Indeed, shortly she could not have gone back if she had wished. She had not started half an hour before she was forced to admit that she had lost her bearings utterly; that she had not the faintest notion in which direction Carnoustie lay, nor whereabouts she was. She was on a black road; that was all she knew. A rough, uneven road, which apparently straggled over open moorland. She could make out trees here and there, but the road itself seemed to have no boundaries. So far as she could make out, there was nothing on either side in the shape of a hedge or landmark.

Soon she was not at all sure that she was not off the road; that she was not roaming, blindly, over the open country. It seemed impossible that any road could be so uneven. She kept stumbling over unseen obstacles. Once she caught herself descending what seemed to be the steep sides of some sort of pit. With a sense of shock she drew back in time. She listened; she seemed to hear the sound of running waters. Could she be standing on the bank of some stream or river, into which, in another second, she might have descended? Anxious, even a little alarmed, turning right about face, she moved forward in what she supposed was the opposite direction. She seemed to be stumbling over a succession of hillocks. This could not be the road; she must have gone entirely astray. If she did not take care she would be running into some serious danger.

All at once her foot caught in some trailing root or plant; she went headforemost to the ground. Fortunately, she came down lightly enough. The fall was of little consequence, but when she tried to regain her perpendicular she learned, to her dismay, that her ankle refused to support her. Willy-nilly, she had to remain squatted where she had fallen.

"I seem to be in for a real good thing," she groaned. "Am I to stay here all night? I shall be frozen to the bone before the morning, to say nothing of waiting like a rat in a trap for Mrs. Macconichie to catch me."

She had to wait there for probably more than an hour, not exactly on the same spot. She managed, at intervals, to half hobble, half crawl across, perhaps another couple of hundred yards of ground. But the labour was thrown away. At that rate she would not have covered a mile before daybreak. Yielding to necessity, still clutching her bag, crouching on the turf, she watched for the light to come. She felt no need for sleep; she was only consumed by a great impatience, in that all things seemed to be against her.

The skies were clouded like her fate. Nowhere was there a glimmer of a star. A cool breeze was coming from what she judged to be the sea. It made itself more and more felt as the time stole on. By degrees it began to bring a mist with it. As she had foreseen, she became chilled to the marrow of her bones.

"If this goes on I shall freeze to death."

The idea recurred to her like a sort of formula. She kept telling herself again and again that that night would be the end of her.

When her vitality seemed at its lowest point the stillness of the night was broken by a sound--the sound of wheels.

CHAPTER II

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

She raised her head to listen, thinking that her senses must be playing her a trick. No; it certainly was the sound of wheels, coming nearer and nearer. Some one was driving fast through the darkness, so fast that in what seemed to her to be less than a minute the driver was close upon her. Apparently nearly in front of her, although she could not see it, was a road along which the vehicle was approaching. It carried no lights; nothing broke the shadows; but, if her ears could be trusted, within a stone's-throw of where she was some wheeled conveyance was hurrying past. She stood upon her one sound foot and shouted:--

"Hallo!--hallo-o!--hallo-o-o!" again and again.

Her first shouts went unheeded. Possessed by a wild fear that she might remain unnoticed, raising her voice to a desperate yell, she started to scream herself hoarse.

This time her tones travelled. Suddenly the vehicle ceased to move. An answering shout came back to her:--

"Who's there? What's the matter with you?"

The accent was broad Scotch. Had it been the purest Cockney it could not have seemed more welcome. She replied to the inquiry:--

"I've sprained my ankle so that I can hardly move".

This time in the other voice there was an unmistakable suggestion of surprise.

"Is it a woman?"

"Yes."

Her tone was fainter.

"And what might you be doing here at this hour of the morning?"

"I'm going to Carnoustie."

"Carnoustie! You're going to Carnoustie!--along this road? You're joking! Can you get as far as this, so that I can have a look at you?"

"I'll try."

She did try. It was a distance of barely a hundred yards, but traversing it was a work of time. When the

space was covered it was only by clutching at the wheel of the trap that she saved herself from subsiding in a heap upon the ground. In an instant the driver was off his seat, and with his arm about her.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It is pretty bad," she stammered.

"For the Lord's sake, don't faint! We've no time to waste upon such trifles."

"I'm not going to faint." At any rate the tone was faint enough. Suddenly she seemed to pull herself together, as if stirred by a spirit of resentment. "I never have fainted in my life--I'm not going to begin to do it now."

He laughed--that is, the little husky sound he made might have been intended for a laugh.

"If you'll keep quite still I'll lift you up into the trap somehow, though, by the feel of you, you're as big as I am, and, maybe, heavier. The mare won't move. She's one of the few female things I ever met that wasn't troubled with the fidgets."

As he put it, "somehow" he did get her up into the trap, then climbed on to the seat beside her. Presently they were bowling along together. For some seconds neither spoke. She was endeavouring to accustom herself to her new position. He, possibly--as his questions immediately showed--was wondering who it was that he had chanced upon.

"You're English?"

"I am."

"Staying in these parts?"

"I'm on a walking tour."

"A walking tour at one o'clock in the morning!"

"It wasn't one o'clock when I started. I've been where you found me for hours and hours."

"Where were you making for?"

"I've told you, I was going to Carnoustie."

"Going from Carnoustie, you mean. You'll never be finding it in this part of the country."

"I daresay. Since it became dark I've been hobbling round about just anywhere. I don't know where I am; I've lost myself completely." He was silent, as if he found something in her words which made him think. Then she took up the *rôle* of questioner: "Where are you going?"

"To a man that's dying."

"Are you a doctor?"

"It's my trade."

"Then you'll be able to look at my ankle. I hope it's nothing serious, but it seems to be getting worse instead of better."

"I'll look at your ankle, never fear. I'll find you an easier patient than the one I'm bound for."

Little more was said on either side. The doctor seemed to be by nature a taciturn man, or perhaps he was too preoccupied for speech. Isabel was feeling too miserable to talk. She was cold and wet; her ankle was occasioning her no little pain. She could hardly have been less inclined for conversation, and she, also, had at times a gift of silence. During the twenty or thirty minutes the drive continued probably not half-a-dozen words were exchanged.

At last the doctor brought his mare to a standstill.

"I suppose you couldn't get down and open a gate? There's one right in front of us. I can see it's closed."

His eyes must have had the cat's quality of being able to penetrate the darkness; she could see nothing.

"I might be able to get down--if I had to tumble, but I doubt if I'd ever be able to get up again."

He grunted as if in disapprobation.

"Can you hold the reins while I get down?"

"I daresay I could do that."

He passed her the reins and descended. She heard a gate swing back upon its hinges. He reappeared at the horse's head.

"I'd better lead her through and up to the house; it's as black as the devil's painted under the trees. I ought to have brought my lamps, but I came away in such a hurry. When some folks are dying they will not wait."

They passed through a darkness which was so intense that she could not see the horse which was drawing her on. The avenue seemed a long one. It was some minutes before, drawing clear of the overhanging foliage, they stopped in front of a house which loomed grim and ominous in the shadows. Apparently their approach had been heard. No sooner had they stopped than the door was thrown wide open. The figure of a woman was seen peering out into the darkness, with a lamp in her hand.

"Is it the doctor?" she demanded.

"Yes, it's the doctor. And how is he now?"

"He's as near to death as he can be to be still alive. I believe he's only keeping the breath in his body till he gets a sight of you."

"To be sure that's uncommonly good of him. Now, madam, will that ankle of yours permit you to tumble

down with the help of a hand from me?"

Without answering Isabel commenced a laborious and painful descent. At sight of her the woman on the doorstep evinced a lively curiosity.

"Why, doctor, who is it you're bringing with you?"

"It's a visitor for you, and another patient for me, Nannie. You'll have to find her a corner somewhere while I go up to see the laird. When I've done with him I'll have to start with her. I'm hoping that she'll be the easier job of the two. Come, lend a hand. It's beyond my power to get her into the house alone, and it seems that by herself she'll never do it."

Between them they got her up the steps, through the door and into a room which, immediately after passing it, was entered on the right. They placed her on a couch.

"Now, madam," observed the doctor, "here you'll have to stay until I've seen my other patient. And since Heaven only knows how long he'll keep me, you'll have to make the best of it until I come. So keep up the character you told me of and don't you faint, or any silliness of that kind, but just make yourself as comfortable as ever you can."

With that the speaker left her, the woman going with him. She had placed on a table the lamp which she had borne in her hand. It was a common glass affair, which did not give too good a light. For some minutes Isabel showed no inclination to avail herself of its assistance to learn in what manner of place she was. By degrees, however, as the time continued to pass, and there were still no signs of any one appearing, she began to show a languid interest in her surroundings. She was dimly conscious that the room was not a large one; that it was sparely, even austere, furnished. She was aware that the couch on which she lay was of the old-fashioned horsehair kind, both slippery and uncomfortable. She had a vague suspicion that if she was not careful she would slip right off it, and her misty imaginings became mistier still. Before she knew it she was asleep.

She slept for two good hours before she was disturbed; at least that period of time had elapsed before the doctor made his reappearance in the room. The sight of the sleeping woman seemed to occasion him surprise. He observed her with a slight smile adding another pucker to his wrinkled cheeks. He was a little, thin man, clean shaven and bald-headed. He had a big, aquiline nose. His eyes were sunk deep in his head, looking out from overhanging shaggy eyebrows. His lips were drawn so tightly together as to hint at a paucity of teeth.

"Who are you, I wonder? You've youth, health, good looks--three good things for a woman to have. You're not ill-dressed. And yet there's that about you, as you lie sleeping there--we're all of us apt to give ourselves away when we're asleep--which makes me wonder who you are, and how you came to sprain your ankle on Crag Moor when going to Carnoustie. However that may be, there's an adventure lying ready to your hand--if you've a fancy for adventures. And, unless I'm much mistaken, I think you have."

He laid his hand upon the sleeper's shoulder. The touch was a light one, but it was sufficient to arouse her. With a start she sprang up to a sitting posture, crying--

"You shan't! It's a lie! You shan't." She put her hand to her bodice, as if to guard something which was hidden there. The doctor said nothing; he stood and watched. Waking to a clearer sense of her

surroundings, she perceived him standing by her side. "Oh, it's you. How long have I been asleep?"

"Sufficiently long, I hope, to rest you. Will you allow me to introduce myself? My name is Twelves--David Twelves, M.D., of Edinburgh. May I ask if you have any objection to introduce yourself to me, and tell me your name?"

"Not the least; why should I have? I'm not ashamed of my name. Why do you want to know it?"

"Because the immediate object of my presence here is to make you what is to all intents and purposes an offer of, say, twenty thousand pounds, and I have a not unnatural desire to know to whom I am offering it."

She sat more upright on the couch, swinging round so as to bring her feet upon the floor, looking at him with eyes which were now wide open.

"What do you mean? You are making fun of me."

"I am doing nothing of the kind. This is likely to be one of the most serious moments of your life. I am not disposed to lighten it by misplaced attempts at playfulness." Yet even as he spoke again that nebulous smile seemed to add another pucker to his cheeks. "What I say is said very much in earnest. There is a man upstairs who's dying. Perhaps he is already dead while I stand here talking to you. If he's not dead, before he dies he wants another curious thing--a wife."

"A wife!--and you say he's dying!"

"It's because he's dying that he wants her. He has had no need of such an encumbrance living. I have come to ask you if you'll be his wife."

"I be his wife!"

Instinctively she doubled up the finger on which was the wedding-ring. She still wore her gloves, so it had remained unnoticed.

"Yes, you. You're the only woman within reach, except old Nannie, who hardly counts, or I wouldn't trouble you. Answer me shortly--yes or no--will you be his wife?"

"Marry a perfect stranger!--a man I've never seen!--who you say is dying!"

"Precisely; it is a mere formula to which I'm asking your subscription. He'll certainly be dead inside two hours, possibly in very much less. You'll be a widow in one of the shortest times on record; in possession of a wife's share of all his worldly goods--and that, by all accounts, should be worth fully twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds! But why should he want to marry any one if he's dying?"

"There's not much time for explanation, but I'll explain this much. He's made a will in favour of a certain person. That will he is anxious to revoke. If he marries it will become invalid. As matters stand it will be easier for him to take a wife than to make another will."

"You are sure he will be dead within two hours?"

"Quite. I shall not be surprised to learn that he's dead already. You are losing your chances of becoming a well-to-do widow by lingering here."

"You are certain he will leave me twenty thousand pounds?"

"The simple fact of his death will make it yours. So soon as the breath is out of his body you will become entitled to a wife's inheritance--if you are his wife."

"You are not playing me any trick? It is all just as you say?"

"On my honour, it is all just as I say. There is no trick. If you will come with me upstairs you will be able to judge for yourself."

"But how can we be married at a moment's notice? Is there a clergyman in the house?"

"You forget you are in Scotland. Neither notice nor clergyman is needed. It will be sufficient for you to recognise each other as husband and wife in the presence of witnesses; that act of mutual recognition will in itself constitute a legal marriage which all the lawyers will not be able to break. That is why it will be easier for him to marry than to make another will."

"There is not the least doubt that he will be dead within two hours?"

"Not the least--unless a miracle intervenes."

She was sitting with her hands clenched in her lap, a perceptible interval of silence intervening before the words burst from her lips--

"Then I'll marry him!"

CHAPTER III

WHOM GOD HATH JOINED

Dr. Twelves showed no sign of either surprise or gratification. He looked at her dispassionately, almost apathetically, from under his overhanging eyebrows.

"Can you walk upstairs without assistance?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't think my ankle is any better."

He stooped down.

"It's swollen; it looks as if it were going to be an awkward business. Your boot and stocking will have to be cut away; but there's no time to do it now--moments are precious. You will have to wait until you're married. It's only on the first floor. Do you think you'll be able to get up with the aid of my arm and of the baluster?"

"I'll try."

"Might I suggest, before we start, that it would do no harm if you were to remove your hat and jacket. It would seem more in keeping."

She acted on his suggestion.

"I ought to wash and tidy myself; I know I'm all anyhow."

"Now you will do very well. Your future husband is too far gone to be able to tell if your hair is straight or crooked; at the point he's reached that sort of thing doesn't matter." When they had reached the landing at the top of the stairs the doctor said to her: "By the way, the name of your future husband is Grahame--Cuthbert Grahame. May I ask what yours is? It is just as well that he should know it."

She hesitated a moment.

"My name is Isabel Burney."

"Miss Burney, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Grahame's room."

He threw open the door of the room in front of which they had been standing. As he did so Isabel slipped off her left-hand glove, bringing with it, at the same time, her wedding-ring. Crumpling up her glove she squeezed it into her waistband, the ring inside it. On the doctor's arm she hobbled to a big armchair, into which she sank with a sigh of unmistakable relief.

The room in which she found herself, although low-ceilinged, was a spacious one. It seemed to her that

all the furniture it contained was old-fashioned, a fact which, although she did not know it, increased its value perhaps a hundred-fold. She thought it simply dowdy. A huge Chippendale bed was in the centre of the room. In it, propped up on pillows, was the figure of a man which, if only from the point of size, fitly matched the bed. Leaning over him, on the other side, was Nannie, the old woman who had admitted them into the house. The doctor addressed himself to her.

"How is he?"

"About the same."

Although they had both spoken in a whisper their voices were audible to the man in the bed.

"Is that that old devil Twelves come back again?"

The tone was harsh, and it was obvious that the speaker spoke with difficulty, but the words themselves were plain enough. The doctor evinced no sign of annoyance at the other's somewhat uncomplimentary reference to himself; on the contrary, he chose to apply to himself the other's epithet as he answered:--

"Yes, it's the old devil back again, and, what's more, he's brought the young devil too--begging your pardon, Miss Burney, for speaking of you in such a manner. But it's the fashion in this house to use strong language, and always has been. Laird, I've brought the lady."

"Where is she?"

"At this moment she's sitting in your armchair. As I told you, she's sprained her ankle, which makes it difficult for her to walk, or even stand."

"Damn her ankle!"

"By all means. You should know more about that sort of thing than I do. You're nearer to it than I am."

"You think that hurts me?"

"Not I. I know that nothing hurts you. I doubt if even the torments of hell will trouble you much. You're past all hurting. Shall I tell Miss Burney she isn't wanted, and can go again?"

"What's her name?"

"Burney--Isabel Burney. At least, she says so."

"Isabel Burney, you are my wife; you're Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame. I acknowledge you as my wife, and I wish all men to acknowledge you also. Are you content that it should be so?"

"I am."

"You hear, Nannie? You hear, Twelves? You're both witnesses. I take Isabel Burney to be my wife, and she agrees."

"I hear. But does she take you for her husband--eh, Miss Burney?"

"I do. I take Cuthbert Grahame to be my husband in the sight of God and man."

Isabel had returned to one of her old faults--overemphasis. There was a theatrical intensity about both her manner and her words which was singularly out of place when compared with the matter-of-fact ribaldry which seemed to mark the husky utterance of the man in the bed. Its inappropriateness seemed to strike the others. After a perceptible pause the man in the bed wheezed--

"Leave God out of it". Presently he added, still more wheezily, "Come here, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame".

The doctor moved towards her.

"Can I assist you, Mrs. Grahame, to your husband's side?" With the doctor's aid she gained the bed. "Laird, here's your wife; can you see her?"

Isabel saw the man whom she had taken to be her husband. The sight of him shocked her. She told herself that she had never seen a more dreadful object even in her dreams. His size was abnormal. Not only was he naturally a big man, but his frame had become swollen and bloated till it was monstrous--a horror to look upon. His head and face were covered with scanty red hair, which needed cutting. He had a huge head, and his neck was so short and thick that it conveyed a grotesque impression that his head sprang directly from his trunk. His whole form seemed to be afflicted with some sort of tetanus, so that he was rigid, immovable. He lay on his back, with his arms straight down at his sides. Through his parted lips came jerky, stertorous breaths. His eyelids were partially open, but only the whites of his eyes were visible; his own words made it clear that they were of little use to him as organs of sight.

"See her? No, I can't see her. I don't want to."

As he spoke a tremor passed all over him. His whole frame heaved; as if seized by a sudden convulsion he began fighting for his life. The doctor spoke to her.

"You had better go, unless you'd like to see the last of him. This is likely to be the end. He'll hardly win through another bout."

He moved towards the bed, Nannie joining him. Isabel was left to her own devices. Powerless to move far unaided it was all she could do to stagger to the nearest chair. In it she sat, waiting, watching, listening, like an unwilling spectator in some bad dream. It was a scene which she never wholly forgot. The dim light, the quaintly furnished room, the figures of the old man and woman bending this way, then that, as they struggled with the creature on the bed. What ailed him she did not know; she vaguely surmised that he might be in the throes of some kind of epileptic fit. His contortions shook the bed, indeed the room. He kept uttering sounds which had a disagreeable resemblance to the half-strangled yelps of some wild beast.

How long it lasted she did not know. Long enough to strain her already highly strung nerves almost beyond endurance. At last there came a lull. The man on the bed was first quieter, then still. She took advantage of the silence to exclaim:--

"Can't you take me away somewhere? You know I can't move. If I have to stay here much longer I--I

shall make a fool of myself."

The doctor and Nannie paid her no heed. Side by side they were stooping together over the silent figure. After affording them what she deemed a more than sufficient opportunity to answer, she appealed to them again.

"Can't you hear me? Take me away somewhere--I don't care where! I'll go mad if you don't."

The doctor did not answer her directly; he spoke to Nannie.

"Do as she bids you; take her away."

"Where'll I take her?" the woman asked.

"Take her and put her to bed in the best bedroom. Remember that she's now the mistress of this house."

Nannie moved towards Isabel. For a woman, she was tall and brawny, but she was probably well past fifty, and Isabel certainly had not credited her with the capacity to do what she immediately did. She eyed the stranger for a moment in silence, then she asked, in the broadest Scotch:--

"Can't you walk by your own self?"

Isabel resented both the tone and the scrutiny.

"You know I can't."

Without more ado the woman, stooping, put her arms about her and lifted her bodily from the chair as if she were some great child. Isabel was taken by surprise, and a little alarmed.

"You'll drop me!" she cried.

"I'll not drop you; you're nothing of a weight."

As if to prove it, the old woman bore her from the room, across the landing, to another room on the other side, one which was in darkness. But Nannie seemed to know its geography by instinct. She deposited her burden on what Isabel realised was a bed. Striking a match on a box which she took from her pocket, she lit some candles which stood on the mantelshelf. Isabel, remaining where she had been placed, eyed her as she moved about.

"You're very strong."

"I'm not so strong as once I was. There was a time when I'd have carried four of you, and thought nothing of it either. Now can you undress yourself, or will you be needing me to do it for you?"

"Thank you, I think I can undress myself; but if you would help me take the boot off my bad foot."

Nannie bent over the foot which the other extended. She regarded it in silence, then, still without a word, she left the room. So soon as she was gone Isabel dragged the glove which contained her wedding-ring out of her belt, and the canvas bag which had come out of Mrs. Macconichie's tobacco jar from her

bodice, and thrust them as far as possible under the bolster which was beneath the pillow on which she was reclining. Scarcely had she done this when Nannie reappeared, in her hands a pair of large scissors. With their aid she proceeded, still speechless, to cut, first, the laces of Isabel's boot, and then the boot itself, till it came away from her foot. As it came away she did what she boasted she had never before done in her life--she fainted. When she came to herself again she found that Nannie, who had apparently remained indifferent to the fact that her senses had left her, having bathed her foot and ankle, was putting the finishing touches to the bandages in which she had swathed it. When the bandage was completed the old woman, still without vouchsafing a word, began to undress her, and did it with a deftness and neatness which would have done her credit had she played the part of lady's-maid her whole life long. Almost before she knew it, she was ready for the sheets, and so soon as she was ready she was placed between them.

"You're very good to me," she murmured, with a luxurious sigh, as she recognised what a delicious feeling it was to be between them.

"I'm not good to you--anyway I'm not wanting to be good to you."

Isabel looked up with surprise; the tone was almost savage.

"Why not? Don't you think that you will like me?"

"Like you!--like you!"

The emphasis with which the words were repeated was unmistakable. It would have been difficult for scorn to have been more eloquent. Without condescending to further speech, as if everything had been said which could be said, Nannie moved towards the door. Isabel put a question to her as she reached it.

"Is my husband dead?"

Nannie turned swiftly round to her.

"Your--what?"

"My husband."

"Your husband!--your husband!"

Again the repetition was marked by the same wealth of scorn. Isabel was moved to some show of resentment.

"He is my husband--you know he's my husband."

"Oh, he's your husband, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame. I'm not doubting it, ma'am, or that you're a fit and proper wife for him. I'm ready to tell to any one that you're a well-matched pair."

"Is he dead?"

As she repeated her inquiry Isabel's manner was a trifle more subdued; she was finding Nannie a difficult person to contend with.

"You'd better be asking Dr. Twelves if your husband's dead, ma'am; he's a surer judge of dead folk than I am. You'll be feeling anxious till you know, and so I'll tell the doctor. When a woman's been acquainted with a man so long as you've been acquainted with your man, so that you've come to know all the secrets of his heart, and the very shape and fashion of the soul which God has lent him, to be sure all her nature stirs within her when she begins to fear he's near to dying. It's hard to lose the husband to whom you've only been married a couple of minutes, so I'll tell the doctor to hurry and let you know if you're a widow before you're a wife."

Without giving Isabel a chance to retort, Nannie opened the door with a swishing movement, which was in harmony with her state of mind, and vanished from the chamber.

CHAPTER IV

A SECOND HONEYMOON

She had slept well; Isabel admitted so much. She suspected something else, that the morning was far advanced. There was that in the atmosphere which conveyed that impression. Apparently some one had been in while she still slept and put the room in order. The blinds were up, the curtains drawn back, the sun streamed in through the small square windows which were set deep in the thickness of the wall. As she looked about her, from her vantage place on the pillow, she felt that this was the queerest place she ever had been in. Everything, including the room itself, seemed to her to be hundreds of years old. The paper on the walls was like nothing she had ever seen before. The furniture was of the oddest shapes; indeed, what some of the articles might be intended for was beyond her comprehension. As she gradually absorbed it all, she began to be conscious of an almost eerie feeling that she had woken up in some ancient habitation and in some bygone age of which she had no knowledge.

Then something else forced itself on her attention, she felt that she was helpless. As she tried to turn in bed, the better to enable her to see what was to be seen, a spasm of pain passed over her, which was so acute that she had to shut her eyes and bite her lips to prevent herself from crying out. For some moments she lay quite still, waiting for the pain to go. It was some time before it diminished; even when it was easier she learnt, to her dismay, that she would have to be very careful in her movements if she did not wish it to return with probably increasing violence. Her foot seemed, from the feel of it, to be about as bad as it could be. It was not only useless, it held her prisoner. The slightest attempt to move it in any direction resulted in the keenest anguish. It seemed that relief from almost unendurable torment could only be obtained by remaining entirely quiescent. That meant, in effect, that she was chained, possibly for an indefinite period, to the bed in which she was lying. An agreeable prospect!

As the true inwardness of the position began to dawn on her, in phantasmagoric procession the events of the previous night flashed across her mind. The letter to her husband--to Gregory Lamb--which she had opened and read, the letter with the Islington post-mark, containing the curt refusal to accord him further help; the resolution to leave him, which she had instantly arrived at after its perusal; her visit to Mrs. Macconichie's sitting-room; her forcible entry into the china cupboard; her abstraction of the canvas bag from the tobacco jar.

At this point, her thoughts branching off in another direction, she felt, gingerly enough, for it seemed that movement of any sort meant pain, under the bolster, and produced from it the bag in question and the glove in which she had secreted the wedding-ring. The sight of the ring started her thoughts travelling again.

To her flight through the darkness, with the leather handbag. By the way, what had become of that bag? She had no recollection of having done anything with it. Possibly she had put it down when she had sprained her ankle, and, in her trouble, had forgotten its existence; in which case it might be still upon the moor. If it were found, and nothing could be learned of her, what deductions would be drawn? She wondered. One thing was certain, it contained all her worldly possessions. Without it she had not so much

as a pocket-handkerchief, not to speak of such a necessity of existence as a brush and comb.

Then the trap had come through the night, and borne her to the house in which she lay. There she had been married to a man upon his death-bed. Such a man and such a death-bed! Could it be possible? She clenched her fists, and asked herself if the whole business had not been the wild imaginings of some disordered dream. Even to herself she could not furnish a satisfactory answer.

Why had she suffered herself to be dragged through such a farce?--to play a part in such an odious scene? Because that old man who called himself a doctor had told her that the creature would be dead within two hours, and that then she would be richer by twenty thousand pounds. Twenty thousand pounds! Could that part of the tale be possible? Why, in that case, this house, the very room in which she was, the queer furniture which filled it, all might be hers. She would be a wealthy woman, who had won her wealth so easily without incurring risk worth mention. Because, even in the storm and stress of the moment, she had understood that bigamy was bigamy, even though one of the marriages into which she had entered was a Scotch one. Of course, nothing could make that marriage of the night before a real one, since she was a wife already. But, as the man was dead, and she was supposed to be his widow, if fortune favoured her the truth never need come out. She believed that she was clever enough to conceal it--at any rate from whom it was worth her while to do so. Only let her get hold of the twenty thousand pounds, or so much of it as could be turned into ready cash--let them find out afterwards what they chose--they would find it hard to get the money back from her. Twenty thousand pounds! She fancied herself letting go of such a sum as that if she once had it in her grip!

The first thing she had to do was to inform herself as fully as possible as to the actual situation. If she was a widow, and her husband had died without a will--he had certainly not made one after marrying her, while the doctor had assured her that marriage had rendered nugatory any he might have made before--then this house, and all that it contained, if it had been his property, was now hers. At least she hoped it was, because, after a little muddled consideration, it began to occur to her that, by English law, a wife did not necessarily inherit all that a husband who had died intestate left behind him. Exactly what share was hers she was not sure, but she had a more or less dim conviction that it was less than the whole. The same objectionable law might obtain in Scotland, or even a worse one. The sooner she ascertained exactly how the ground lay the better it would be for her peace of mind. So she began to call attention to the fact that she was wide awake. Since there was apparently no bell within reach, she had to make the best use of her voice.

"Nannie!" she called. "Nannie! Nannie!" And she kept on calling, because there was none that answered. Her voice was a strong one--she exerted it to the utmost--but it seemed that it was not strong enough to reach any one outside that room. She shouted till she was hoarse, and angry too, quite in vain; nothing resulted.

"If there's any one in the house they must hear me, and I expect they do, only they don't choose to come. Oh, if it weren't for this foot of mine! That Nannie's an insolent hag. She knows perfectly well that I can't move, and thinks she can treat me as she likes. If I could move I'd soon show her. Nannie! Nannie!" She shouted till she could really shout no longer. No one came; nor was there anything to show that she was heard. She began to be possessed by a fresh alarm. "I wonder if the house is empty? Suppose that old hag has gone off and left me alone in the house with that--that dead man. I'll be bound she's quite capable of doing it--old wretch! I shall starve to death! Nannie! Nannie!"

But all the strength had gone out of her voice--it was not strange that those muffled tones remained

unheeded--a fact of which she herself was conscious. At last, wholly exhausted, she lay and thought hard things of every one. She was genuinely hungry. She told herself that if some one did not come soon and bring her food something would have to be done, though she had not the faintest notion what. Self-help was out of the question; she was as powerless to move as if she had been riveted to the bed.

She was rapidly reaching a despairing stage when Nannie entered with a tray in her hand, quite calmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should come just then and not before. Isabel broke into angry expostulation.

"Why have you kept me waiting. Why didn't you come before? You must have heard me long ago--you're not stone deaf. I've screamed myself hoarse."

Nannie placed the tray upon a table. Then, with the most matter-of-fact air, putting her arms about the angry woman, she raised her to a sitting posture, arranging the pillows so that they formed a prop for her back. Divided between indignation and bewilderment, Isabel submitted in silence; she was so helpless, the old woman's manner was so masterful, that to expostulate seemed vain. The tray was put beside her on the coverlet, Nannie observing--

"When you've eaten your fill I'll come and take a look at that foot of yours".

"It's ever so much worse. I've been in agony--and am still. I believe I've broken a bone."

"Not you; it's no but a sprain."

"It's more than a sprain--much more, I'm convinced of it. Where's Dr. Twelves? He ought to attend to it at once. He said he would come and see me. Why hasn't he been?"

"He's been and gone hours ago."

"Been and gone! Why didn't you let me know that he was here?"

"What for should I let you know?"

"You knew that I wished to see him."

"You never said it; and, anyway, he never said that he was wishing to see you."

"You're taking advantage of me! You think I'm at your mercy, and that you can do as you like with me because I can't move! You're a wicked old woman!"

"Am I? Then I'm reckoning that age is the only difference there is between us."

Burning words flamed to Isabel's lips, but she had enough prudence and self-control not to allow them to go any farther. She was at the other's mercy, and she knew it. The only way to obtain from her some slight consideration was to endeavour to appease, not anger her. Instead of giving her anger vent, she put to her a question, the one she had put the night before.

"Is my husband dead?"

She received what was practically the same answer.

"Didn't I tell you that for that you must ask Dr. Twelves, since he's knowing when folks are dead better than me?"

Without affording Isabel another opportunity to speak Nannie left the room.

If the new Mrs. Grahame could have got out of bed there would have been some lively doings. It is not impossible that Nannie would have found that she had met her match. When that lady was really roused, and had a fair chance to show it, she was a difficult person to deal with. But she was, literally, held by the leg; as incapable of doing what she would have liked to have done as if she had been an infant in arms.

When, after an interval of no long duration, the ancient servitor returned, Isabel did treat her to what she meant to be a taste of her claws. For all the effect she produced she might have saved herself the trouble. The Scotchwoman evinced a serene indifference to anything she might say or do, which influenced her more than she would have cared to own. Then the pain she endured was exquisite. Nannie's ministrations were deft enough. She set about her task like one who understood well what she had to do, and was capable of doing it. She removed the bandages, bathed the injured foot, applied hot poultices; so far as Isabel was able to judge, did all that could be done. But the most delicate touches could not prevent her suffering agony. By the time the other had finished her anger was forgotten. All she desired was rest--peace--to be left alone.

For seven days Isabel remained, willy-nilly, in bed. All the time the only person she saw was Nannie. Dr. Twelves never came near her. Whether the fault was his or her attendant's was more than she could determine. She heard no news of any sort or kind. Nothing could be got out of Nannie. No answers to any of her questions; only the fewest possible words on unimportant subjects.

It is true that during the first two or three days her ankle gave her so much trouble, her sufferings from it were so intense, that she was, in a measure, content to be left alone and in ignorance. But as the pain lessened her impatience, and indignation, grew apace. More than once she attempted to get out of bed and to start on a voyage of exploration through the house to acquire information on her own account. Since, however, her attempts only resulted in disaster, and it was made plain that they only postponed her convalescence, common-sense gained the upper hand. She resolved to endure with as much calmness as she could command till the time arrived when, at least to some extent, she should again be mistress of her own powers of locomotion.

After the longest week she had ever known she decided that that time was not far off. She informed Nannie that, since her foot was now on the high road to recovery, on the morrow she would be capable of getting out of bed, and that, therefore, get out of bed she would. Nannie, as was her wont, kept silence when this piece of information was vouchsafed to her. But that she was impressed by it was evident when on the morrow in question, instead of the old woman, Dr. Twelves came into the room. It seemed as if Nannie must have told him that the time had now come when it was desirable that he should make his re-entry on the scene. At least that was the conclusion at which, at sight of him, the lady in the bed instantly arrived.

CHAPTER V

A CONVERSATION WITH THE DOCTOR

"So you've come, have you, at last! I suppose that old hag told you you had better before I came to you? I should have come in half an hour."

That was the greeting the angry lady accorded her tardy visitor.

Dr. Twelves seemed to be in no haste to answer. Coming to within a foot or two of her bed-side he stood and eyed her. He looked very old in the daylight, older than she had thought he was. Short; thin to the point of emaciation. There was something almost sinister in his attitude, in the way in which, inclining his head a little forward, his arms held close to his sides, he examined her keenly, as if he were some bird of prey, and she an object on which he was doubtful whether or not to pounce. As she gave him glance for glance she understood that this was a person who was not so frail as he might at first sight appear. But want of courage was not a deficiency which could justly be laid to the lady's charge. When he did reply it was with a question.

"Why do you speak to me like that?"

"You know very well why! You promised that first night that you would attend to my foot; but though I've asked for you again and again you've never been near me once, till you were afraid that I should be after you."

"You've been in good hands. Nannie has done all for you that I could have done."

"I don't doubt that."

"Then of what do you complain?"

"You've kept me a prisoner."

"Kept you a prisoner! I! Madam, you jest. Has not your foot had something to do with your confinement? Is it not holding you a prisoner still?"

"It won't do long, so don't you think it. I'll be out and about before the day's over, and when I am I'll make things hum. Is my husband dead?"

"Your husband?"

"My husband! Are you deaf?"

"No, madam, not yet. So far age has not robbed me of my hearing. But to whom do you refer when you speak of your husband?"

There was that in the fashion in which he asked the question which caused her to clench her fists, tighten her lips and descend to vulgarity--unfortunately an easy descent for her to make when her temper waxed warm.

"What are you playing at? Do you think you're clever, or that I'm an utter fool? You're wrong if you do, you may take it from me. Is my husband, Cuthbert Grahame, dead? I've not been able to get an answer out of that old harridan, but I'll get one out of you."

"Then is Cuthbert Grahame your husband?"

"Is he! Isn't he? Didn't he marry me the other night in front of you and that old woman?"

"Have you a certificate or any writing to show it?"

"A certificate! What do I want with a certificate? You said nothing about a certificate! Look here, old man, don't you try to play any fool-tricks with me, or you'll be sorry. Are you trying to make out that he's not my husband?"

"Not at all; I am trying to do nothing. I should like to ask you a question, to which, before you answer it, I would suggest that you should give a little careful consideration. Would you rather be Cuthbert Grahame's wife or not?"

"I am his wife, and you very well know it, so it's no use talking, and that's enough said. I ask you again, is my husband dead?"

"Your husband? That is the point which I am gradually approaching. Mr. Cuthbert Grahame is not dead."

Her jaw dropped open.

"Not dead?"

"Not dead."

"But you told me----"

"Precisely; I am aware that I told you. You will, however, remember that I made an express reservation in favour of a miracle. The miracle has happened."

"How long will he live?"

"Madam, I am not omniscient. I have once, within your knowledge, failed as a prophet; I should not care to fail again."

"Is he dying?"

"I may venture to say that, at the present moment, to the best of my knowledge and belief, he is not."

"You are beating about the bush. You can at least say if he is likely to live long."

"It is possible, madam, that he may outlive me--even you."

"Then you have cheated me!--cheated me! You have got me into this mess by your lies."

"Any injustice I may have done you was unintentional. You will also be so good as to observe that I have just now offered you something which was intended to be in the nature of a loophole out of the dilemma in which you are placed."

"You mean when you asked me if I wanted to be his wife. Am I his wife, or am I not?"

"It might present a pretty point for the lawyers. If you had chosen to repudiate the connection, it might not have been easy to establish. Nannie and I can hold our tongues--that I beg you to believe. The occasion for a wife having passed, he might have preferred to hold his too."

"Would he rather be unmarried?"

"That is not a matter on which I should care to positively pronounce."

"Then why was he so eager?"

"I explained at the time. He had made a will in favour of a certain person, which he desired to render ineffective; marriage makes null and void any will which a man may have previously made; under the circumstances that seemed to be the easiest and the shortest way out of it. As matters have turned out the measure seems to have been a little drastic, since he can now, if he chooses, make a dozen new wills each day."

"Is he so far recovered as that?"

The doctor seemed desirous to consider before he answered. He put up his long, thin hand to stroke his bristly chin. Moving a few steps, he leaned over the foot of the bed, and from that point attentively regarded her.

"Madam, I do not wish to trouble you with the medical names of all the complicated diseases with which Mr. Grahame is afflicted. I am not sure that I am myself acquainted with them all; some of them puzzle even me. Among other troubles he is paralysed. He cannot move hand or foot of his own volition, or crook a finger. Again, straying into the paths of prophecy, I dare assert that he never will be able to. He has his senses--after a fashion; he is sane--also after a fashion. That is, he is legally capable of making a will, or of taking a wife. But if he desires to affix his signature to a document a pen will have to be placed between his fingers, his hand will have to be guided. To that extent he has recovered, beyond that he almost certainly will never go."

"But he is not dying?"

"No, madam, he is not dying."

"Nor likely to die?"

"No office would insure his life for four-and-twenty hours, though it is quite within the range of possibility that the breath may continue in his body for years. Such cases have been known. Some people

death takes at the first call; some have to be called again and again; some seem to go beyond the portal and yet return. Cuthbert Grahame is one of them. He'll not go till death is very much in earnest; when that will be I cannot say. I mistook death's mood the other night--the oldest of us make such mistakes at times. In this case my mistake may seem to press a little hardly upon you."

She looked at him askance. There was a whimsical gravity in his tone which was a little beyond her comprehension, a something which was almost sympathetic. She changed the subject; a fresh intonation had come into her voice also.

"I wish you'd look at my foot. It's better. I think that before long I'll be able to get about again as usual. I want to very much; it's awful being a prisoner in bed. I'm not good at keeping still."

He did as she requested, then pronounced a verdict.

"Your foot is better--much better, as you say. There is no reason why you should not get up, though it may be some little time before you have the entire use of it again."

"At any rate I'll get out of bed--at once."

"And, then, what do you propose to do when you are up?"

"I'm going to see my husband."

"Your husband?"

"Can't I? Why can't I?"

"Mrs. Grahame!--if it is your wish that you should be Mrs. Grahame."

"Aren't I Mrs. Grahame? If I am, what's the good of pretending that I'm not? I am Mrs. Grahame, so there's an end of it."

"Mrs. Grahame, haven't you any friends?"

"What do you mean by friends?"

"Haven't you any relatives? Is there no one to whom you are near and dear? no one to whom you are in any sense responsible for your actions; with whom in a measure your happiness or unhappiness must be shared?"

"No one in this world!"

He smiled at her vehemence, observing her closely all the time.

"Since I am, in a degree, responsible for the--we will call it situation--you are in, I am not unnaturally desirous of having my conscience as clear as I conveniently can. I would, therefore, beg you earnestly to let the first thing you do be this: If you have--we will say an acquaintance--on whose judgment you can rely, write to him; lay the facts before him clearly, and await his response before you take any further step whatever--certainly before you seek to have an interview with Mr. Grahame."

"There is no such person."

"It is unfortunate, since you are so young, and, therefore necessarily, so inexperienced, that you should be so entirely alone in the world. Will you allow me to offer you some advice?"

"What's the use? I've had enough of your advice already--too much."

"How do you make out your case? I am unconscious of having offered you any advice."

"You advised me to marry that man."

"I advised you!"

"Of course you did. There are more ways than one of offering advice; you chose the roundabout way. You told me that if I married him he'd be dead inside two hours, then I'd be richer by twenty thousand pounds. This is what comes of acting on your tip! No thank you. I've had enough and to spare of your advice; now and henceforward I'm going to act upon my own."

"None the less I'm going to give you a piece of advice--of very sincere advice. You have been subjected to some slight inconvenience--though, perhaps, inconvenience is hardly the proper word."

"I should think not."

"My advice to you is: When your foot permits leave this house--I assure you it is not a pleasant one to live in; accept a reasonable sum by way of compensation; then blot the whole episode from your memory."

"What do you call a reasonable sum?"

"Say a hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds?--the idea! when you talked of twenty thousand! None of your kid's talk for me! Look here, Dr. Twelves, you're an old fox. Don't you think I don't know it however hard you try to play the lamb? You've got some game of your own on. I don't know what it is, but I soon will. If you offer me a hundred pounds to go, I'm dead sure it'll be worth a good deal more than that to me to stay--and I'm going to stay! This is my house; I'm the mistress here; and all the more the mistress because my husband's a rich man who can't look after himself. I'll look after him! I'll show you who's who and what's what!--and every one else as well!--you can take that straight from me!"

As he rubbed his chin, as if he found comfort in the feel of the bristles, the doctor's smile grew more pronounced.

"Content, Mrs. Grahame, content! Only--still a further scrap of advice!--postpone your first call on your husband till you are able to move about as you please."

This piece of advice the lady did act upon, for the simple reason that she was powerless to do otherwise. When she did get out of bed it was agony to hop even as far as the couch. Three more days passed before she was able to stand without flinching overmuch; another whole week had gone before she was able to hobble unaided to the door.

During that time she perhaps suffered more than she had done while she was still in bed. To her restless nature the compulsory inaction was almost unendurable. Her desire to attack the problem which confronted her, to solve it if she could--at any rate to learn what really was the position in which she stood--possessed her like a consuming fever. Nothing could be got out of Nannie; she was impervious to questions of every sort and kind. Arguments, coaxing, threats, alike were unavailing. The old woman could scarcely have been more taciturn had she taken on herself a vow of silence. And after that one visit she saw no more of Dr. Twelves; she could even hear nothing of him from Nannie. That angered her almost more than anything, that he should seem to ignore her so completely! She swore to herself that he should smart for it before very long.

During that week she laid up a fund of resentment against both the doctor and Nannie which she promised herself she would pour forth upon their heads at the earliest possible moment. Only let her be able to get about again as of old, and they should see!

On the eighth day she decided that her time had come, or, at least, that it had begun to come. She said nothing to Nannie, but having proved by actual experiment that she could move about with comparative ease, she dressed herself, waited till the old woman had paid her her usual morning call, then set out on a voyage of exploration. Hobbling to the door, she opened it as quietly as possible, then stood and listened. She could hear Nannie moving about downstairs. Then she moved towards the door which was on the opposite side of the landing. Had she had a stick on which to lean her progress might have been quicker. In spite of her reiterated requests Nannie had failed to provide her with one. Without support of any sort she moved very slowly. But she did get to her destination at last. She laid her hand upon the handle, paused a moment to learn if her movements had been observed, then turned it as quietly as she could.

CHAPTER VI

HUSBAND AND WIFE

She stood just inside the threshold of the room, with the handle of the open door between her fingers, and listened. She had moved so noiselessly that, quite possibly, to the ear alone her entry had been imperceptible. She looked about her, recalling the picture which it had presented to her mind on that first night. For some reason which she would have found it hard to explain a shiver passed all over her; a sudden chill seemed to penetrate to her very bones.

The room looked different by daylight, the windows wide open, the sun sending wide, warm splashes of yellow light from wall to wall. One of them came right at her as she remained there motionless. As she lifted her face she was blinded by the glare. It was odd that she should shiver in that glow of sunshine. Everything was so neat and orderly; there was such an absence of any signs of occupation, such complete stillness prevailed, that her first impression was that she had in some way made a mistake; that the room was empty. It was only when her wandering glance reached the great bed, which stood in such a position that it was partially screened by the door which she still held open, that she understood.

Its occupant was asleep, or--he was so motionless, so silent, her own heart seemed to cease beating--could he be dead? With unexpected ease she moved closer to the bed. No, he certainly was not dead; he merely slept, to all appearance, as peacefully as a little child.

Sleep produced no improvement in his looks. She went still nearer, so that, by leaning over, she could examine him in detail.

The conviction which she had had at first sight of him recurred with, if anything, even greater force. Beyond a doubt she had never seen a more unprepossessing-looking man. She had an almost morbid liking for good looks in a man. Gregory Lamb's handsome face had had almost as much to do with winning her as his lying tongue, which dowered him with splendid wealth. Her ideas of good looks were probably her own--Gregory was there to show it. But her attachment to them was so marked that she could with difficulty be civil to a man who was positively plain. An absolutely ugly man was to her an object of aversion; her first feeling towards such an one was actual physical repulsion, as if he were some unclean thing.

There could be no sort of doubt as to the ugliness of the man in the bed. His huge size was in itself a sufficiently unpleasant feature. It lent to him an uncomfortable aspect which was almost inhuman. He seemed to have swelled and swelled till his skin had become as tight as a drum. One had a disagreeable notion that if one pricked him, like some distended bladder, he would burst. He was all bloated, not only his body, but his head as well, and, above all, his neck. She had once had an aunt who had died of dropsy. This man seemed dropsical from the crown of his head to the tip of his toe--monstrously dropsical.

Nor was his appearance improved by the manner in which his head and face were covered with long sandy red hair, growing in scanty tufts, with bare spaces in between. The hair matched ill with his

complexion, which was brick red, tinged, as it were, with a suggestion of pallid blue. He slept so quietly that it was difficult to be sure, at first sight, that his condition was one of slumber, not death. As Isabel bent over, she did not hesitate to tell herself that she wished he was as dead as he seemed. The sight of him afflicted her with such a sensation of aversion that she was then and there filled with an almost irresistible desire to crush him out of existence, as if he had been some loathsome reptile. She was possessed by a shrewd suspicion that she had only to strike him a hearty blow--anywhere!--to bring him to an end upon the spot. It would be so easy. She had been tricked; he ought to have been dead ere then. What was the use of such a creature living, and what enjoyment could he get out of life? Where should she strike him? She clenched her fist as if it had been actuated by an involuntary tightening of the muscles. As she did so, he opened his eyes, and looked at her.

It was a curious moment for both of them--so both of them seemed to think. There was in his gaze such a take-it-for-granted air that one could not but wonder if he had not been conscious of her presence even while he slept. The sight of a strange woman leaning over his bed, with such a queer expression on her countenance, did not seem to surprise him in the least. That she was strange to him was plain. He seemed to be searching in his muddy brain for some clue which would tell him who she was. The search did not seem to be meeting with much success.

For probably more than a minute they continued to look at each other, the contrast between the fashion of their looks being almost grotesque in its completeness. Her bold, handsome face was, at the same time, illuminated by keen intelligence, and marked by an expression of vindictiveness which gave it an unpleasanter effect than if it had been actually ugly. His face, on the other hand, was vacuous, expressionless; more, it was incapable of expression. It reminded one, in some uncomfortable way, of a piece of blubber, without form and void.

The eyes, particularly in comparison with the rest of him, were small; with the exception of the pupils they were blood-shot. One wondered how much, or how little, they could see; they regarded Isabel blankly, as if she had been a wooden doll.

After an inspection which lasted, as it seemed, an unnatural length of time, it was he who broke the silence. His voice was a little clearer than when she had heard it first, but not much. It still had the peculiar quality of appearing to belong to some one who was at a distance.

"Who are you?"

There was a significant pause before she answered. In her tone was significance of another kind.

"I'm your wife."

Either her words took him by surprise, or he did not gather what she meant, or disliked what he did gather. He was still again, as if ruminating on what she had said. When he did speak the remark he made was a little startling.

"Damn you!"

The unparliamentary utterance, especially as addressed to a lady, was accentuated by the matter-of-fact stolidity which marked it. It was not impossible that for a moment or two she was moved to give him back as good as he sent--and better. Possibly, however, the impulse was changed, as regards form, in the

making. Instead of imitating the vigour of his epithet, she cut at him with a lash of her own.

"You're my husband." It would have been difficult for the strongest language to have been more scathing than her plain pronouncement of a simple fact. As if desirous of driving her dart still further home, she repeated her own words, with an even added bitterness--"You're my husband!--you!"

It would appear that the man, object as he was, was not without some sense of humour, and, also, that his feelings were not of the kind which are unduly sensitive. After what seemed to be due consideration of her words, he endorsed their correctness with a brevity which in itself was eloquent.

"I am."

There was something in the two little monosyllables which seemed to sting her more than his curse had done. She gave a movement, as if she were disposed to let her resentment take some active and visible form. But, again, maybe, her impulse changed in the making; she endeavoured to put a meaning into her repetition of a simple statement, which should make it strike him with greater force than a blow could have done.

"I am your wife."

Once more he showed himself to be her match in the game of give and take. Hardly were the words out of her mouth than he endorsed them again, with what was almost like the semblance of a grin upon his blubber-like face.

"You are."

"And I propose to let you see that I'm your wife."

"No doubt."

"Your real, actual wife, not a puppet, a thing you can pull by a string."

"Quite so."

"You may imagine, perhaps, that I'm a mere dummy, an automaton, which can be set in movement only when you choose. If you do, you're wrong, as I intend to show you, Mr. Cuthbert Grahame."

"Precisely, Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

It seemed, for an instant, as if a torrent of words was trembling at the tip of her tongue, needing but a touch to set them loose; if so, the touch did not come. Turning, she went and stood by an open window; resting her hand on the sill she leaned out, as if she needed fresh air. She looked out on to a garden which was evidently of considerable size, but which sadly needed attention. The grass could not have been cut for months; it competed with weeds for possession of the footpaths. There were flowers, but they needed pruning; the weeds threatened to choke them in their own beds. Beyond, the ground rose; everywhere the slopes were covered with trees, pines for the most part--scarcely a cheerful framework to what was already bidding fair to become a scene of desolation. In spite of the sweet, clean air and of the brilliant sunshine, in her surroundings, as she saw them, there was a hint of something uncongenial, unfriendly, which did not tend to make her mood a gayer one.

While she still seemed to be absorbing the spirit of the landscape, Mr. Grahame's voice came to her out of the bed.

"I want to speak to you."

She heard him, but it was not until he had repeated the same sentence three times that she chose to favour him with her attention. Bringing her head back into the room she turned her face slightly towards the speaker.

"Well?"

"Why did you marry me?"

"Because I was told that you would be dead inside two hours."

Although the reply was brutal in its plainness, it did not seem to hurt him in the least--indeed, it seemed rather to amuse him.

"That's a poor reason. What were you to gain by my death?"

"Dr. Twelves told me that I should have twenty thousand pounds."

"Did he? I see. That was the bait. You're a ready-witted young woman."

"You mean that you think I'm a fool."

"Not at all; no more than the rest of your sex, or, for the matter of that, of mine. We're all fools; only some of us are fools of a special brand. Who are you?"

"I'm your wife."

"You've told me that already. I mean who were you before you were my wife?"

She moved her hand to and fro, restlessly, upon the window sill.

"I've half a mind to tell you."

"Make it a whole one. Yours should be a story not without features of interest. Besides, a husband ought to know something about his wife."

She stood up straighter, her back to the window, looking towards the bed with gleaming eyes. It was evidently easier to provoke her to an exhibition of temper than him.

"I'll tell you nothing. I'm your wife; that's all I'll tell you; and that ought to be enough."

"It is--more than enough. You're an embodied epigram. I think I can guess at part of your story." The indifferent, almost assured tone in which he said it brought her near to wincing. "My eyes are not so bright as they were--no, not so bright--but they're bright enough to enable me to perceive that you're young, and not bad-looking--after a sufficiently common type. You appear to be one of those big, bouncing,

blusterous, bonny--four b's--young females who spring out of the gutter by the mere force of their own vitality; who push and elbow themselves through life with but one thing continually in view--self. You're probably ill-bred, ignorant, impudent and imbecile--four i's--four which are apt to go together--and, in consequence, blundering along rather than advancing by any reasonable method of progression, you'll keep tumbling into ditches and scrambling out again, until you tumble into one which will be too deep for you to scramble out of, and in that you'll lie for ever."

To hear him, in his dim, distant, uninterested tones, mapping out, as it were, a chart of her life and conduct, affected her unpleasantly. When he had finished she had to pull herself together before she could deliver a retort which she was conscious was sufficiently futile.

"I daresay you think yourself clever."

"I'm afraid you're disappointed. If I'm not altogether to be congratulated on having you for a wife, neither are you to be altogether congratulated on having me for a husband."

"Congratulated! My stars!"

"Exactly--your lucky stars. Come, I've drawn a little fancy sketch of the kind of wife you appear to me to be; tell me, what kind of husband do you think I am?"

"Think! I don't think; I'm sure you're a monster. You ought to be in Barnum's show--that's where you ought to be."

"That is your candid opinion? Your tone has the ring of genuine candour. It's an illustration of how one changes. Would you believe that once--not so long ago--I was remarkable for my good looks as well as my figure?"

"Tell that for a tale!"

"I'm telling it for a tale that is told--and over. It must have been a disappointment when you learned that I was not dead."

"It was. I could have shook old Twelves when he told me. Perhaps I'll do it yet."

"Will you? That will be nice for Twelves. I should like to be present at the shaking. You look as if you could shake him."

"I should think I could--shake the bones right out of his body. I'm as strong as a horse--stronger than most men. I once thought of coming out as a strong woman, only I didn't fancy the training."

"Didn't you? By training do you mean clean and healthy living? Is that what you disliked?"

She had already repented her lapse into the autobiographical.

"Never you mind what I mean."

"We won't; why should we? May I take it that you have got over the disappointment of not finding me dead, and have become reconciled to the idea of my living?"

"You don't look to me as if you would live long, considering that you're as good as dead already."

"You think so. We've not been long at arriving at that stage of perfect candour which, I fancy, marks the career of the average husband and wife. I think you're wrong. I am one of those beings who are very tenacious of life. I'm only fifty, whatever I may look. There's no real reason--your friend Dr. Twelves will tell you--why I shouldn't live another five-and-twenty years."

"I don't care what he says after what he told me. I'll bet you don't."

"Suppose I do, would you propose to spend them with me?"

"I should do as I like."

"I begin to suspect you'd try to. Let me put the case in another way. What would you want to leave this house and never re-enter it again?"

"Twenty thousand pounds."

"Is that your lowest figure?"

"It is."

"Thank you. I will give the matter my careful consideration. In the meanwhile may I ask you to leave me for a time? My conversational powers soon become exhausted; with them I am apt to become exhausted too. A little rest might do you good."

"Listen to me. I came here so that you and I might understand each other."

"We have gone some distance in that direction, haven't we?"

"I don't think you have, or you wouldn't talk to me like that. It may be clever, and cutting, and that kind of thing, but I don't like it. I'm your wife, your equal, more than your equal, since you're lying there like a log, already more than three parts dead. I'm the mistress of this house; this room is as much mine as yours."

"Is it?"

"It is. That's what you've got to understand. When I choose to leave it I will, but not a moment before. So don't you order me about, because I don't intend to let you, and there'll be trouble if you try."

"Am I to understand when I ask you to leave the room, my bedroom, in spite of your courteous hint of a moment back, that you refuse?"

"You are; you bet you are. And you're to understand more than that; you're to understand that if you're not careful what airs and graces you take on with me, I'll stuff a handkerchief into your mouth. Then we'll see what you'll do next. A helpless lump like you to talk to me--your lawful wife!--as if I were nothing and no one. I'll soon show you."

"Will you? Maybe you'll first be shown a thing or two yourself, my lady!"

The tones were familiar. They were not those of the man in the bed. Looking round Isabel found that Nannie was glaring at her from the other side of the room.

CHAPTER VII

A TUG OF WAR

Perceiving that Isabel made no reply, Nannie addressed her again, with both in her manner and her words perhaps a superfluity of truculence.

"What for have you left your room and come here disturbing Mr. Grahame, you bold-faced hussy?"

Nannie's appearance and the vigour of her speech, both of which were probably a trifle unexpected, seemed to take Isabel somewhat aback. It was not unlikely that a rapid debate was taking place in her mind as to what exactly was the *rôle* it was most advisable that she should play.

One point was obvious, that the moment had come when it would have to be decided, possibly finally, just what position in the household hers was going to be. If she was to be its real mistress--as she had boasted that she was, and would be!--then it was out of the question that Nannie should be allowed to speak to her in such terms as she had just employed. How was she to be prevented? In her own way Isabel was not a bad judge of character. In the course of her short life her adventures had been so many and various that it had grown to be a habit to measure herself against nearly every one with whom she was brought in contact. Nannie was a dour old Scotchwoman. Isabel was perfectly conscious that she was not likely to be subdued--to the point to which she desired to bring her--by words alone. She herself was wholly devoid of scruples. As to self-respect, she was incapable of realising what it meant. She had been brought up in a school in which that sort of thing was not taught. Her early days had been spent among women who were quite as ready to resort to physical force as the men, which was saying not a little. As she had grown older she had never hesitated to use her muscles when her tongue was beaten. She was quick to perceive that this was a case in which she would have to use her muscles again, if she did not wish to degenerate into something worse than a figure-head in the house which she aspired to rule.

The only question she had to decide was whether she would be a match for the Scotchwoman. It would be worse than vain to challenge conclusions if she was likely to be proved the weaker. Brief consideration, however, persuaded her that there was but little fear of that. Her ankle was against her, and the fact that she had been inactive for a fortnight. But, on the other hand, though tough and brawny, Nannie might be old enough to be her grandmother. Even though handicapped by her ankle, Isabel did not doubt that she excelled her both in sheer strength and in agility, while as to knowledge of how to make the best of her powers she was convinced that, as compared with her, the other was nowhere.

She resolved to bring the question as to who was to be mistress to an issue then and there--if necessary, in the presence of the man in the bed. Instead of answering Nannie she put a question to him.

"Who is this objectionable old woman?"

"My housekeeper."

"Then, perhaps, you'll tell your housekeeper that, where I'm concerned, if she can't keep a civil tongue in her head and mend her manners, she won't be your housekeeper long--or mine either."

"Hadn't you better tell her so yourself?"

"Does that mean you're afraid to?"

"Never interfered in the housekeeping since the day I was born, nor with Nannie either. She's always run this house as if it were her own."

"Then the sooner she understands that she's not going to do so any longer the better it will be. If you won't make that plain to her, then I will. Now, my woman, remember that I'm your mistress, and that I'll stand impertinence from no one--least of all from a servant of mine. Leave this room at once; I'll talk to you when we're alone."

Nannie seemed to be surprised almost into speechlessness by the other's attitude and manner of addressing her. It was a second or two before she could find words with which to illustrate her feelings.

"Of all the brazen impudence! That a nameless besom, picked up from the roadside in the middle of the night, should have the face to speak to me like that! And you to call yourself Mr. Cuthbert's wife! Why, you're nothing but a shameless trollop! And though the doctor said that Mr. Cuthbert was to be kept as quiet as possible, if needs be I'll take you out of this room in my two arms, as you well know I did before. So out you come before I make you!"

"Go it, Nannie!"

The mocking encouragement from the man in the bed was to Isabel as the final straw. She did not allow him to range himself, before her face, on the woman's side. From words she proceeded to measures. Traversing the room with a rapidity which wholly ignored the twinges which proceeded from her injured ankle, she planted herself immediately in front of Nannie.

"Are you going to leave this room, or am I to put you out of it?"

"Me to leave Mr. Cuthbert's room, and ordered out of it by you! It'll be you that'll be put out of it, and that pretty quick, you----"

Isabel did not wait for her to finish; she anticipated the volley of compliments which had no doubt been intended to follow by straightening her left arm in the most approved fashion, and striking the other full on the nose with a vigour and unexpectedness which caused the old woman to lose her balance and go toppling over on to the floor. Before she had a chance to recover, Isabel had the door wide open, and began bundling the still prostrate Nannie unceremoniously through it. She was conscious that words were proceeding from the man in the bed, but what they were she neither knew nor cared. It was not her intention, if she could help it, to continue the proceedings in his room. Having got the other out of the room somehow, she shut the door behind her, determined to let him know as little of what was to follow as circumstances would permit, at any rate till all was over.

Then she waited for Nannie to rise, which she did with an agility which did credit to her years. As the other had possibly foreseen, the old woman was beside herself with rage. She rushed blindly at her

opponent, who was at once cooler and more experienced in little discussions of the kind. Although hampered by her ankle she had no difficulty in evading the other's mad onrush, at least sufficiently long to enable her to receive her with a hail of blows directed impartially at her face and body. The proceedings had only lasted a few seconds, and were waxing momentarily warmer, when they were interrupted by some one who ascended the stairs. It was Dr. Twelves. As was only natural, being very far from edified by the spectacle by which he was confronted, he raised his voice to remonstrate.

"What does this mean? Have you two women gone mad, that you behave like drunken fishwives? Nannie!--Mrs. Grahame!--shame on you!"

Nannie, who had been severely pommelled, and had so far got much the worst of it, abstained, for the moment, from her attempts to return some of the marks of esteem with which she had been presented, and proceeded to vouchsafe some sort of explanation. As, however, she talked at the top of her voice, which failed her badly, and had to stop at uncomfortably short intervals to gasp, it was rather difficult to make out what she said, and when that was done it was not easy to join her observations with each other and supply them with a meaning.

"Put me out of Mr. Cuthbert's room!--ordered me out!--hit me in the face, that had never been laid hands on by any but my mother!--knocked me about as if I were an old rag-bag!--a bold-faced besom that's nothing in the world but the clothes she stands in!--and less character than that!--before I've done with her I'll strip her to her impudent skin!"

Nannie proceeded to do it. The attempt could scarcely have been called successful, because no sooner had she brought herself within the reach of the other's dangerous left arm than she received a smashing blow in the face which sent her staggering backwards. The course of the combat had brought her near the head of the stairs, uncomfortably near, as the event immediately showed. Before she was able to recover herself, reaching the topmost stair, she went crashing down it on to the doctor who stood remonstrating below. Luckily for him he was on the bottom step but one, so that he had time to move somewhat aside before she was in his immediate neighbourhood. As it was she sent him cannoning with uncomfortable violence against the wall, while she herself came toppling on to the landing with a bang which shook the house.

Silence followed--a speaking silence. Above was Isabel, a really striking figure, as, with flushed cheeks, flaming eyes, clenched fists, straightened arms, she stared down on her victim in the depths below. The doctor, more startled than hurt, seemed to be in two minds what to do or say. With one eye, as it were, he looked at Isabel up above, and with the other at Nannie down below. At last he spoke, addressing himself to the triumphant figure up above.

"For all you know you may have killed her."

"It will serve her right if I have!" came the defiant response.

That she was not killed was soon made plain by Nannie herself.

"She's broken my leg!--and I'll be bound half the bones in my body!--the she-devil! Oh, doctor, what'll I do?"

There came the voice from above.

"You'll stop that noise! and if you're wise you'll cut out your tongue! Because the next time you say a rude thing to me, or of me, as sure as you're lying there, I'll have you dragged into the road, and there you shall be left; you shall never set foot inside this house again--I promise you that!"

The doctor had been leaning over her, as if to ascertain the nature of her injuries.

"I believe you have broken her leg."

"To be sure she has! Oh, doctor, doctor, I told you we'd rue the day you brought her into the house!"

"Next time I'll not be content with breaking half the bones in her body--I'll break them all!"

"Hush, woman! you forget yourself; have you no pity?"

"I've pity for those who deserve it, but not for an unmannerly servant who tries to bully her mistress, and then whines when she herself gets thrashed instead! And look here, Dr. Twelves, don't you think that I'm an ordinary woman, because I'm not----"

"That I am rapidly beginning to believe."

"Don't you interrupt me when I'm speaking, not even by attempts to be smart, especially as you happen to be one of those silly old men who are not meant to shine in that line. If you'd got an ordinary woman into the mess you've got me by your lies and humbug, I daresay you'd have been able to do as you liked with her. I suppose that's what you and that old woman have been reckoning on. But I want you to understand just once, and once for all, that you're mistaken. It's going to be the other way round; I'm going to play this game, in my way, not yours; I'm going to do as I like with you. You'll take your instructions from me, and from me only. If you want to be allowed on these premises you'll treat me as a lady and as the mistress of the house ought to be treated. Who's that down there? I heard you sneaking about and listening! Come up here and let me look at you." A shock-headed young woman appeared, followed, at a respectful distance, by one still younger. "If you two are my servants--and I suppose you are, or you wouldn't be there--if that old woman can't walk alone pick her up, carry her to her room and put her to bed, and leave her there; then go on with your work and let me have no nonsense."

All this time Nannie, who still lay motionless, had been groaning in what was evidently genuine pain. The doctor, who had been bending over her, remarked a little dryly:--

"I trust you will pardon me, Mrs. Grahame, but I think her leg is broken".

"Well, what of it? It's her fault, not mine; she's brought it on herself. She may think herself lucky that her neck's not broken after the way she's behaved. I'd have thrown her out of a window if there'd been one handy, and it would have served her thoroughly well right. I suppose you don't want her to lie there, littering up the stairs, even if her leg is broken. She carried me to my room as if I were a sack of potatoes, now they shall carry her. Do you hear what I say, you two?"

So Nannie was borne to her room with anything but the honours of war.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MINIATURE

Like some other persons, so long as she had her own way, and nothing occurred to annoy her, Isabel could be quite agreeable. Now that Nannie was laid low, and Dr. Twelves accorded her the respect she demanded--at least outwardly, for she continually suspected him of having his tongue in his cheek--she proceeded to show that there was a side to her character which was not altogether unpleasant. The household--what remained of it--consisted of two raw damsels, whose English was of such a quality that Isabel not infrequently found herself at a loss to understand what they were saying. They made no secret of the fact that they were by no means heart-broken at Nannie's discomfiture. She had ruled them with a rod of iron, and they were by no means sorry that some one had tried her hand at ruling her--with distinctly solid results. Especially was this the case when they learned that the new mistress was inclined to be as lax as the dethroned one had been rigid. So long as the work of the house was done--and there was not much of it as Isabel managed things--they were free to do pretty well as they chose, even to the extent of there being practically no watch kept on their outgoings and incomings.

The truth was that the new Mrs. Grahame was above all things desirous that no watch should be kept on her. Most of her time was spent in ransacking the house from top to bottom--an occupation she enjoyed immensely, and found no little to her profit. Now that Nannie was laid on her back, and--since at her time of life a broken leg is no small matter--promised to remain there for some time, there was no one to say her nay. Isabel turned out every cupboard and every drawer; waded through every scrap of writing they contained; appraised every article she found--and, indeed, assembled quite a nice collection of what she deemed the more valuable trifles in her own apartment, for her personal use and consolation. She lighted on what, to her, was a considerable sum of money. On this, she learned, Nannie had been accustomed to draw for various current expenses. She, of course, regarded it, there and then, as her own personal property.

Her first appearance out of doors took the form of a visit to a neighbouring small town--not Carnoustie--where she purchased such articles of attire as she imagined she required, together with a trunk to contain them. These she paid for out of Nannie's store. She did not think it necessary to inform Mr. Grahame how she had used what was, after all, his money. She did not seem to think it worth her while to tell him anything.

Her mind was occupied with various problems. First and foremost, she was extremely anxious to ascertain how much money the man she called her husband actually had, where it was, and how it could be got at, say by one who had a right to get at it. Almost as if he were conscious of what was transpiring in her brain, Cuthbert Grahame took advantage of an opportunity which arose, or which he, perhaps, made himself, to volunteer some information on the subject on his own account. The afternoon on which the conversation took place would have been memorable for something else, even if he had not seen fit to make her the receptacle of some very interesting confidences.

Isabel was an active young woman; healthy, full-blooded, vigorous, one in whose veins the blood ran

strong. Inaction to her was punishment. So soon as her ankle permitted, and it proceeded to a rapid and complete recovery, she spent a portion of each day in taking the air--that portion of the day which was not spent in prying into everything the house contained. As her researches drew to a conclusion--as even the most thorough investigation allowed them to do in time--that unoccupied portion became more and more. So, having examined the inside of the house she turned her attention to the outside, to learn that her husband's estate was of considerable extent. She wandered up and down it, to and fro, till she began to be almost as intimately acquainted with it as with the contents of the residence. One afternoon she was indulging in one of these rambles when she received what really amounted to a shock.

She was passing through one of the woods of which her husband's property seemed chiefly to consist, and was resting on the bole of a tree, when she heard the sound of wheels. She was perhaps in a peculiar mood, because it immediately brought back to her that night on which she had listened--with what an anxious heart!--to the wheels of Dr. Twelves' approaching trap. Passers-by, thereabouts, were few and far between; for days together she would not encounter any. She had grown to love seclusion, possibly for sufficient reasons of her own. She was seated on a slope. The road began at the foot, perhaps thirty feet away. She instinctively altered her position, so that, while she could see herself, the trunk of the tree almost entirely screened her from observation. She wondered who was coming, peeping round to see. When she did see she drew back with a start.

In the dogcart which presently appeared was her husband--her real husband--Gregory Lamb. The sight of him took her wholly by surprise, and filled her with unwonted perturbation. What was he doing there? What could have brought him to that neighbourhood? She had taken it for granted that he had long since returned to London. Even Mrs. Macconichie's--supposing he was still there, which seemed unlikely--was a good twelve miles away. She was conscious that he was not alone in the trap. Who his companion was she had not noticed; she had not time.

The vehicle drew rapidly level with the tree on which she rested. She decided that she might venture to peep again, and was just doing so when the horse shied so violently that the cart was almost overturned. Recovering itself, apparently getting the bit between its teeth, it bolted like a thing possessed, and vanished from her sight, though not before she had nearly convinced herself that the man with her husband--the one who was driving--was Dr. Twelves. She had only seen him from the back, and then had had but occasional glimpses through intervening trees for half-a-dozen seconds, but she was almost sure that it was he. There was, however, just a possibility that she was mistaken, and it was that possibility which worried her. She would have liked to have been certain, either one way or the other. Then, in the case of the worst, she might have been prepared.

For the juxtaposition could but mean trouble for her. She was too clear-sighted to delude herself with the notion that the doctor was anxious to be a friend of hers. He had, to outward seeming, accepted the situation; probably, in part, because, as she herself put it, she was no ordinary woman; and partly because, under the circumstances, considering the part which he himself had played, he did not see what else there was for him to do. Let him, however, learn how wholly baseless was her claim to occupy the place which she had arrogated to herself, and she did not for a moment doubt that he would use that knowledge to oust her from it in the shortest possible space of time.

The only two points on which she had her doubts were: Was it really the doctor who was driving Gregory Lamb? and, if so, had Gregory Lamb given him cause to even suspect the relation in which she stood to him? On a third point there was no doubt--the dogcart had been moving from, not towards the

house, so that in any case the peril was not actually approaching her now.

Another thought suddenly occurred to her, one which set her heart beating faster than was altogether agreeable. The doctor and her husband might have been to the house already, in which case danger might be awaiting her return to what she had learned to call her home.

That was a question which might be quickly resolved--she would resolve it quickly. She started off homewards then and there, telling herself as she went that, whatever had happened, or might happen, they should only be rid of her on terms of her own.

It turned out that, so far, nothing had happened; to that extent, at least, her agitation had been uncalled for. No one had been near the house since she had left it; nothing had happened which was in any way out of the common. The relief she felt at learning even so much showed how real she had imagined the danger was. With some vague idea of subjecting him to cross-examination and learning if he had suspicions of her of any sort or kind, so soon as she had removed her hat she paid a visit to Cuthbert Grahame's room.

As usual, he lay immobile between the sheets, preserving that death-in-life rigidity which, it seemed, was to continue his condition to the end. The sight of him struck in her an unwonted note.

"Don't you get tired of lying there?--especially on a day like this, when the sun is shining and the breeze is stealing among the trees and flowers?"

She did not strike a responsive note in him. He was silent for some seconds, then he asked, in his strange, far-away voice, which was like a husky whisper--

"Aren't you well?"

"Oh yes, I'm well enough. I'm only wondering if you're not tired of being ill. It seems to me that you might as well be dead as keep on lying there with only your voice alive--and that's pretty nearly done for."

She had returned to her more familiar mood.

"Tired!--tired!" He repeated the word twice, then after an interval went on: "What's the use of being tired of what has to be? I'm tired of you, but it seems you have to be--so what's the use?"

"I don't see why you need be tired of me. I'm no more to you than a chair or table."

"You're my wife."

"Your wife! It's because I'm your wife that I'm likely to get tired instead of you. I'm not a helpless statue--I'm a woman; I don't want a dead log--I want a man."

"I was once a man."

"You a man!"

"Seems queer, doesn't it?"

"I don't believe it."

"Yet I was, physically, not a bad sample of a man. Now the Lord knows what I am!--a husk, I suppose. There's a man inside me somewhere still."

"You look as if there were, and you sound it."

She laughed, not pleasantly. It was one of her defects that her laughter seldom had a pleasant sound, as if it were only the spirit of malice which had power to move her to mirth.

"You've confessed why you married me. Do you know why I wanted to marry you, or any one? I'd have married your friend Nannie if she'd agreed, but she refused point-blank."

"Is that true?"

"Quite. It was only when she persisted in her refusal that the doctor thought of the woman he'd found in a ditch. Since anything in the shape of a woman would serve he hauled you up the stairs." She was still. She was standing in her favourite position by the open window, looking out at the woods on the slope of the hill. "Shall I tell you why, when already looking into hell--and I had a good look, I promise you!--I wanted to marry any one?"

"I know."

"Who told you?"

"Dr. Twelves."

"He seems to have imparted to you a good deal of useful information. What did he tell you?"

"That you'd made a will in some one's favour, which you wanted to break, and that was the easiest way to break it."

"Did he tell you who the some one was?"

"No."

"It was a woman. Do you hear--it was a woman!"

"I hear."

"A young woman--younger than you and prettier. Prettier? My God! You're not bad-looking in a way, but there's a streak of the vulgar in you now. No one could ever mistake you for a lady. You're one of the blowzy sort; you'll become impossible; hard-featured; flame-coloured cheeks; bold, staring eyes; huge, unwieldy, gross. She!--she's the most perfect woman God ever made, and she'll only improve as the years go by."

"I've met that kind of woman before."

"Not you. She's not to be found in the sort of society in which you've moved."

"She's to be found in the penny novelettes--never out of them. You and your perfect women! In spite of

her perfection you don't seem to have found her all milk and honey, or you wouldn't have been so keen to break that will of yours."

"Do you know why I wanted to break it?"

"Some silly nonsense. Because she tried to scratch your eyes out, I daresay--serve you right if she did."

"Because she wouldn't marry me."

"Because----!" She stopped to burst into noisy, strident laughter. "She must have been a fool. I should have thought any one would have married you if you'd made it worth their while."

"I told you that she was not the kind of woman you have ever met; she's clean beyond your understanding. Put your hand underneath my pillow--gently. You'll find a case; take it out."

Isabel looked at him, hesitating, as if in doubt of his meaning, then she did as he had told her. He was propped up on a nicely graduated series of pillows. As she withdrew her hand, the case between her fingers, she dragged one of the pillows with it right from under the one on which his head reposed, so that, denuded of its support, his head fell back. In a second he began to choke before her eyes. His face grew bluer and bluer; the veins stood out through his skin; he fought for breath; his stertorous gasps shook him from head to foot. She raised his head to its normal position, returning the pillow to its place. As she watched him struggle back to what--to him--was life, she laughed.

"It wouldn't take long to make an end of you."

By degrees he regained the use of his attenuated voice.

"I do want careful handling--that's so. Still I wouldn't murder me if I were you--it would be murder. Murder has to be paid for in full. It would be hardly worth your while to be compelled to render full payment for such a remnant as I am. Have you got the case? Open it."

She held a square Russia leather case, in corn-flower blue. She looked for a spring or for something which would enable her to get at its interior, but found nothing.

"Does it open? I don't see how."

"It's a little idea of my own that spring. I didn't want any one to see what is inside but me. But it's so long since I've seen that I have grown hungry for a look, so you shall have one too. I think I should like you to have one. Hold the case between your finger and thumb, one of them exactly in the centre of each side, then press firmly."

Obedying him, immediately one of the sides flew open in the middle, revealing, framed in the other, the miniature of a young girl. Isabel was no artist; she was incapable of appreciating the artistic value of the portrait which confronted her. What struck her instantly was that it was surrounded by what looked like three rows of precious stones--pearls, sapphires, diamonds.

"Are they real?" she inquired.

"Do you mean the stones in the setting? They are. The pearls are there because she is the queen of

pearls; the sapphires, because they are her favourite stones; the diamonds, because I chose to have them."

"They must be very valuable."

"They cost a lot of money, and they'd fetch a lot. That is the girl I wanted to marry me. What do you think of her?"

"She is pretty."

"Pretty! She's beautiful."

"She's too fair for me."

"That's because you're dark. I hate dark women--always have done. Hold the case open in front of me. Let me look at her."

She did as he asked. No change took place in his expression; none could take place. His voice remained the same; that also was incapable of modulation. Yet she knew that an alteration had taken place in him; that as he gazed the man of whom he had spoken, who was inside him somewhere, was stirred to his inmost depths.

"Not beautiful! She's the most beautiful creature in the world. She always has been; she always will be. God bless her! though He has been hard on me." Then, after a pause, "Take the case away and shut it, and put it back beneath my pillow--gently. That glimpse will last me a long time, thank you. Though I may never look at her again, her face will be with me always to the end. Before you close the case you might look at her again more carefully. Perhaps, after you have gazed at her attentively, understanding may come to you; you may begin to perceive the beauty which was hidden from you at the first."

She returned, the case still open in her hand, to the window in front of which she had been standing.

CHAPTER IX

THE SLIDING PANEL

The silence remained unbroken for some seconds. Then he asked--

"Well, what do you think of her now?"

"I think she's pretty, as I said. You may think her beautiful. I daresay plenty of men would; that sort of thing's a question of taste. I tell you what I do think beautiful--that's these diamonds. The sapphires and the pearls are all very well, but the diamonds are the stones for me."

"You would think that. You're the sort of woman who'd admire a gaudy frame, and have no eyes for the picture that was in it. If you like I'll tell you who she is and all about her. It may seem like sacrilege to talk of her to you, but I think I'll tell you all the same."

"Tell away. I suppose it's the old, old story: she met some one she fancied more than you. Men always do think that sort of thing is wonderful. But I don't mind listening."

"Yes, there was some one she liked better than me. That was the trouble."

"It generally is, while it lasts; then it turns out to be a blessing. But, of course, you've never had the chance."

"As you say, I've never had the chance. Her name--I won't tell you her name--though why shouldn't I? Her name is Margaret Wallace."

"Scotch, is she?"

"Her father was Scotch, her mother English. He was my dearest friend. When he died----"

"He left his only daughter, then a mere child, and that was all."

"That was all, and as you say she was a mere child. You seem to have had some experiences of your own."

"One or two. I'm more than seven."

"So I should imagine."

"You took her to your own home, found her in food and washing, and pocket-money now and then. As she grew older her wondrous beauty and her many virtues--especially the first lot--warmed your withered heart. When she attained to womanhood you breathed to her the secret of your passion, which she had spotted about eighteen years before; but as she didn't happen to be taking any, of course the band began to

play. Isn't that the sort of story you were going to tell, only I daresay you wouldn't have told it in quite that way?"

"I certainly shouldn't have told it in quite that way."

"You had expended on her two hundred and forty-nine pounds nineteen and sixpence ha'penny, besides any amount of fuss, so her ingratitude stung you to the marrow. Still you might have borne with her; you might not even have altered the will which you had made in her favour, and which you kept shaking in her face; only when she took up with another chap she seemed to be coming it a bit too thick. You cried in your anger, 'I'll make you smart for this, my beauty!' So you started to make her smart; but it seems to me that you've done most of the smarting up to now. Was it her cruelty which made you the pretty sight you are?"

"Not altogether."

"Not altogether! You don't mean to say that when you wanted her to be your wife you were anything like what you are now? A nice kind of love yours must have been!"

"I appear to have acquired a really delightful wife."

"If you weren't a dead log it might be that you'd find out how true that was. Any man with a touch of spice in him would give the eyes out of his head for a wife like me, and there have been plenty who were ready to do it."

"As you yourself observed, these things are a question of taste. So you think she was justified in treating me as she did?"

"Justified for not wanting to marry a thing like you! You ought to have been drowned for hinting at it."

"I am myself beginning to think that your point of view may not be wholly incorrect, and that, therefore, it was fortunate that I did not die on the night we were married."

"I don't."

"You wouldn't--you have, of course, your own point of view. From mine it is fortunate that I have been spared to enable me to make another will."

"How are you going to make a will, when you can't move so much as a finger?"

"I can have one drawn up according to my instructions. You will find that I'm capable of signing it. Would you have any objection?"

"It would depend on what there was in it."

"I see. May I ask if you are under the impression that if I die without a will--even supposing our marriage is valid----"

"It's valid enough, don't you be afraid."

"I'm not afraid; you, I fancy, have the cause to fear. But I say, supposing our marriage is a marriage--as to which I say nothing either one way or the other--if I die intestate do you imagine that you will necessarily come into possession of all I have?"

"Have you any relatives?"

"Not one in the whole wide world."

"Then you bet I shall."

"You may bet you won't."

"Who's got more right to what you leave behind than your lawful wife?"

"It depends. Under no circumstances would you inherit more than half of my personal property, and a third of my real estate; the rest would go to the Crown."

"Half's something! Look here, Dr. Twelves told me that if I married you I should have twenty thousand pounds. Have you got as much?"

There was an interval before an answer came. Possibly the man in the bed was considering what answer he should make to such a very leading question.

"I cannot tell you exactly what I have got, but I may safely venture to assert this much: If all I possess--land, houses, shares and so on--were to be turned into cash to-morrow, I should find myself with at least two hundred thousand pounds."

"Two hundred thousand pounds! Go on!"

"This is a curious world, and Fortune is a curious jade; she bestows her gifts with feminine irresponsibility. She gives one health and strength and youth--and empty pockets--just when he could get enjoyment out of full ones. To another, crippled limbs, physical helplessness, premature old age--and pockets brimming over--just when money is of as little use to him as pictures to the blind. I have been denied most things except fortune. Sounds ironical, doesn't it? As with Midas, everything I have touched has turned to gold--in my case a thing wholly worthless. I never made a bad money speculation in my life. I doubt if I ever made an investment which did not pay me ten per cent. Some of my investments have paid me forty and fifty per cent, for years, and are worth ten times what I gave for them. I wasn't worth twenty thousand pounds when I began life; now, to adopt your phraseology, I'll bet I'm worth more than a quarter of a million."

"And yet you live in a place like this, without a horse in the stable, and the garden like a wilderness!"

"Why shouldn't I? Where would you have me live? In a castle? with an array of servants who would take my money and from whom I should have to hide. A well-bred servant wouldn't be able to endure the sight of such an object as I am. All I need is a bed to lie on, some one to put food between my lips, money to pay for it. Since here I have those things, here I have all I need. Besides, you should bear in mind that, as nothing is being spent, there will be all the more to leave behind."

She was silent; her face turned towards the open window, the miniature in its jewelled case still in her

hand. His words had fired her imagination. A quarter of a million!--this man worth a quarter of a million!--and he supposed himself to be her husband! Not long ago she had told herself that a certain and clear five pounds a week earned by singing and dancing at the minor music halls would be her idea of fortune. She had married that deceitful humbug, Gregory Lamb, because she believed that he might possibly have as much as a thousand a year. What was a thousand a year compared to a quarter of a million! If he died without a will half of it would be hers, or was it a third? Why shouldn't she have more than that? If he had no relatives to make a fuss, why shouldn't she have it all?

Even as she asked herself the question an answer came to her dimly, yet with sufficient clearness to start her trembling. It was born of an idea which would have disposed most women to do more than tremble. Her breath came faster; her eyes brightened; something like a smile wrinkled her lips; the vista presented to her imagination, which would have appalled most persons, titillated her.

After a while she asked, without turning her head--

"If you were to make a will, what would you put in it?"

"I'll show you."

"When?"

"Now. There's a secret hiding-place in this room. If you tried do you think that you could find it?"

"I'd find it fast enough."

"Then find it."

"What sort of place is it?"

"That's asking for assistance. I'll give you this much. It's in the wall, concealed by a panel of wood. Now I've given you the scent, follow it to a finish--if you can."

"In a room like this there might be fifty hiding-places."

"There might."

"It would take days to examine it thoroughly; however long it might take me I'd find it. I'd strip the walls of everything before I'd give it up."

"I don't think you need go so far as that just yet. Look round; you've hawk's eyes; I've given you a hint; can't you make a likely guess, like the sharp-witted child who is playing hide-and-seek?"

Isabel's glances were travelling round the room searchingly, resting here and there, allowing nothing to escape them. When they had traversed the whole apartment from floor to ceiling in one direction they returned in another.

"You are not tricking me? There really is a secret hiding-place?"

"There really is."

"And you say it's behind a panel in the wall?"

"That's it."

Her eyes in their return journey had reached the great wooden fireplace. Although she did not know it, it was a fine specimen of old carving. What she did notice were the rounded posts which served as pillars. There were four, two longer and two shorter, each supporting a shelf on which there were ornaments. She wondered if the posts would turn. Probably something recurred to her mind which she had read about a movable post, though she could not have said just what it was or where she had read it. She had a notion that she would try if the posts in the fireplace turned, when she was stopped by a remark which came from the man in the bed.

"You're looking in the wrong place; so as I don't want your search to occupy you days, I'll tell you where it is." Even as he spoke it struck her--rather as a vague suspicion than anything else--that he did not want her to pay too much attention to the fireplace. She waited for him to continue, which he did at once. "You see the bracket in the corner on my left. Go to it. Take down the vase which stands upon it, then lift the bracket out of its socket." She did as he told her. "You see the boss just at the top of the socket. That releases the catch. Press it, then slide upwards that part of the panel which is immediately at your right."

Again she followed his directions. A portion of the woodwork, three or four inches wide, and about a foot in length, yielding to her touch, disclosed an open space behind.

"There's an envelope in it, a blue envelope; take it out."

There was an envelope, apparently nothing else. On the front was an inscription, whose crabbed characters had apparently been written by a feminine hand. "This envelope contains Cuthbert Grahame's will, and is not to be opened till after his death." The two flaps at the back were secured by big red seals.

"Never mind what it says. I'm Cuthbert Grahame, and I tell you to open the envelope, although I don't happen to be dead. Take out the paper which you'll find inside. Read it; you can read it aloud if you like."

She read it aloud. The handwriting was identical with the cramped caligraphy on the envelope.

"I give and bequeath all the property of which I die possessed, both in real and personal estate, to Margaret Wallace, absolutely, for her sole use and benefit.--CUTHBERT GRAHAME. Witnesses, NANNIE FORESHAW, DAVID TWELVES, M.D., Edin."

With the exception of a date at the top that was all the paper contained.

"That is the will you broke by marrying me, or, if you prefer it, which I broke by marrying you. There isn't much to be said for the phraseology--it wasn't drafted in a lawyer's office. Nannie wrote it down to my dictation--at that table over by the window there. She doesn't write a very excellent fist, but it'll serve. That's as sound a will as if it had been drawn by a council of lawyers, and, to the lay mind, a good deal plainer than they'd have made it."

"Do you mean to say that what's on this paper is enough to put Margaret Wallace into undisputed possession of a quarter of a million of money?"

"It would have been if I hadn't married you; my marriage has made it so much waste-paper. You may

tear it up, or keep it if you please; it makes no difference. I intend to make another will."

"What are you going to put in it?"

"Exactly what's in that, only the date will be different. It's the date in that which renders it nugatory."

"Aren't you going to leave me anything?"

"Why should I?"

"Dr. Twelves told me that if I married you I should have twenty thousand pounds."

"I'm not responsible for what Dr. Twelves may assert."

"You are--in a way, and you know it. Because he only brought me up so that you might die in peace, and, I expect, at your own express command."

Mr. Grahame was silent, possibly considering her words.

"A cheque for a hundred pounds would amply repay you for what you've done--or I might make it a hundred guineas."

"A hundred guineas! Listen to me--you're my husband."

"You've observed that on some previous occasion."

"And I'm your wife."

"That also has already become ancient history."

"I want you to understand just the way in which I see it. I'm the mistress of this house, and no one sets foot in it--or in your room--without my express sanction and approval."

"Won't any one? We shall see."

"We *shall* see! I'll write you just the will you want, as Nannie did, if you'll let me add a sentence leaving me--say, five thousand pounds. It ought to be more--twenty thousand was what Dr. Twelves promised--and you can make it as much more as you like, but I'll do it if you make it that." As, when she stopped, he was silent, she again went on: "If you don't let me add such a sentence you shall make no will at all--as sure as I'm alive I swear you shan't. I'll have my bed brought in here to stop you doing it at night--you may trust me to take care you don't do it by day. As your wife I've my rights, and you're a helpless man. I mean to take advantage of my rights--to the fullest possible extent!--and of your helplessness. You ought to know by now that in such a matter I'm the sort of woman that keeps her word."

"I have a sort of notion that you might do your best in that direction--from what I've seen--and heard--of you."

"You can bet on it!"

"Let me follow you clearly. Am I to understand that you will draw up yourself a will identical in all respects with the one you have in your hand, if I allow you to add an additional clause by which you are to benefit to the extent of five thousand pounds?"

"That's what you're to understand--just that."

"And that you'll assist me to sign it in the presence of two witnesses?"

"I'll assist you all I can."

"I'll think it over. Five thousand pounds is a deal of money for what you've done, and for the sort of woman you are; but--I'll think it over. When would you do it?"

"If you say the word I'll do it right now."

There was a considerable pause, then he repeated his former observation:--

"I'll think it over." After a pause he added: "Put back that miniature underneath my pillow--this time gently, if you please. Close the panel; replace the bracket and the vase. You may take the will with you if you like, so that you may get it well into your head. I'm tired--I've talked enough. I want to be still--and think."

CHAPTER X

THE GIRL AT THE DOOR

When Isabel left Cuthbert Grahame's room her brain was in a tumult. She had so much of which to think that she found it hard to think at all. The discovery that his wealth was so altogether beyond anything of which she had dreamed as possible; the unearthing of his will--from such a hiding-place; the facts she had learned of Margaret Wallace, and which she had herself embroidered--these things were in themselves enough to occupy her mind to its full capacity for some time to come. Yet they were far from being all she had to think about. The miniature, in its jewelled setting--especially the jeweled setting!--was likely to be a subject of covetous contemplation until--well, until something had happened to it, or to her. Then there were the pillars in the fireplace. Something--she could not have told what--had filled her with the conviction that the recess behind the sliding panel was not the only hiding-place the room contained. She was possessed by a desire to examine those four rounded posts--to examine them closely--to ascertain whether in their construction there was anything peculiar.

But beyond and above all these sufficient causes for mental agitation there was still another, one far greater--the will she might have to draft, which she felt certain she would be asked to draft. The idea which she had at the back of her head, which had prompted her suggestion, was of such a character that it almost frightened her. Like Cuthbert Grahame, she wanted time and opportunity for thought. She had it in contemplation to risk everything upon the hazard of a single throw--everything, in the widest sense of that comprehensive word. To put her notion into execution needed courage of a diabolical kind. Failure involved utter and eternal ruin. Success, on the other hand, would bring in its train all the pleasures of which she had scarcely dared to dream.

On her return from her walk, having learned that Gregory Lamb had not put in the appearance she had feared, she had sent the two maids on an errand. They were raw, country wenches, ignorant, slow-witted. It seemed hardly likely that, under any circumstances, she would find them dangerous, yet she was strongly of opinion that it was advisable, if, as was possible, the deserted Gregory did call, that she should be the person to receive him. Nannie was still confined to her room, so that Isabel had but to be rid of the underlings to have practically the whole house at her mercy.

It has been said that small things make great generals, since it is the eye for trivial details which wins big battles. The little act of foresight which prompted Isabel Lamb to clear the premises of that pair of Scotch wenches not impossibly changed the whole course of her life--not because what she had foreseen happened; what actually occurred she had not even looked for.

The dining-room had a large bay window which commanded the path leading to the front door. As she stood there, with her brain in a state of almost chaotic confusion, something caught her eye--a figure on the carriage drive. It was still at some distance; it disappeared nearly as soon as she saw it. She kept her glance fixed on its vanishing point. As for some moments nothing was visible, she was beginning to suppose that she must have been mistaken, when she saw it again. It was still to a great extent hidden by the trees and brushwood, but it certainly was there. Isabel instinctively drew back, although in any case

she must have been entirely invisible. Instantly her brain became clear. The perception of approaching danger, which had on her the effect of bracing her up, restored to her at once the full use of her faculties.

"Is it Gregory?" she asked herself.

If it had been he would have had a warm reception. But it was not, as was immediately made clear. The figure was that of a woman--reaching a point where the ground was clearer, she could be plainly seen. She was walking very fast, with long, even strides.

"Who is it?" the woman at the window asked herself. "It can't be one of the girls--they won't be back for a couple of hours or more. I know them! Besides, they don't move like that. Nothing feminine's been near the place since I've been in it. So far as I know, there's nothing feminine hereabouts to come. As for callers, we don't have them. What's likely to attract a woman to a house like this? Why, I do believe it's a lady--that dress was never made in this parish. And--she's young! Where on earth have I seen her before? I have seen her, but where? My stars!--the miniature! It's Margaret Wallace!--come to see the man she jilted! Here's a nice to-do!"

The approaching figure had come clear of the carriage drive, and was now in full sight. As Isabel had acknowledged to herself, it was unmistakably that of a lady. The dress might be proof itself to another woman's keen perception, but there was other evidence as well. The way in which the stranger bore herself--her carriage, the easy grace which marked her movements, at least suggested breeding. As the face became visible all doubt was at an end. This was certainly a lady who, as it seemed, was coming to call.

Was the purport of her presence here merely to pay a passing call? Did she simply wish to make a few inquiries, and then return from whence she came? Would she be content with a few more or less civil words being spoken to her at the partly open door, or would she insist on entering and being allowed to visit Cuthbert Grahame in his room? In that case Isabel's domination would be at an end. The chances were that those two had but to exchange half-a-dozen words, and the castle which she had already in imagination builded would resolve itself into an edifice even less substantial than a house of cards. The wild scheme of which she had conceived the embryo would never move from that condition. The situation out of which she had determined to wrest a great opportunity would be there and then at an end if Margaret Wallace won her way past that front door.

But would she win it? The fates were on Isabel's side. Nannie upstairs helpless in her bed; Cuthbert Grahame still more helpless in his; the two girls out--Margaret Wallace would have to reckon with her. Isabel overrated herself if, in such a contest as was likely to ensue, she did not prove the better of the pair.

A sudden thought occurring to her she hurried into the hall. By some fortunate chance the front door was closed, so that she remained unseen by the approaching visitor. She remembered that she had closed it when she herself had come in; as a rule it stood wide open. If it had been then it would have been impossible for her to perform the part she proposed to play. As soon as she reached it she turned the key--only just in time. Within thirty seconds the handle was tried by some one on the other side.

"That settles it," observed Isabel to herself. "I didn't look at the face in the miniature so closely as all that, it was the setting which occupied me. I might have mistaken the likeness, and it mightn't have been Margaret Wallace after all. But the style in which she turned that handle gives her away. She's come in

and out of this house too often not to be aware that, even if the door does happen to be shut, you've only got to turn the handle to come in. When she found that it wouldn't open, I'll bet that she had a bit of a shock. Holloa! it seems that she can't believe it now. I daresay it's the first time in all her life that she's found that door closed against her."

Something of the kind did seem possible. The person on the other side was giving the handle various twists and turns, as if unable to credit that the door was actually locked. It was only after continued efforts that the fact was realised. There was an interval, as if the person without was considering the position.

"Now what'll she do?" wondered Isabel. "Go round to the back, and see if she can't get in that way? She won't think it a possible thing that both doors can be locked. The odds are that she's come in one way as often as the other. She won't come in that way this time, and so I'll show her."

On stealthy feet Isabel, stealing to the back of the house, both locked and bolted the door which gave ingress to the house on that side. As she was ramming the top bolt home a bell clanged through the house followed by the rat-tat-tat of a knocker.

"So she's concluded not to give herself the trouble of trying the back door, at least for the present. Now what'll I do? One thing's sure, I'm not going to be in any haste to answer either her ringing or her knocking. Possibly if no one does answer she'll be tricked into thinking the house is empty." The bell and knocker were audible again.

"She's pretty impatient; she doesn't give a person over-much time to answer, even if one wanted to. What a row that bell does make--sounds as if it were rusty. I daresay it isn't rung more than once a year. It'll startle those two upstairs--it's a time since they heard it. There she is again. She'll hurt that bell if she isn't careful. I'd like to hurt her--if she doesn't watch out I will before she's finished. That's right, my dear, give another pull at it! Pretty rough on Grahame. If he only knew who was ringing what wouldn't he give to get at her--especially if he understood that this is the only chance he'll ever have; and to have to lie there like a log, and let it slip between his fingers! As for Nannie--that old woman's got the nose of a bloodhound--I shouldn't be surprised if she smells who's at the door. If she does I shouldn't wonder if, broken leg or no broken leg, she tumbles out of bed and tries to get down somehow to open it. She hadn't better. She'll break it again if she does--if I have to help her do it! No one's going to interfere with that door but me! I'm not going to have her hammering and clanging till those two girls come back, that won't suit my book at all. And as she looks like doing it the sooner I get rid of her the better."

The upper panels of the front door were of coloured glass, the panes, which were of different hues, shapes and sizes, being set in leaden frames. While it was possible for whoever was within to obtain a vague impression of some one without, it was impossible for whoever was without to see anything of the person within. It was of this fact that the quick-witted Isabel proposed to take advantage. Among the various accomplishments which fitted her, in her opinion, to shine in the halls was that of mimicry. Drawing close up to the glass panels she exclaimed, in tones which were intended to represent the broken-legged Nannie's--

"Who's that as wants to break the bell of a decent body's house?"

That the assumption was not entirely unsuccessful was shown by the response which came instantly from the other side of the door.

"Is that you, Nannie? You silly old thing! Where have you been? What have you been doing? And why have you locked this door?--open it at once!"

"And to whom will I open it, please?"

There came a peal of girlish laughter as a prelude to this reply.

"Nannie, you are an old stupid! Do you mean to say that you don't recognise my voice as well as I do yours? Why, I'm Meg come back to see you again!--open the door at once, you goose!"

"I'll no open the door this day."

"Nannie!"

"Margaret Wallace, I tell you I'll no open the door for you this day, so back you go from where you came."

"Nannie! how can you speak to me like that! How dare you!"

"I'm but obeying Mr. Cuthbert's orders, and it's not fear of you that'll stay me from doing that."

"Do you mean to tell me that Cuthbert Grahame forbade you to let me into the house?"

"He did a great deal more. He said that if you ever came near it he'd bring half-a-dozen dogs to set them at you. So take yourself off, and be quick about it."

"But, Nannie, I don't understand."

"None of your lies! It's plain enough! So be off to where you're wanted--if it's anywhere."

"But, Nannie, what have I done that you should speak to me like this? You always used to take my part."

"It's no part of yours I'll ever take again. Are you going?"

"I only want to talk to you. If you'll only open the door I promise you I won't try to get in if you don't want me to."

"I can have all the talk I want with you as we are. Will you be off?"

"Won't you let me have one look at you, Nannie, and give you just one kiss?"

"I'll have none of your kisses, and I never want to look at you again till you're lying in your coffin."

"Nannie! there's something about the way you talk which I don't understand. It's not you to speak to me like this. I insist upon your opening the door. I don't believe Cuthbert Grahame ever told you not to--I know him too well to think that's possible. I shall keep on ringing and knocking till you do open, and so I tell you."

"Then you'll keep on some time, I promise you that. I know what Mr. Cuthbert's orders are better than you. If I was to empty his gun at you I'd only do what he'd wish me to."

"Nannie! But, Nannie, I've come all the way from London. It's a very long way, and costs a deal of money, and nowadays I haven't much money, as you know. You're not going to send me back like this."

"Is it the fare back to London that you're wanting? If it's to beg you've come, I'll give you the fare out of my own pocket, so that Mr. Cuthbert may be rid of you in peace."

This time in the girlish voice there was a ring of unmistakable indignation.

"Nannie! you're a wicked old woman! I believe that you've some wicked scheme in your head of which Cuthbert Grahame knows nothing. You sound as if you were capable of anything. If you don't let me in this moment I'll get in without your help."

"How are you going to do that, pray?"

"Do you think I can't? I'll soon show you! If you think I'm still a foolish girl to be tyrannised over by you, you're very much mistaken. I won't believe that Cuthbert Grahame doesn't wish to see me till he tells me so with his own lips."

CHAPTER XI

HOT WATER

A hand was raised on the other side of the door and brought smartly against the glass. The whole panel shivered; the blow would only have to be repeated two or three times to destroy it altogether. Whipping the key out of the lock, Isabel hurried up the staircase, slipping it into her pocket as she went. Although she had no fear of an entry being made, she was very far from desirous of being seen. That would involve the discovery of the fraud she had been practising. If Miss Wallace learned that it was not Nannie who had been addressing her in such uncompromising terms, it was scarcely likely, even if driven by force from the house, that she would leave the neighbourhood without effecting her purpose of seeing Cuthbert Grahame. So Isabel, determined that that should not happen, resolved to adopt extreme measures.

When she gained the top of the stairs she could already hear the glass shivering in the door below. Rushing into the bath-room, snatching up a couple of pails which the not too tidy maids had left there, and filling them at the tap, she strode with them to the landing-window which overlooked the entrance. She had filled them at the hot-water tap, and the steam came against her hand.

"It isn't very hot," she told herself. "There's just enough sting in it to make her a little warmer than she is already."

The window was wide open. She peeped out to see that the girl was immediately below. Balancing both pails on the sill she turned them over together. That the contents had reached the mark was immediately made plain by the cries which ascended from below.

"Nannie! Nannie! you've scalded me! you've scalded me!"

Isabel replied, still taking care not to allow so much as the tip of her nose to be seen through the window--

"I'll scald you again in half a minute--you'll find the water's boiling next time, I promise you. What's more, I'll take Mr. Cuthbert's gun to you, as he bade me. You shameless hussy! to go breaking his windows because he won't have you set your foot inside the house that you've disgraced!"

This diatribe from the supposititious Nannie was followed by silence below. Isabel, who found the suspense a little trying, was half disposed to venture on a glance to learn what was taking place. Unmistakable sounds, however, arose just as she had made up her mind to run the risk. Margaret Wallace was crying. Presently she exclaimed, in tones which were broken by her sobs--

"I'm going, Nannie. You needn't trouble to get Mr. Cuthbert's gun, nor to wait till the water's boiling. Whatever Mr. Cuthbert's orders may have been--and I know I've used him badly, and deserve anything from him--I never thought you'd have treated me like this. I've never done you any harm, and you've always pretended that you loved me. I hope you'll never regret driving me away like this from the house

that has always been a home to me! Oh, Nannie! Nannie!"

The girl uttered the last two words in such poignant tones that Isabel thought it extremely possible that they penetrated to the woman to whom they were actually addressed. After a moment's interval footsteps were audible below. Then, as Isabel drew back behind the curtain, she could see through the loophole that Margaret Wallace was returning whence she came. She moved with a very different step to that which had marked her approach. Her feet seemed to lag, her head hung down, and she kept putting her hand up to her eyes to relieve them of blinding tears. Her attitude was significant of the most extreme despondency. Apparently some remnants of her pride still lingered. It was probably those fragments of her self-respect which prevented her from once looking round to glance at the house from whose precincts she was being so contemptuously dismissed.

Isabel watched the defeated mien which characterised the girl's whole bearing in the moment of her humiliation with a smile of triumph.

"That's one to me. It's on the cards that it's the one that's going to win the game. I guess she's feeling pretty bad. It can't be nice, if your pockets aren't too well lined, to come all the way from London just for this. I daresay she meant to do the conscience-stricken act--tell him how sorry she was, ask his forgiveness, have an affecting reconciliation, and all that kind of thing. I expect she was drawing pictures of how it all was going to be as she came along in the train. I rather fancy those pictures won't get beyond the outline. She'll be trying her hand at sketches of another kind as she goes back again. I wonder how she'd feel if she knew how she's been bluffed by an insolent adventuress, and that Nannie hadn't had a hand in the game at all. She'd feel pretty mad! I wonder how Nannie feels if she so much as guesses at what's been going on. I'll give the old lady a call; and I'll call on Mr. Cuthbert Grahame. But before I do that I think I'll write a few lines on a sheet of paper--on a couple of sheets."

Before she quitted her post of observation the unhappy girl had vanished from sight. Isabel waited for some minutes after she had disappeared lest something should transpire which might cause her to change her mind and return. As time passed and nothing more was seen of her, Isabel decided that she had gone for good. Descending to the dining-room, seating herself at a writing-table, Isabel drew from a drawer two large sheets of paper, similar to the one contained in the envelope which Cuthbert Grahame had instructed her to take from behind the sliding panel. On one of these sheets she wrote, in her large, bold, round hand, a facsimile of the will which marriage had rendered invalid.

"I give and bequeath all the property of which I die possessed, both in real and personal estate, to Margaret Wallace, absolutely, for her sole use and benefit." When she had finished she surveyed what she had written, then added--"With the exception of five thousand pounds in cash, which I give and bequeath to Isabel Burney, and which it is my wish shall be paid to her, free of legacy duty, within seven days of my being buried".

"That only needs his signature and the signatures of the witnesses. Shall I date it, or leave the date open? I think I'll be safe in dating it to-morrow. Now for another document very much like it, but not quite, though as far as appearance goes it must be as exactly like it as it can be conveniently made."

She then wrote on the second sheet what was, with some slight, but important, differences, an exact reproduction of the words she had written on the other.

"I give and bequeath all the property of which I die possessed, both in real and personal estate, to

Isabel Burney"--she hesitated, then wrote--"whom I have acknowledged to be my wife, in the presence of Dr. Twelves and Nannie Foreshaw, absolutely, for her sole use and benefit"--she hesitated again, and this time added--"with the exception of five farthings in cash, which I give and bequeath to Margaret Wallace, and which it is my wish shall be paid to her, free of legacy duty, within seven days of my being buried."

"That also needs but the signatures and--a little ingenuity." She had made them, in all respects, so much alike, fitting into the same space the extra words on the second sheet that at a little distance it was easy to mistake one for the other. "Now we'll tear up that old thing, which my appearance on the scene was so unfortunate as to spoil, and we'll put the new will in its place--with its brother."

She did as she said, folding up the two sheets in precisely the same creases, putting them into the one envelope. Then she went upstairs to see Nannie.

The old lady's leg bade fair to be a long time healing, nor was a cure likely to be hastened by her impatience and general unwillingness to take things easily. So soon as Isabel put her head inside the room, Nannie, sitting up in bed, aimed at her a volley of questions.

"Why haven't you been here before? What's all the clatter been about--like as if the house was coming down? Such ringing and hammering I never heard the likes of. What's been the meaning of it all? Where's them two girls? Why didn't one of you open the door, like as if it was a Christian house? Why did you suffer such a hubbub--enough to disturb the countryside? Who's been talking in a voice like a cracked tin trumpet?"

It occurred to Isabel that the last analogy was unfortunate, since a "cracked tin trumpet" was a not inadequate description of the screech in which Nannie herself was even then indulging. The old lady presented a peculiar spectacle--in a huge, ancient nightcap, tied in a big bow beneath her chin; a vivid tartan shawl about her shoulders. The visitor replied to the whole of the inquiries with an unhesitating lie.

"Nannie, do you know that a dreadful man's been begging, and trying to force his way into the house. If I hadn't turned the key just in time I don't know what would have happened." She did not, but the happenings would have run on different lines to those which she suggested. "As it was he broke the front-door window, and I had to pour a couple of buckets of water over him before he'd go."

"A man been begging, and trying to force his way into the house! Such a thing's never happened in all the days I've known the place."

"I daresay I expect it was some one who's heard that you were confined to your bed, and thought that I might be easily tackled. He's found out his mistake."

"Where's them two girls?"

"I've sent them on an errand. Perhaps he knew that too, and that made him bolder."

"I thought I heard a voice I knew."

"That must have been mine."

"Yours! I haven't heard a sound of you. Who was it screeching?"

"That was me. I was imitating your voice, Nannie. You see I thought it might frighten him more than mine--and it did."

"My voice! Do you mean to tell me that that rasping, creaking screech was meant to be an imitation of my voice? I'd like to know whoever heard me talk in that way."

"Why, Nannie, I'm hearing you talk that way now. Don't you know your own musical accents when you hear them?--and me giving you a taste of them to your face!"

Laughingly, Isabel treated Nannie to another imitation of her curious nasal utterance then and there, and was out of the room before the old lady had recovered sufficiently from her astonishment to pronounce a candid criticism of the impertinent performance.

From Nannie Isabel descended to the master of the house, to be greeted by some very similar inquiries.

"What's been the meaning of all this uproar?" Isabel repeated the lie she had told Nannie. "That was no man's voice I heard. It was a woman's, and I could have sworn one I knew."

"I expect the voice you thought you knew was Nannie. I was favouring the ruffian with as close an imitation of her genial tongue as I could manage."

"That's not what I mean. I heard you imitating Nannie. Will you swear it was a man at the door?"

"Of course I'll swear it. Whatever do you mean?"

"What was he like?"

She seemed to consider.

"He was rather tall and very broad, with a big red beard. He had a cloth cap on the back of his head; his coat over his arm; and he carried a huge stick--about as undesirable-looking a person to encounter on a lonely road as you could very well imagine. I should know him anywhere if I saw him again. Do you recognise him from my description?"

"I do not. I heard nothing of any man speaking, the voice I heard was a woman's."

"Of course it was; I tell you that that was me imitating Nannie. Don't you understand?"

"It was neither your voice nor Nannie's. It was one I have heard too often, and know too well, ever to mistake for another. I could have sworn it was hers; I could have sworn I heard her pronounce my name. I was not dreaming--I could not have been. That I should lie here, chained and helpless, and she almost within touch of me! Why didn't Nannie go down to the door?"

"Nannie?--she's as helpless as you are."

"Where are those two servants?"

"I sent them out on an errand long ago."

"So that you've had me at your mercy, and if it was her, you've had her also. That God should permit it! If you are lying to me--and I believe you can lie like truth!--may you soon be consigned to hell fire, to rot there to all eternity."

"If the worst comes to the worst, that's a trip on which I hope to follow you."

"Swear to me by all that you hold sacred--if there's anything!--that it wasn't Margaret Wallace at the door."

"Margaret Wallace!--are you stark mad?"

"I believe you're tricking me! I believe I heard her voice! I believe I heard her pronounce my name!"

"If I had thought that you could have got such an idea into your head as that, I'd have thrown the door wide open, and invited that murderous ruffian to walk upstairs to you. Then you would have seen how much he was like Margaret Wallace--that is, if she's anything like the picture which you showed me. You've been talking and thinking so much about Margaret Wallace that you've got her on the brain. Do you think that if it had been her I wouldn't have brought her right up to you? You're very much mistaken if you do. I'm no saint, any more than you are, but I'd no more rob a woman of her happiness than you would--perhaps not so much. You did try to rob her, and you got me to be your accomplice--blindfold, as it were. If I'd known what you've told me this afternoon I'd have seen you--and old Twelves!--the other side of Jordan before I'd let you make a fool of me. Now that I do know, I won't rest quiet till you've put her back into the position in which she was before. Here's that will I spoke to you about. It's the same as the one which was spoilt, except that it leaves me five thousand pounds. Five thousand pounds will be of no consequence to her, while it will make all the difference in the world to me. After the way in which you've treated me I ought to have something, and that's the something I mean to have."

Taking out the will which left everything to Margaret Wallace except the £5,000, she held it out in front of Cuthbert Grahame. He read it through.

"That seems all right. Will you help me sign it?"

"Of course I'll help you sign it--now if you choose, though I've dated it to-morrow, because I thought that would give you a chance to think things over. I tell you that I shan't rest till that girl's back into her own again." For some moments he was silent, then he said--

"Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Mistaken about what?"

"Perhaps it wasn't her voice I heard."

"Man, I tell you you were dreaming."

"Perhaps I was. If you'd driven her from the door you'd hardly bring me a will like that directly after. Even if you'd let her in, you might have guessed that she wouldn't have wanted to rob you of your five thousand."

"Of course she wouldn't, any more than I wanted to rob her. We women are not so bad as that,

whatever you men may think."

"Put the will under my pillow--gently--with her miniature. As you say, I'll think things over. Maybe I'll sign it to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII

SIGNING THE WILL

Cuthbert Grahame did sign his last will and testament on the morrow, though hardly in the fashion he intended. The way in which he was tricked was this.

Before the woman who called herself his wife went down to her breakfast she paid him a morning call. He had had a more restful night than usual, so that he was in an exceptional good-humour. The sight of her seemed almost to give him pleasure. She was all smiles and sweetness, which were real enough, since she hoped to be shortly in possession of a boundless stock of happiness. He began on the subject directly he saw her.

"I'll sign that will of yours."

"That's right; so you shall. But won't you wait till after breakfast, then we can have up Jane and Martha to be witnesses."

Jane and Martha were the two serving-maids whose absence yesterday had been so opportune.

"I'll wait. You'll have to have me propped up a little higher; I shan't be able to sign like this."

"I'll see to that; I'll do everything I can." And she did. She communed with herself as she ate a substantial meal. "Propped up? I'll see he's propped up high enough, I promise him--the higher the better. He can't be propped up high enough for me. It seems a dangerous game to try to change one paper for the other right under his very nose, but I fancy I know how it can be done--and with complete impunity. If he could move so much as a finger it might be difficult, but propped up as he'll be he'll be wholly at the mercy of my two hands. I think they're skilful enough for the job they've got to do." Spreading out the second sheet of paper on the breakfast-table in front of her, she studied it carefully, with every appearance of complacency. "Such a little difference and yet so much--only the substitution of one word for another, and all the world is changed. I think 'whom I have acknowledged to be my wife in the presence of Dr. Twelves and Nannie Foreshaw' is a positive stroke of genius. It commits me to nothing, and establishes my position, because while he admits his desire to claim me for his wife, there is no reference to any wish on my part to have him for a husband. The only trouble will be to prevent his noticing the difference in the appearance of the two papers, which, however neatly I've done it, is the necessary consequence of inserting those few words. But I think I know how to manage that."

She did; she credited herself with no capacity which she did not possess. In every respect she proved herself to be fully equal to all the requirements of the occasion.

She returned to Cuthbert Grahame's bedroom so soon as she had finished breakfast, the personification of brisk, hearty good-humour.

"Now are you ready? Shall we get to business? Is the will still underneath your pillow? Shall I get it out?" She took from its resting-place the paper which he supposed himself to be about to sign. With the aid of some pillows she raised him to a more upright position. Then she spread the paper out in front of him. "You see, there's the will. Is that just as you want it to be?"

He read it through.

"That's all right."

"Then I'll call up Martha and Jane to act as witnesses, and then you'll be able to sign it in their presence." She called up the two girls, who came up rubbing their hands on their aprons. She said to him, "Hadh't you better explain to them what it is you want them to do?"

He explained.

"I'm going to make a new will. Mrs. Grahame,"--he paused; one almost suspected him of a desire to give the name satiric emphasis--"has been drawing up a will at my dictation. I'm going to sign it. I want you to act as witnesses of my signature. Stand close to the bed so that you can see what I am doing. My dear"--this was to Isabel; again there was the hint of an ironical intention--"if you will bring me the will which you have been so good as to draft for me I won't keep these young women a moment longer than I can help."

She brought him the will--or, rather, a will. It was spread out on a slope, and covered with a sheet of blotting-paper on which she kept her fingers to prevent it slipping. Only the last four lines were visible--"it is my wish shall be paid to her, free of legacy duty, within seven days of my being buried". What went before was hidden; the familiar conclusion seemed to be all that he cared to see. Leaning over him, raising his right arm, as gingerly as if it had been a piece of delicate porcelain, she placed his dreadful, helpless fingers somehow about a pen. He spoke to the two girls.

"As you know, I can do nothing by myself, so Mrs. Grahame, at my request, is going to guide my hand so as to enable me to sign my will. You understand, it is I who am signing it, not she."

It was a strange signature--"Cuthbert Grahame," in big, sprawling letters; some of them unattached to each other, all slanting in different directions. The owner of the name, however, seemed to view the result with undiluted satisfaction.

"That's my signature--clear enough for any one to read. Now I want you two girls to attach your names as witnesses to the fact that I have signed my will in your presence."

Isabel removed the slope to the writing-table against the wall. Then each of the girls wrote her name in turn. When they had done so they left the room. So soon as they had gone Cuthbert Grahame spoke to Isabel.

"Now let me have a look at that will of mine in its finished condition. Thank goodness it is done. It's a weight off my mind--a relief for which I have to thank you."

Isabel stood at the writing-table, looking down, with a smile on her face, at the paper he had signed.

"Do you say that you want to see your will now that it's all signed, sealed and finished?"

"Yes; didn't you hear what I said? Then I want you to put it under my pillow. I'll show it Twelves when he comes. He'll laugh when he sees it."

"I expect he will laugh. Is Dr. Twelves coming to-day?"

"He said something about it. If not, then he'll be here to-morrow. It will keep till then."

"Oh yes; it will keep till then."

"What are you waiting for? Why don't you bring the will? Don't I tell you I want to read it again?"

She went to the bed, the sheet of paper extended between her two hands.

"Here's your will, Mr. Grahame; by all means read it again."

He read it, once, twice, then again. Then he tried to speak. It seemed that his voice failed him. It was not pleasant to notice the stammer which seemed to mark his struggles for breath.

"What--what folly's this? That's not the will I signed."

Her eyes were dancing with laughter. There was a merry ring in her voice, as if she was in the enjoyment of an excellent joke.

"Oh yes, it is."

"It's not the one you drafted."

"Oh yes, it is."

"It isn't the one you showed me just now."

"Isn't it? Are you quite, quite sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! It's a trick!--a fraud! This is not my will!"

"But, dear Mr. Grahame--I noticed how you called me your dear!--it is your will. Here's your signature, attested by two witnesses. After all, there's only a slight difference between the one you saw and this."

"A slight difference, you--you----!"

In his efforts to find an expletive to fit the occasion, his struggles for breath became greater. She went gaily on.

"The only difference is that I get everything instead of Margaret Wallace, and that instead of my five thousand pounds she gets five farthings. Surely the trifling substitution of a few words won't matter to you in the least, Mr. Grahame."

It seemed that it mattered a good deal. After a tremendous effort he regained some portion of his voice,

enough to enable him to burst into a string of expletives.

"You--you----! You----! It's a fraud! a----fraud! It's a swindle! Don't you flatter yourself that it will stand! Don't you think I'll let it stand! Wait till Twelves comes, then I'll show you!"

"Wait till Dr. Twelves comes? Suppose he never comes?"

"What do you mean? What are you doing with that pillow?"

"Suppose Dr. Twelves never comes, what is to prevent this will from standing?"

"What are you doing with that pillow, you----!"

"I'm going to stop your saying such dreadful things. It pains me to have to listen to such language."

She snatched away one pillow from beneath his head, and then a second. She had propped him in such a way that when he was deprived of their support his head fell back, and there recurred the scene of the previous afternoon. He began to choke; his unwieldy frame was shaken by convulsive efforts to breathe; stertorous gasps proceeded from the region of his chest. He presented a dreadful spectacle.

The sight did not seem to in any way affect the woman who was standing by his bed, with the pillows still in her hand. She pressed the bolster farther up his back so that his head declined at an acute angle; applying her palm to the point of his chin she forced it lower still. Then she said--

"I'll place the will as you wished me, Mr. Grahame, under your pillow".

She placed it there, under the single pillow which remained; then she left the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENCOUNTER IN THE WOOD

Isabel crossed to her own room, put on her hat, smiling at herself in the looking-glass as she arranged it to her satisfaction, then went downstairs, and out of the house without a word to any one. It was perhaps because she was conscious that Martha was peeping at her through the stillroom window that she began to whistle. She was still whistling one of the latest possible melodies when, entering the drive, she turned off among the trees and struck into the woods. Whistling was one of her accomplishments: she whistled very well. The sound of her clear pipe travelled far and wide. No one to hear her, or, for the matter of that, to look at her either, would have supposed that she had a care upon her mind. She bore herself like some lighthearted, happy girl, who, with unstained conscience, looks the whole world in the face, thinking what a delightful place it was for a pretty girl to be in.

As a matter of fact it was the bright side of the picture which presented itself to her--the bright side only. In imagination she saw herself, as she would herself have phrased it, with "tons of money" and "heaps of friends"; the bright particular star of a radiant circle. Everywhere she was greeted with outstretched hands, glad faces and pæans of welcome. Her frocks were the most numerous and the "sweetest," her carriages and horses were the finest, everything she had was of the very best, and she had everything the heart--her heart!--could desire.

With that union of the practical with the imaginative which was not the least prominent of her characteristics she there and then began to inquire of herself what exactly in her new position she should do. To begin with, there was the delicate question of what she should call herself. Should she be Mrs. Lamb or Mrs. Grahame? Should she revert to her maiden patronymic, or should she start life again, with a fresh name altogether, one more in consonance with her new position? These were points she felt which would depend largely upon circumstances; she might not have so much freedom in the matter as she might desire. Then there was the question of domicile. Where should she reside? One thing was certain, she would not stay where she was--nothing would induce her. If she had her own way she would never come near the place again--never! As for living in his house!--in the middle of her brilliant imaginings the mere thought of such a thing seemed to make her blood run cold.

On the instant her mood was changed. She stood still, amid the trees and bushes. With clenched fists, a new expression in her eyes, she looked behind her, first over one shoulder, then the other, then to the right and to the left, as if in search of something she had no desire to see. A sudden, strange reluctance seemed to clog her limbs. She listened: there was only the cawing of some distant rooks and the whisper of the breeze among the pines. With a laugh at her stupidity, breaking through the something which constrained her, she went striding on.

But she had not gone far when a very genuine sound brought her to a halt. In itself a commonplace, there it was the most unusual of noises: it was the sound of footsteps, of some one tramping through the forest. In all the time she had known the place she had never heard a step except her own. Could it be Margaret Wallace, still lingering about the haunts she probably knew well and loved? It would be

disconcerting if it were. If they met--but that was hardly a woman's step. Could it be the doctor? What was he doing in the forest on foot? Besides, she had noticed what little pattering steps he took; this person was striding.

The walker was hidden from her by a clump of bracken which rose to a height of some six or seven feet. He was moving in her direction. Should she retreat? It could probably be done, and before he caught a glimpse of her. Should she advance and meet him? or should she wait until he came to her? While she hesitated, the decision was taken out of her hands. The walker, threading his way among the bracken, reached a point where the stalks were shorter. All at once she found herself confronted by--Gregory Lamb.

She stared at him with as much amazement as he stared at her, and her amazement was unbounded. Possibly he was the last person with whom she would have associated the advancing footsteps; no thought of him had crossed her mind. Not improbably, since she at least had cause to suspect that he might be in the neighbourhood, his surprise was even greater than hers. He stood looking at her in bewildered silence, as if unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes. When he did speak the observation which he made was characteristic.

"Well, I'm hanged!"

Her retort was equally in character.

"I wish you were!"

"I daresay; but I rather fancy that when it does come to hanging, where you and I are concerned, it will be a case of the lady first. Where the deuce have you been all this time? and what on earth are you doing here?"

"What business is that of yours? Do you know you're trespassing?"

"What business is it of mine? and do I know I'm trespassing? Well, that's pretty good, considering you're my wife, and the way you've behaved. Do you happen to know that the police are scouring the country for you, and that they're only lying low because they think you're dead, or something?"

"It's a lie! You're a natural born liar; you tell nothing but lies."

"Don't you think you've a little gift of you're own in that direction? I do! It was bad enough to sneak off from me like that; but to steal the old girl's money was playing it too low down!"

"What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about! Do you think that I don't know--and that everybody doesn't know--that you broke into Mrs. Macconichie's cupboard and stole her savings? A pretty mess I got into because you were a thief! You don't happen to know, I suppose, that they locked me up for what you'd done, and that they only let me go when I proved that that sort of thing wasn't quite in my line."

"Serve you right!"

"What served me right?--locking me up, or letting me go?"

"Anything would serve you right, you brute!"

"Brute, am I? All right, my lady! if that's the way you're going to talk to me I'll soon let the police know whereabouts you are, and then they'll serve you right. A good taste of prison would do you good, you dirty thief!"

"Don't shout like that!"

"Then don't you call me names. I'm not a thief whatever else I am."

"I'm not so sure of that. What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?"

"I thought you'd gone back to London long ago."

"Then you're wrong, because I haven't; and what's more, I'm not likely to go. I've been having a real bad time, that's what I've been having."

"Haven't those rich friends of yours sent that remittance you were always gassing about?"

"No, they haven't." After a pause, he added, sullenly, "My old mother's allowing me a pound a week, and I'm living on that. So now you know."

"Honest?"

"It's the gospel truth. So you'll be able to judge for yourself how likely I am to be able to get back to London on that, especially as she won't let me have a penny in advance."

"A nice sort you are!--after the lies you told me about the tons of money you'd got yourself, and the other tons your friends had got!--a pound a week!"

"Anyhow I'm not a thief."

"And I shouldn't have been a thief if I hadn't listened to your lies; and very well you know it. I've had enough of you; take yourself off!"

"Take myself off?"

"Yes, take yourself off, before I tell some one to take you."

"Well! you've got a face! If I do go I'll put the police on to you, and then you'll sing a different song."

"You dare!"

"Dare!" he laughed, not pleasantly. "What is there to dare? I'd think as little of putting the police on to you as I would of putting a dog on to a cat. They'd soon show you your place, you thief!"

There was an interval of silence, during which she looked at him over the intervening bracken. If looks

could kill he would have dropped dead where he stood.

"Well, are you going to take yourself off, or am I to tell them to take you?"

"Who's them?--tell away! I think that when I tell them you're my wife, and that the police have been looking for you for quite a while, they--whoever they may be!--won't be so keen to interfere with me as you perhaps fancy. There's another thing: you seem to be forgetting that you're my wife. When I do go you'll go with me."

"Will I? We'll see."

"We will see; or, if you prefer it, it shall be the other way about, I'll go with you."

"Will you?"

"It'll have to be one or the other, you may take it from me. Well, are you going to call those friends of yours? Are you coming with me, or am I to go with you? Which is it to be? I'm in no hurry; take your time. I'll have a pipe while you're thinking it over."

He filled a pipe which he took from his pocket, while she glared at him.

"I'm as strong as you; I believe I'm stronger; I believe I could kill you if I chose."

"Be a murderer as well as a thief, would you? I shouldn't be surprised. You mightn't find it so easy to bring off this job as you did the other; killing a man is not so simple as killing a pig, take my word for it."

"Listen to me, Gregory Lamb."

"I'm listening, Mrs. Lamb, and it gives me real pleasure to do it."

"I'll make a rich man of you if you'll take yourself off."

He stayed the lighted match on its passage to his pipe.

"You'll make a rich man of me? Now you're singing in quite another key. How are you going to do it?"

"I'm staying in the house of a man who's dying."

"Dying is he? Then what does he want you in the house for? Have you turned nurse? Is that your latest caper?"

"Never mind what I've turned. He's a rich man."

"What do you call rich?--like me?"

"You fool! He owns all this"--she threw out her arms--"and ever so much besides."

"Owns all this? Is it Cuthbert Grahame you're talking about?"

"What do you know about Cuthbert Grahame?"

"Only that I happen to be living in one of his cottages--just over there--and a nice hole it is. But you can't expect much in the way of board and lodging for a pound a week, especially when you want some change left out of it. You're living in Cuthbert Grahame's house? Why, then--great Scot!--you must be the woman they're talking about who dropped from the skies." A change took place in the expression of his countenance which in its way was comical. "A pretty sort of she-devil you must be!"

"Now what are you talking about?"

"I know everything. Why, one of the servants up at Cuthbert Grahame's--Martha Blair--is the daughter of the people I'm lodging with. They talk of nothing else but you. You've been passing yourself off as Cuthbert Grahame's wife."

"Well, what of it?"

"What of it?--that's good! First theft, then bigamy!"

"You fool! he's dying."

"I don't see what difference that makes; from what I understand he's been dying for years."

"He's made a will in my favour."

"Did he tell you?"

"He did. He's left me everything--every shilling he has in the world."

"You're a beauty, upon my soul you are!"

"And I tell you that he's dying while we are standing here. The odds are that he'll be dead by the time that I get back."

"How do you know?"

"Then everything he has will be mine--ours."

"Ours?"

"Ours!--yours and mine!--if you can keep a still tongue in your head, and keep on pretending that you know nothing about me."

He was trembling.

"What about the Mrs. Grahame?"

"Stuff the Mrs. Grahame! After he's dead I can soon be Mrs. Lamb again. What's to stop me?"

"Shall we have to live here?"

She shuddered, involuntarily.

"Live here?--not much! We'll clear out of this in double quick time. We'll take a house in London, and live like princes."

He moistened his lips with his tongue.

"You'll act on the square with me?"

"Of course I will, if you'll act on the square with me. Look here, there's a ten-pound note for you. It's all I've got about me, but as you seem hard up you may find it useful. You go back, and unless I'm mistaken by to-morrow morning you'll hear he's dead. It won't take me long to put things ship-shape. Don't you write or try to see me, unless I give you the office. I'll keep you posted in how things are going. And so soon as I can lay hands on a good lot of the ready, if you like we'll go up to town together, and we'll have a real old spree as we go."

"Belle, you--you're----"

He stopped, as if his vocabulary failed him altogether.

"Yes, I know I am; I'm all that, and more besides."

She laughed, and he laughed. In the laughter of neither of them was there any merriment. The sounds they emitted were merely mechanical.

CHAPTER XIV

IN CUTHBERT GRAHAME'S ROOM

On Isabel's return to the house she was greeted on the threshold by Martha, the Martha Blair whose connection with Gregory Lamb's present place of residence seemed destined to have a considerable bearing on Isabel's future life, and, at least, to settle the debated question of what her future name and title were to be. Martha's whole attitude was significant of some great happening. Her hands were raised; it seemed that if possible her hair would have been raised too; her eyebrows were elevated to quite a perceptible degree. Her eyes and mouth were wide open; agitation, of a not unpleasant kind, streamed from every pore of her. Behind was Jane, every whit as interested as her companion; but as she happened to be both the younger and the smaller her opportunities for display were less pronounced. Outside stood Dr. Twelves' dogcart; the horse, untended and untethered, apparently content to stand still as long as any one desired.

Martha broke into speech before Isabel had a chance to plant her foot upon the doorstep.

"Oh, Mrs. Grahame, the master! Mr. Cuthbert, ma'am!"

"Mr. Cuthbert, ma'am!" echoed Jane from the rear.

"Mr. Cuthbert? Well, what's the matter with Mr. Cuthbert? Let me come in, don't stand there blocking up the way! Do you hear, what's the matter with Mr. Cuthbert?"

"He's dead, ma'am--he's dead."

The words broke from both the girls in chorus.

"Dead? What do you mean? What nonsense are you talking? He was well enough when I went out. I've never seen him better."

"He's had an accident, ma'am, and it's killed him."

"Accident? How could he have an accident? Is Dr. Twelves in the house? Where is he?"

"The doctor is in Mr. Cuthbert's room. He's been there this half-hour and more."

She went upstairs to Mr. Cuthbert's room. Her pulse did not quicken; inwardly as well as outwardly she remained calm; she was a woman whose self-control was above the average; yet she was reluctant to enter that room. It was with an effort she induced herself to grip the handle; when she had done so she had to force herself to give it the necessary twist. Even then she lingered on the threshold.

"Who's there?" came the doctor's voice, in accents of inquiry. She showed herself.

"What's happened? What's the matter?"

The doctor was standing at the head of the bed. He had something in either hand. Instead of replying to her inquiries he looked at her from beneath his overhanging brows, as if he had been her accuser.

"Why do you look at me like that? Do you hear me ask you what has happened? Have you all lost your senses? Why don't you answer?" He waved his hand towards the bed. Her gaze followed his gesture, with an effort. She knew what she would see; she did not want to see it. Instantly her glance returned to the doctor.

"Is he--is he dead?"

"Quite dead."

"But I don't understand. When I left him he seemed brighter and better than I have ever seen him before."

"He's been killed."

"Killed! What do you mean, he's been killed?"

"Come here, I'll show you." She went a little closer, unwillingly. "Come this side of the bed." She did as he bade her, with leaden feet. "You see, the pillows have fallen; he's been choked."

"But how can they have fallen? They were all right when I left him. Has any one been in since?"

"Are you sure they were all right when you left him?"

"Perfectly sure. I tell you I have never seen him in better health or in brighter spirits."

"He could not have pushed them from under him himself."

"He might have done it in a fit."

"Perhaps; but it would have had to be a singular sort of a fit. You say you are sure they were in their usual position when you left him?"

"Why do you ask me that again? Why do you look at me like that, and speak in such a tone? Are you suggesting that I have had a hand in his death?"

"I am suggesting nothing."

"It seems to me that you are suggesting a good deal, which you dare not say right out. At least your manner is peculiar--but that it generally is. If you have anything to say, say it--like a man!--at once! Don't hint it, like a sneak. I hate your underhanded ways."

"I found this under his pillow--his one remaining pillow."

"It's his will. He made it this morning."

"So I am told by the two servants. I perceive it is in your writing. Did he dictate to you this document?"

"He did. I wrote it from his dictation, word for word as he told me. I wrote it yesterday afternoon. He read it through, and kept it under his pillow all night. He signed it this morning."

"It seems odd that, after completing such a will as this, he should have immediately died--in such a manner. If he could come to life again I wonder what he'd say."

"Give me that will, if you please, Dr. Twelves."

"Hadn't I better hand it to his lawyer for safe keeping?"

"His lawyer? His lawyer is now my lawyer; I will give all necessary instructions. The will will be in safe keeping with me. Give it me at once." He gave it her. "What have you in your other hand? Some more property of mine?"

"It is the miniature of the woman he loved best in the world. Don't you think it might go with him, in his coffin, to the grave?"

"Give it me. I will give all necessary instructions, as I have already told you. Your interference is not desired, nor will it be tolerated. To be quite frank with you, Dr. Twelves--it is always my desire to be frank and open--I have endured too much from you already; I will endure nothing more. The less I see, or hear, of you in the future the better I shall be pleased, since you are, in all respects, the most objectionable person I ever met. Don't you venture to intrude yourself again; if medical attendance is required it will be obtained elsewhere. I am now the mistress of this house--since there is no master, its mistress in the most literal sense. Everything is mine--everything. Be so good as to bear that in mind."

He looked at her, and smiled.

"I am not likely to forget that--ever."

She did not know which she liked least--his tone, his look, or his smile.

BOOK II

THE WIDOW

CHAPTER XV

"THE GORDIAN KNOT"

Mr. Talfourd twiddled the bunch of La France roses between his fingers with a smile which was scarcely one of satisfaction. They were very fine roses--in just that stage of bursting bud in which the La France is seen at its best. In London La France roses cost money, even when they are poor examples of their kind; those were good enough for exhibition. There were a great many of them, and they were tied about with a beautiful green ribbon, in charming contrast with the blooms. They had probably cost some one at least half a sovereign. They were for him; they had cost him nothing; yet they did not seem to afford him pleasure.

The fact was he was puzzled. He did not quite know what to make of the situation; what he did understand he did not like.

"This gets beyond a jest," he told himself. "Because I happened to mention, accidentally, that La France roses were my favourite flowers, I didn't expect to find a bouquet of them on my table every morning awaiting my arrival. Either it means something or it doesn't; either way I don't like it. I'm getting three hundred pounds a year in cash for doing I don't quite know what, and apparently half as much again in flowers. It won't do--it will not do." He gave the unoffending roses an impatient twirl. "The point of the joke is that when I said La France roses were my favourite flowers I was speaking a little beside the mark. I don't know that I have a favourite flower. They're Meg's--I was thinking of her at the time, as I generally am. I don't want Mrs. Lamb to think that she is giving me flowers, when she is really giving them to Meg, to whom I invariably pass them on. I don't know that she would really relish the notion of my giving her flowers to some one else. Confound her impudence!"

He threw the roses from him on to the table with a show of roughness which they, at any rate, had done nothing to deserve. As if conscious that his temper was being vented in the wrong quarter, picking them up again he regarded them with looks of whimsical self-reproach.

While he was still eyeing them the door was opened, and a masculine voice inquired from without--

"May I come in?"

Without waiting for a reply the inquirer entered. It was Mr. Gregory Lamb. A much more resplendent Gregory Lamb than the one whose acquaintance we have previously made. The Gregory Lamb we met in the wood was purely an affair of make-believe--not of very plausible make-believe. His attire then looked as if it wished you to think it had cost a great deal of money--but the trained eye knew better. There could be no doubt that everything about this Gregory Lamb was the most expensive of its kind--only the trained eye knew really how expensive. The impression he conveyed was that he had got as much on him in the way of money as he conveniently could--probably that impression was not far wrong. Yet the result was scarcely satisfactory. Especially was this shown to be the case when he brought himself into comparison with the man who was already in the room.

Both were young; both bore themselves well; both were good-looking; yet there could not be a moment's doubt as to which was the pleasanter to look upon. It was not only that one was obviously a gentleman, and the other just as obviously was not; nor was it that one looked a clever, an intellectual, man, and the other emphatically did not; still less was it an affair of costume, since Gregory Lamb was overdressed and Harry Talfourd's attire was simply plain and neat. It was something subtler than any of these things which made the one attractive and the other the reverse. Gregory Lamb had never made a friend worth having in all his life--and never would; Talfourd made friends wherever he went. He could not himself have said why; it was certainly not because he tried.

To begin with, Mr. Lamb's manner was unfortunate. His intention was to be on terms of hail-fellow-well-met with every one; to be no respecter of persons; to be "my dear chap" with Tom, Dick and Harry. As a matter of fact, there was an air of patronage about everything he said and did which was perhaps the more insufferable because unconscious. He came into the room with what he meant to be an air of jaunty geniality.

"All alone? I thought you would be. It's not your time for receiving visitors, is it? Just come; I heard you knock; must have time to breathe before you let them in--eh? Those are fine roses."

"They are not bad ones."

"Bad ones!--I should think they weren't. They oughtn't to be; I happen to know what my wife paid for them." He laughed, as if he sneered. "Sends you them every morning, doesn't she? Standing order, I hear. Talfourd, you're in luck."

Mr. Talfourd's manner was as cold as the other's was warm.

"Mrs. Lamb is very kind--kinder than I deserve."

"Perhaps she knows what you deserve better than you do--trust her, she's no simpleton. When she takes a fancy she has her reasons. I say, old man, I want you to do me a favour."

"I shall be happy to do you a service if I can."

"There's no doubt about the can--not the least in the world--you'll find that it's as easy as winking. I want you to get my wife to let me go for a little run to Monte Carlo."

"I beg your pardon?--I don't understand."

"It's this way. I'll be frank with you, Talfourd. I look upon you as a friend, my boy. I can't go without cash; I'm stony-broke; my wife holds the money-bags. You tell her--you know how!--Mr. Lamb winked--"that you think the run would do me good, and tell her to give me a thousand to do it with, and--I'll do as much for you one day, upon my soul I will."

Mr. Talfourd stared at the speaker in undisguised amazement.

"You credit me with powers of persuasion which are altogether beyond any I possess."

"Oh no, I don't"--Mr. Lamb laughed again--"I know better than that! You tell her what I've asked you to tell her, and I bet you anything I cross by to-night's boat, with notes for a thousand in my pocket. She'd

send me to the North Pole at a hint from you."

There was scarcely such a friendly expression on Mr. Talfourd's face as on the other's.

"Are you not forgetting that Mrs. Lamb is my employer? that I am merely her servant since I receive her wages?"

"Her servant?"--the laugh again--"I hope she doesn't overwork you. Come, Talfourd, be the good sort you are, help a lame dog over a stile. I'm spoiling for a flutter, and I'm dead sure that the only chance I have of getting it is by means of a helping word from you."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Lamb. I am engaged to do clerical work for Mrs. Lamb. I should not presume to speak to her on the subject you have mentioned."

"Presume?--what ho! Now Talfourd, you're no kid any more than I am. You know as well as I do that you can twist my wife round your finger. All I want you to do is to give her a twist for my particular benefit."

"I can give you no answer but the one I have already given."

"Oh yes, you can--and you will. I'll look in for it to-morrow morning--by that time you'll have thought it over. You're not so crusty as you make yourself out to be. That'll be four-and-twenty hours clean thrown away; and when you're spoiling for a burst like I am, that's a deuce of time. But I shall have every confidence in your kind offices when you've had a chance to see just what I'm driving at."

When Mr. Lamb had retired Mr. Talfourd seemed unhappy.

"Every time that man talks to me I want to kick him. I wonder if he affects other people in the same way--the unmentionable animal! If, as the husband of his wife, he thinks himself entitled to talk to me like that, it's time for me to think things over. I must know where I am moving. Three hundred pounds are three hundred pounds--I know that as well as any one--but they may be earned too dearly. It is one thing to be Mrs. Lamb's secretary, quite another to be----" He did not finish the sentence even mentally. Sitting down to the table he drew towards him the little heap of correspondence which was supposed to justify his secretarial existence. There were about a dozen envelopes, mostly containing circulars of different kinds. "I believe that the letters are examined, and any of the slightest importance retained, before they are sent to me. The idea of my receiving three hundred pounds a year for opening circulars is too thin."

While he sat with both elbows on the table, staring ruefully in front of him, the door opened again, and Mrs. Lamb came in.

"At work? I hope I'm not disturbing you."

She had changed more than her husband, whether for the better or for the worse was not easy to determine. So far as appearance went she had become a much better imitation of a lady. Society, or what with her passed as society, had smoothed away some of the angles. She had the air of a woman who had to do with many persons of different sorts, and had learned to adapt herself to them all. One felt that she was probably a popular character on the stage on which she had chosen to perform--successful, at least within certain limits. One did not wonder that it was so, if only because, in her own way, she was good to

look at.

That way, however, did not happen to be Mr. Talfourd's--which was unfortunate. Indeed, she inspired him with a curious feeling. He was afraid of her. It seemed absurd, but he was. For one thing, he realised that she was not only a clever, an unusually clever woman, but that her cleverness lay in a direction in which he was incompetent, and would perhaps prefer to be. Again, he felt that she read him like an open book, knew him to his finger-tips, while she was beyond his comprehension--where, again, he would possibly prefer her to remain. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that she saw in him something which was not savoury; that her keenest glances were continually directed on his weakest points; that it would please her to find him an undesirable creature. He had no overt cause to suppose this was so. So far she had been to him nothing but a friend--a friend in need. But on such a point even the vaguest shadow of a doubt was disquieting.

He rose as she came in.

"It is not possible for you to disturb me--I wish it were."

"You wish it were? Why?"

"Because in that case I should be really doing some genuine work--which I never am. My post is too much of a sinecure; my conscience will not allow me to remain your secretary much longer if there continues to be nothing to do."

"You want something to do? You shall have it--very soon--at least, I think so. I have been reading your play."

"My play?"

He had noticed that she was carrying in her hand what looked like some typewritten MSS., in brown-paper covers. Now, with a start, he recognised them as his own.

"'The Gordian Knot.' Mr. Winton gave it me to read."

"Winton! What right----"

He was about to ask what right Winton had to do anything of the kind, but perceiving that that would scarcely be a civil inquiry, he stopped, not, however, before she understood what had been on the tip of his tongue.

"Mr. Winton had every right to give it me to read, as, I think, you will yourself admit when I explain. I have, of course, known for a long time that Mr. Winton would like to commence management on his own account. The other afternoon he told me that he had a play which he would produce at once if he could only find some one who would furnish at any rate part of the necessary capital. I asked by whom it was. He said, 'It's by a man named Talfourd--Harry Talfourd'. You may easily believe that that did arouse my interest." She said this in a tone which seemed to make him go all over pins and needles; it was almost as if she had caressed him. "I mentioned to Mr. Winton that, given certain conditions, it was possible that I might be tempted to enter into such a speculation. He offered to send me the MS. It reached me yesterday. I read it last night and again this morning--not once, but three or four times. Mr. Talfourd, it's first-rate."

"It's very good of you to say so."

"It's not good of me. It's a simple statement of a simple fact. If it were rubbish I should tell you so plainly--if you were the dearest friend I have in the world. On such matters I have no hesitation; and I think you will confess that this is a matter on which I do know something. Your play's first-rate. If we can agree about terms it shall have an immediate production."

"I hardly know what to say to you."

He did not. On that play he had founded more hopes than he would have cared to mention to that friendly lady. Its success would mean so much to him, and to the woman he loved. It had gone the usual round of the untried dramatist's play. Hope deferred again and again had made his heart sick. He had begun almost to despair that it would ever see the light. Yet now that he was told that if there was only an agreement about terms--as if there was any likelihood of a disagreement!--it should have an immediate production, he was not at all sure that his feelings were what, under the circumstances, he had supposed they would have been. It was perfectly true, he did not know what to say to her. She was glib enough.

"Say?--say nothing. Let's talk business, and stick to that. I mean to. You understand that this is purely a business proposition which I am about to make to you, and absolutely nothing else. If I go into this matter it will be on strictly commercial grounds, and on those only."

"I wish I were sure of it."

"It's not nice of you to doubt my word, Mr. Talfourd; before I have finished you will be sorry for having done so. Before entering into negotiations for the production of your play, do you know what would be one of the preliminary conditions I should be disposed to make?"

"I have not a notion."

"That I should be your leading lady."

"Mrs. Lamb!"

"Mr. Talfourd! I presume you are aware that I can act?"

"I know that you have made some successful appearances in--in amateur theatricals."

"Mr. Winton will inform you that those amateur theatricals were not greatly below the standard of any professional representations you have seen. Apart from that--this is strictly between ourselves--I may mention that once upon a time I was professionally connected with the stage." She did not think it necessary to mention with what branch of it. "Your heroine, Lady Glover----"

"Lady Glover is hardly my heroine."

"She is the leading feminine character--the pivotal character; the one about whom the whole thing turns. To my mind the one creature of real flesh and blood."

"I had hoped that Agnes Eliot was a character of some importance."

"Agnes Eliot?--pooh!--namby-pamby, bread-and-butter miss! She's not bad in her way, and, I suppose, in a pit-and-gallery sense, she's the heroine--and not an ineffective one either; but I assure you I have not the slightest wish to play Agnes Eliot. Susan Stone, who becomes Lady Glover, is a woman who, in the face of all obstacles, achieves success; continually confronted by difficulties, she treats them as so many Gordian knots; she cuts them and walks straight on. Quite indifferent as to the means she employs, she always gets there. Considering the present craze among actresses for what they are pleased to call sympathetic parts, I think you will agree that that is not a character which would appeal to every one."

"Certainly. Winton is of opinion that in casting the play the chief difficulty would be to find an adequate representative. As you say, many actresses don't like to act wicked women."

"I don't know about an adequate representative, but I'm quite willing to act Lady Glover, and, although I say it myself, I think you'll find that I shall be equal to the occasion. Indeed, I am ready to make a sporting bet with you that, in my hands, Lady Glover will take the town by storm. There's a popular fallacy that people don't like wicked women--it is a fallacy. When they're of the right brand, they love 'em--especially men. Give me a chance, and I'll prove it. I'll guarantee that seventy-five per cent, of masculine playgoers shall fall in love with Lady Glover--if I play her. What do you say?"

"I don't understand why you should wish to play her."

"How's that?"

"The answer seems so obvious. You--a lady of position, of fortune, with troops of friends!"

"Change, Mr. Talfourd, is the salt of life. I'm very fond of salt. Before I read your play I had no more idea of doing anything of the kind than I had of flying to the moon. But Lady Glover went straight to my heart. I saw at once what magnificent fun it would be to give to the stage a really adequate representation of the naughty feminine. I knew I could do it--and I can. So why shouldn't I?"

"You understand that Mr. Winton has the refusal of the play, and that I should first have to consult him."

"Of course I understand that Winton has the refusal of the play, and of course I understand that you will have to consult him. I'm not afraid of Winton. He shall be the leading man, and cast the other parts as he pleases. I'll be Lady Glover, and find the money. I'll be an ideal Lady Glover. I believe in your heart you know it. Winton and I between us will make of the play a monstrous success, and so your fortune will be made, and a few shillings added to my own. I should dearly like to make your fortune, if only for one reason--because you don't like me."

"Mrs. Lamb!"

"Which is the more odd, because men generally do. Do you remember our first meeting?"

"I'm never likely to forget it."

"You don't say that in a tone which suggests an unsophisticated compliment. I had read that thing of yours in the *Cornhill*. Frank Staines said that he had the honour of your acquaintance; that you were clever on quite unusual lines--as he put it, 'a cut above the market'--and that in consequence you'd been having a pretty rough time. You recollect that it was at an early stage of our acquaintance that I offered you the post

of private secretary."

"I wonder if, when you did so, you knew that I'd nearly reached my last shilling?"

"I'd an inkling. If you hadn't you'd have said no." This was so literally the truth that he was silent. She understood him so much better than he did her. He had an irritating feeling that she was treating him as if he were some plastic material, which she was gradually fashioning into the shape she desired. "I've done you nothing else than good turns----"

"I know it, quite well."

"And yet, actually, I believe, on that account, you seem to dislike me more and more."

"I do assure you, Mrs. Lamb, that you are wrong. I do hope I'm not the blackguard you seem to imagine."

"I am not wrong, Mr. Talfourd--in a matter of that sort I seldom am. And you're not a blackguard; you're altogether the other way. It's a case of Dr. Fell--the reason why you don't like me you cannot tell. It's not your fault at all--it's sort of congenital. Don't worry! But that being so, since I have already done you one or two good turns, it would be delightful to be able to do you a crowning good turn--to make your fortune; to make you the most successful man of the day--you, the only man I ever met who really did, and does, dislike me.

"Mrs. Lamb, I--I can't tell you how you make me feel."

"I wouldn't try."

He did not. She looked at him and smiled, while he stood before her, with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes, like some shamefaced schoolboy.

CHAPTER XVI

MARGARET IS PUZZLED

Miss Dorothy Johnson, balancing herself on the edge of the table, was playing catch-ball with a pair of gloves.

"Margaret Wallace, you're one of the sillies!"

"Evidently you are not the only person who is of that opinion."

"That's right--put the worst construction on everything I say, and think yourself smart."

"It's just as well that some one should think so. Dollie, sometimes I'm very near to the conviction that it's no good--that nothing's any good, and, especially, that I'm no good; that I might as well own myself beaten right away."

"Well, you are beaten this time, that's sure. What ought to be just as sure is that you don't mean to be beaten every time--there's the whole philosophy of life for you in a nutshell."

"But suppose I'm dragging Harry down? I shouldn't be surprised if it's all through me that his MSS. keep on being returned. I said to him, 'Let me make drawings to illustrate your stories--I'd love to'. And I do love to! 'Then we'll send the stories and the drawings to the editors together.' But they nearly all come back. I've a horrid feeling that it's my drawings which ruin them."

"Stuff! It's Harry's work that's no good."

"No good? How dare you! You've said yourself over and over again that it's splendid."

"That's what's against it--it's splendid." Miss Johnson, stretching her right arm to its extreme length, dangled her gloves between the tips of her fingers. "Margaret Wallace, literature means to me at least three pounds a week, it may be four, if possible, five. I can live on three, be comfortable on four, a swell on five. The problem being thus stated in all its beautiful simplicity, it only remains for me to discover the quickest and easiest solution. I have learned, from experience, that the *Home Muddler* is willing to give me half a guinea for a column of drivel, and the *Hearthstone Smasher* fifteen shillings for another. The *Family Flutterer* prints eight or ten thousand words of an endless serial at five shillings a thousand--one of these days I mean to strike for seven-and-six. But in the meantime there you are--the pursuit of literature has brought me bread and cheese. Why doesn't your Harry tread the same path?"

"The idea!"

"Of course!--the idea!--and that's where he gets left. It's my experience that in literature----"

"Literature!"

"I said literature. I was observing, when you interrupted, that it is my experience that in literature"--Miss Johnson paused, Miss Wallace was contemptuously silent--"men always get paid at least twice as much as the women. I don't know why; it seems to be one of the rules of the game. It therefore follows that if your Harry did as I do he would earn six, eight, ten pounds a week, which, with management, would keep two--not to speak of your drawings, which ought to bring in something. I believe the *Family Flutterer* pays as much as seven-and-six for a full page."

"My dear Dollie, you know as well as I do that we both of us would rather starve."

"Sweet Meg, I'm not saying you're right or wrong, only, if you have resolved to eschew the easily earned loaves and fishes, don't revile because, having set out on the track of the rarer creatures, you discover--what every one knows, and you know!--that they are difficult to find. My private opinion is that Harry will find them one day--if he keeps on long enough--though I don't know when."

"You're a comforting sort of person."

"I'm a practical sort of person, which is better. Cheer up, Meg! he'll get there--and perhaps you will too--though of course his stories are better than your drawings."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

Miss Johnson, descending from the table, put her arm round the girl who was seated on the other side.

"You poor darling! I'm a perfect pig! I say, Meg, are you hard up?"

"I always am."

"Beyond the ordinary, I mean?"

"If you mean, can you lend me, or give me, any money, you can't--thank you very much. I'm going to hoe my own furrow, right to the end."

"How about Harry? He gets some of his stuff accepted; then there's the three hundred pounds a year certain which he gets for being that party's secretary. I call that practicality, if you like! He ought to be getting on first-rate."

"He doesn't seem to think so, anyhow. As for what you call the three hundred pounds a year certain, I doubt if anything could be more uncertain, the engagement may terminate any day. I believe that Harry is really more worried than I am, and--and that's saying a good deal."

"Then the marriage is not coming off just yet?"

"Marriage!--and you call yourself a practical person!--how can you be so absurd?"

"I am not sure that I am absurd. If I ever loved a man--which I am never likely to do, men are such beings!--really loved him, and knew that he loved me, I shouldn't hesitate to marry him on a pound a week. Marriage, properly understood, is a spur; it's not, necessarily, anything like the clog romantic people like you seem to think it is."

When Miss Johnson had gone Margaret Wallace went and stood before a photograph which hung over the mantelpiece--the photograph of a man.

"I think, Cuthbert Grahame, it's possible that you'll shortly be revenged; if you knew just how things are I fancy you'd be of opinion that you're revenged already. If you'd been even a shadowy semblance of the father you once professed to be, I--I shouldn't be wondering where I'm to get my dinner from."

She examined the physiognomy of the man in front of her as if, instead of being the most familiar of faces, she saw it now for the first time. Going back to her seat at the table, she was examining the drawings which had accompanied the returned MS., as if desirous of learning what improvement she could make in them, when there came a tap at the door.

"Come in." Mr. Talfourd entered. In a moment she was in his arms. "Harry!"

"Meg!--more roses for you." He handed her the La France roses which had been presented to him by Mrs. Lamb. "What are you doing?"

She was eyeing the roses, without any great show of enthusiasm, which was possibly lacking because she knew from whom they had originally come.

"Harry, I've more bad news for you--I never seem to have anything else. The story's back from the *Searchlight*."

"What does it matter?"

"I don't like to hear you talk like that, because, you see, we both know that it matters, dear. Harry, do you think that it may have been returned because my drawings aren't up to the mark--honestly?"

"Honestly, I am certain it has not. Your drawings are at least as good as my story. I have never met any one who can illustrate me as well as you do."

"You mean that? If I weren't Margaret Wallace would you say so still?"

"I should. I should congratulate myself on having met some one who could illustrate me as I like to be illustrated. You misunderstood me just now. I said what does it matter, because it doesn't matter, in view of something of much greater importance which I have to say to you."

"Harry! what is it?"

"I hardly know how to begin, it's such a queer position. It's this--in a way, my play's accepted."

""The Gordian Knot'?--by Mr. Winton?"

"No, not by Winton, by Mrs. Lamb."

"Mrs. Lamb?--Harry!" He told her how the play had come into Mrs. Lamb's hands, and how that lady had expressed her willingness to give it immediate production, on the understanding that she was to create Lady Glover. "But I didn't know she could act. Why should she want to anyhow?--she a rich woman!--especially such a part! Lady Glover's a horrible creature! I suppose you think she'd make a mess of it--and

of course she would. She must be a very conceited person."

"Sweetheart, shall I tell you, quite frankly, what I really think?"

"You hadn't better tell me anything else."

"Then I'll make you my father confessor. I've a strong feeling, amounting to a positive conviction, that she'd make a magnificent Lady Glover. That's one reason why I hesitate."

"Now I don't understand. If she makes a success of the part, what else do you want?"

"I'll endeavour to explain. For one thing, I think it possible that she'll make it the part of the play, and so put Winton in the shade entirely. In the theatre he proposes to manage I'm certain he's no intention to be overshadowed by any one. Not that, in such a matter, I'm likely to be too sensitive about his feelings--but there it is. What, from my point of view, would be more serious, is that it is extremely probable that, by her rendition of Lady Glover, she'll warp the play out of what I intended to be its setting. As she was talking just now it dawned upon me that, in her hands, the play might become transformed--something altogether different to what I meant it to be."

"But if it's a success?"

"Meg, I find it difficult to put into words just what's in my mind. Of course if it's successful it will mean----"

"It will mean everything."

"It will mean a good deal; but it will mean everything I'd rather it didn't mean if the success is owing to her."

"But it will be your play. In one sense its success will always be dependent upon others. Really, Harry, I don't follow you. What is your objection to Mrs. Lamb? She's never done you any harm."

"No, she hasn't done me any harm--as yet."

"As yet! Do you think she means to? Considering that she proposes to produce your play, and bids fair to make a great success of it, it doesn't look as if she did."

"Meg--you'll laugh at me--I'm afraid of her."

"Afraid of her?--of Mrs. Lamb!--Harry!"

"I've never been comfortable in her presence since the first moment I've met her. When she's there I have the sort of feeling which I imagine a nervous person might have in the neighbourhood of a dangerous lunatic. I don't know when or how she will break out, but I feel that sometime, somehow, she will, and that then I shall have to struggle with her for my life."

"Harry! are you in earnest?"

He laughed oddly.

"Meg, upon my word, I can't tell you. She hypnotises me, that woman--she hypnotises me. Her influence is on me even after I have left her."

"She must be a curious person. I should like to meet her."

"Meet her?"

He shuddered, involuntarily. "Rather than that you should meet her I'd---- If I can prevent it you shall not meet her."

"Why not? I know plenty of people who have met her, and who seem to think her a distinctly agreeable person--hospitable, good company, amusing, kindhearted, generous to a degree. Tell me, Harry, has she ever behaved to you in any way as she ought not to have done?"

"She has not, in one jot or tittle."

"To your knowledge has she ever done, or even said, anything wrong?"

"No. Still, I would rather she did not produce my play, especially if she is to act Lady Glover."

"Will she produce it if she doesn't?"

"I doubt it."

"There is something at the back of your mind which you're keeping to yourself. When I think of all that the success of 'The Gordian Knot' would mean to us, of how you've looked forward to its production, of how we've talked and talked of it, your present attitude is incomprehensible. It doesn't follow that because Mrs. Lamb produces your play--and even acts in it!--that you need therefore make of her a bosom friend if you'd rather not. I don't suppose it's only generosity which impels her; I daresay she has an axe of her own to grind."

"You may be sure of it."

"Then so have you. I don't see how it matters if it's A, B, or C who grinds it, so long as it's ground--properly ground; and you seem sure that it will be that."

"I have little doubt of it."

"Then tell me, Harry, what is the real, downright reason why you don't wish Mrs. Lamb to produce your play, and act in it?"

"Because, Meg, I'm afraid of her."

"Afraid of her!--of a woman!--who you yourself admit has never done you anything but good! Harry, you're beyond my comprehension."

Before he could answer there was a knock at the door. A servant entered with a card on a tray.

"A gentleman wishes to see you, miss."

She looked at the card.

"'David Twelves, M.D., Edin.'. It can't be Dr. Twelves of Pitmuir?"

A voice came from the door.

"It's that same man."

CHAPTER XVII

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

In appearance the doctor had altered but little since we saw him last. He was the same little wizened old man, with the slight stoop, and the sunken eyes which looked out so keenly from under the thick, overhanging thatch of his shaggy eyebrows. When she heard his voice, and saw him, Margaret, running to him--before Harry, before the servant--put her arms about his neck (she could easily do it, since he was the shorter), and, after looking at him fixedly, as if to make sure that he was still the same man, kissed him on the lips.

"Dr. Twelves, to think of your coming to see me after all these years!"

"And whose fault is it that I haven't come before? whose fault I'd like to know?"

"It certainly isn't mine."

"Not yours? when I hadn't a notion where to look for you, and you took care that I hadn't? It's only by the grace of God I've chanced upon you now. I was looking in a bit of a magazine, at an illustration which seemed to me to be pretty fair, when I saw your name in the corner--Margaret Wallace--in your own handwriting. I can tell you I jumped--there, in the railway carriage--so that I daresay my fellow-passengers thought that I'd a sudden gouty twinge or, maybe, rheumatism, for none can say that I look like a gouty subject. I went straight to the office where the magazine is published, and I asked them to tell me where you might be found. I believe they thought I'd designs upon your life, or, at least, upon your purse. I had to tell them such a yarn before they'd tell me. Then I took care to follow the girl up the stairs, so that, if you meant to deny yourself, you shouldn't have a chance."

"Deny myself?--to you?--doctor! what a notion!--as if I should!" By now the servant had retired; Miss Wallace, who still retained a hand upon her visitor's shoulder, had brought him into the room. "Harry, this is Dr. Twelves, of whom you have so often heard me speak. Doctor, this is Mr. Talfourd, whose wife I hope one day to be."

"I trust, young gentleman, that your deserts are equal to your good fortune, and that you're properly conscious how great that is. I've known this lassie since the time she seemed all hair and legs, for those were the parts of her you noticed most, and there hasn't been a day on which I haven't wanted her to be my wife."

"Now, doctor, that's contrary to the fact; you know you told me more than once that Providence had marked you out to be a bachelor."

"And wasn't that self-evident, since you wouldn't have me? Now, Margaret Wallace, what have you been doing?"

"Doing? I was talking to Harry when you came in."

"I'll be bound that it's plenty of talking to Harry that you do, and will do--particularly later on, when you're Mrs. Harry."

"Doctor!"

"What I mean was, have you made your fortune? or are you drawing pictures for your daily bread?"

She looked at Mr. Talfourd quizzically.

"I have one eye upon my daily bread."

"And it isn't too much of it you see, by the looks of you. You're peaked, and you're thin."

"Oh, doctor! I'm sure I'm not."

"And I'm sure you are, and by virtue of my profession I ought to know. It's a pretty market to which you've brought your pigs. You might be one of the richest women in England, instead of being half-starved--with white cheeks and tired eyes."

"Doctor, how dare you say such things! It's not true! You've not improved!"

"I'm thinking you've not improved either. You've a stubborn heart. Why, all this time, haven't you let some of us know something about you?--if it was only where a line might reach you."

"You know very well why, and I did go to see Mr. Grahame."

"You went to see Cuthbert Grahame? When?" She mentioned the date. "Girl, you're dreaming. It was the day after that he died."

"The day after that he died? I knew he was dead. I heard of it long afterwards by a side wind; but I have never heard any particulars. You none of you told me anything."

"How were we to, when you'd hidden yourself from us in this great city?"

"Of what did he die?"

"If you ask what was on the certificate I can tell you; but if you want to know how death came to him you must inquire of his wife."

"His wife?"

"When he died he was a married man, according to the law of Scotland."

"Dr. Twelves, are you jesting?"

"I'm not. On the day he died he made a will leaving her all that he had in the world--and she had it."

"Who was she?"

"Beyond saying that she was no better than she ought to be, I can tell you nothing."

"Was she some one from the neighbourhood?"

"She was not; she was from England. She dropped from the clouds. I should say--if I may be allowed to do so in this company--on her road to hell. What passed between you and Cuthbert Grahame when you saw him on that day before he died?"

"I didn't see him. Nannie wouldn't let me."

"Nannie wouldn't let you?"

"She would not. She said that Mr. Grahame had forbidden her to admit me into the house."

"She's never spoken a word to me about it. What's been the matter with the woman? But there's something ails your story. That day, and for many days afterwards, she was lying in bed with a broken leg. Was it from her bedroom that she shouted out to you?"

"From her bedroom?--nothing of the kind. She told me through the front door that Mr. Grahame had forbidden her to let me in. When I said that I would come in, and began to break the window to show that I was in earnest, she went to the window above, and poured two buckets of boiling water over me."

"Margaret Wallace! it's dreaming you must have been."

"It was a curious kind of dream. The water scalded my neck, and left a scar which was visible for weeks--wasn't it?"

She turned to Mr. Talfourd, as if for corroboration.

"It was. When I saw it I was disposed to go straight off to Scotland, and give the old harridan a taste of my quality."

"It's as queer a story as any I've heard. Seeing that Nannie was as if she had been glued to her bed, how could she walk about the house as you say, and pour buckets of boiling water on to you through a window?"

"I only know that she did."

"Did you see her?"

She considered a moment.

"No, I didn't. She took care not to show herself."

"She took care not to show herself?"

"She hadn't the courage to let me see her face, but she let me hear her voice, and plenty of it. It was not necessary for me to see her when I heard her. I've been acquainted with Nannie Foreshaw's voice for too many years to be likely to mistake it for any one else's."

"You're sure? I doubt----" The doctor seemed to be considering in his turn. "I can't put the pieces of the puzzle together so that they just fit, but I've a notion that I'm on the way. Margaret Wallace, I've a suspicion that I've been a greater fool even than I thought. After the chances I've had to get wisdom, to get understanding, that's not a nice feeling to have. Between us--you've had a hand!--we've muddled things to a marvel. I'll communicate with Nannie with reference to that little conversation you say you had with her; when I've heard from her I'll talk to you again." He turned to Mr. Talfourd.

"And you, sir, do you make drawings?"

"No; I write stories."

The doctor looked him up and down as if he were a specimen of a species which was new to him.

"Stories? Oh! and is that a man's work? I come of a good old Scottish stock. My forebears have always held that a man should do a man's work. Is writing stories that?"

"It isn't easy, if that's what you mean."

"Not easy? I should have thought you would have found it as easy as lying. I've written them myself; I didn't find it hard. It's just a waste of time. However, I'm not judging you. Is that all you do, write stories?"

"Just at present I'm doing something else as well. I'm acting as private secretary to a lady."

"Private secretary to a lady? You've your own notions of what's a man's work, Mr. Talfourd."

Harry flushed; Margaret laughed.

"And you country Scotchmen have your own ideas of what you're entitled to say."

"You're Scotch yourself, my lassie, on the best side of you; don't gird at your own birth. I ask your pardon, Mr. Talfourd, if I've said anything I ought not to say; but I've known this lassie all her days. She's been to me as the apple of my eye, and--she tells me that you're to be her husband. Would it be going too far, Mr. Talfourd, if I were to ask you what's the name of the lady to whom you're acting as private secretary?"

"Mrs. Lamb--Mrs. Gregory Lamb."

"Mrs. Gregory Lamb? That's odd."

"How is it odd? I hope there's nothing improper about the name."

"It's not that it's improper; it's that I once met a Gregory Lamb. What sort's your Gregory Lamb?"

"He's about my own age, perhaps a little older; not ill-looking; not, I should imagine, a bad fellow in his way."

"Is he a poor man?"

"I believe his wife is very rich."

"His wife? Of course, there's the wife--and she's very rich. The rich woman who married the Gregory Lamb I know would be a very foolish female."

"Mrs. Lamb is certainly not that."

"Then her Gregory's not mine, though it's an unusual conjunction of names. I'm thinking that none but a fool of a woman would ever have married him."

CHAPTER XVIII

CRONIES

That evening Dr. Twelves dined with a fellow Scot, J. Andrew McTavish, of McTavish & Brown. Mr. McTavish lived in Mecklenberg Square. Although a bachelor he liked plenty of house room, and in Mecklenberg Square he had it. His house was perhaps the largest in the Square, and certainly not the least comfortable. Comfort was to Mr. McTavish a sort of fetish: excepting money he set it above everything. He looked as if he did. Of medium height, he was of more than average size, his waist measurement was approaching a significant figure; his neck loved a generous collar, his chin overlapped; he had slight side whiskers, dark gray in hue, and the top of his head was so completely bald that one wondered if it could ever have been anything else. He and his guest presented an amazing contrast: three or four replicas of Dr. Twelves could have been contained in Mr. McTavish.

They dined *tête-à-tête* at a small round table which stood in the centre of a big room. Mr. McTavish liked big rooms; he was never comfortable in a small one. During the meal the conversation was of a desultory character, principally hovering around Pitmuir, where Mr. McTavish had lived till he came to London. Questions were asked and answered touching every soul in the parish Mr. McTavish could think of, and his memory was extensive. There was hardly a man, woman or child about Pitmuir whose name had not been mentioned before dinner was finished. If the inquiries were slightly acid, so were the replies. It seemed as if these two gentlemen had made it a point of honour to say nothing nice of any one. According to them the folk about Pitmuir were a very human lot--at least they had most of humanity's failings.

After dinner they retired to the study, another fine apartment. There they had a cup of coffee, a liqueur, and a cigar apiece. The doctor seemed lost in the huge chair which he had been invited to fill. His host regarded him with twinkling eyes.

"Have you had a good dinner, David?"

"You feed yourself too well; you're a hundred years behind the age."

"How do you show it?"

"Our great-grandfathers pampered their bellies. We know better; we have learnt that it is the part of wisdom to starve them. You're still where our grandsires were."

"And where are you?"

"I'm on the high road to as fine an attack of indigestion as a man need have, and live."

"I can give you the name of one of the greatest authorities on indigestion."

"I dare swear you can give me the names of one or two. I shouldn't be surprised if that sucking-pig proves to be the death of me, beyond the skill of all your authorities."

"It was cooked to a turn."

"I ought to know how it was cooked, considering the way that I behaved to it. It's wicked to set such meat before a man. And now, I've something which I wish to say to you."

"You've said one or two things already--what's the other?"

The doctor, taking the cigar out of his mouth, regarded the ash on the tip.

"You remember Wallace's daughter?"

"Cuthbert Grahame's girl?"

The doctor nodded.

"I've seen her this afternoon."

"No? I wondered what had become of her, more than once. I've seen and heard nothing of her since he turned her out."

"He didn't turn her out, she turned herself out. I had the story from his own lips."

"So had I. To all intents and purposes he turned her out, however he may have put it to himself or to you."

"He asked her to marry him, and she wouldn't."

"He asked her not once or twice, but again and again, until he made it plain that his house was no place for her unless she meant to be his wife. So, as she didn't, there was nothing for her but to go."

"It was a fool business."

"On both sides. Why he wanted to marry her I don't know. I never do know why a man wants to marry. I'd sooner have a buzz saw in every room in the house than a wife in one. Why she wouldn't marry him, I know still less."

"There was the difference in their years. Then he was already threatening to be what he afterwards became--physically, I mean."

"Well, what of it? If a girl in her position has to marry, I should say that there are two things which she ought to look for first of all--money, and a sick husband; if possible, one who is already sick unto death. In Grahame she'd have had both."

There was silence, as if both parties were giving to Mr. McTavish's words the consideration due to a profound aphorism. It was the doctor who spoke next.

"He always believed that she would come back again, saying yes."

"I'd no patience with the man, he was all kinds of a fool. If he wanted her to be his wife, he didn't go the right way to get her. When she said no, instead of thanking God for his undeserved escape, he stormed and raved, fretted and fumed, until he became only fit to be exhibited in a booth at a fair."

"When he heard that she was in love with some one else, it was that that was the death of him."

"A good thing too. It'd have been a good thing if it had been the death of both of them. I've no bowels for such tomfoolery. Where is she? What's she doing? Is she married to the other fool? If she is, don't they both wish that they were dead?"

"You've a sharp tongue, Andrew--if your wits were like it! Not all married folks wish that they were dead; there's just as much desire to live among the married as among the single--maybe more. To hear you talk one would suppose that one had only to remain single to be happy. You and I know better than that."

"Speak for yourself, David, speak for yourself--I'm happy enough."

"Then your looks belie you."

"What's the matter with my looks, you old croaker?"

"I'm a doctor of medicine, Andrew McTavish; I've learned to turn the smoothest side to a patient; so you must excuse me if to your inquiry I return no answer."

"After the dinner I've given him!"

"It's the ill-assorted food you have caused me to cram down my throat that I'm beginning to fancy has given me a touch of the spleen."

"Something has. The next time you dine in this house it will be off porridge."

"We'll leave the next time till it comes. To return to Margaret Wallace. She's not married yet, and, so far as I can judge, she's not likely to be. It's want of pence, both with him and with her. If she had some of Cuthbert Grahame's money, as she ought to have, it'd make all the difference."

"It's in part your fault that she hasn't."

"I'm not denying it, and I'm not forgetting it. If I've been guilty of the unforgivable sin, it was when I brought that woman to Cuthbert Grahame's bedside. I sometimes think that I'll see it chalked up against me in letters of fire when I'm brought up before the throne."

"Stuff!"

"Maybe--to you. You're devoid of decent feeling, Andrew McTavish; to you all's stuff. What's become of the woman?"

"What woman?"

"She who calls herself Mrs. Grahame?"

"She calls herself Mrs. Grahame no longer."

"How's that?"

"She's married again."

"The creature! The poor fool she's married! What is his name?"

"Gregory Lamb."

Dr. Twelves rose from his chair as if impelled by a spring. Opening his mouth in apparent forgetfulness of what was between his lips, his cigar fell to the floor, where it remained apparently unnoticed.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"What name was that you said?"

"Why, man, what's the matter now? I'm wondering whether the sucking-pig's mounted to your head instead of descending to your stomach. David, you're easily upset these days. Pick up your cigar, it's burning a hole in my floor covering."

"Damn the cigar!"

"And welcome! It's not that I mind. What I object to is your cigar damning my carpet. Pick it up at once, sir."

"You're fussy about your old carpet."

"Old carpet! it cost me a guinea a yard not twelve months since."

"You're wasteful with your money."

"I am, when I spend it entertaining such as you."

"What's the name of the man you say that woman married?"

"Gregory Lamb."

"It's past believing!"

"Is it? I haven't found it so."

"That's because you're walking in darkness. Do you know that the youngster Margaret's plighted to is private secretary to Mrs. Gregory Lamb?"

"Is he? Then I should say that that's presumptive evidence that he's not bad looking. She has an eye for a good-looking man."

"Gregory Lamb was staying at Pitmuir when she was at Cuthbert Grahame's, calling herself his wife. A half-bred, ill-conditioned young scamp he was."

"I should imagine that Mr. Lamb was not born in the caste of Vere de Vere."

"Were they acquainted then? What was there between them? How come they to be married now?--he without a penny, to my knowledge, she with all that money. She'd not marry such a creature as he was--for love, that I'll swear. They were birds of a feather, only he was more fool than knave, and she more knave than fool."

"That about describes them now--if a lawyer may say as much--under privilege."

"Andrew, can you keep a still tongue?"

"If I couldn't I shouldn't be sitting here."

"I've always had a suspicion that there was something wrong about that will."

"Do you mean the one under which she inherits? You needn't confine yourself to suspicion upon that point--it's about as wrong as it could be. If there had been substantial opposition she'd have found it hard to bring it in."

"I'm not meaning it in your sense. I know that Grahame signed it in the presence of those two daft lassies; but I don't believe that he knew what he was signing, although the evidence is all the other way. I've kept my doubts to myself until this moment, and even now I can't tell you just why I don't believe it--but I don't."

"Quite possibly you're right, but you can't prove it."

"I know I can't, and there's something else that I can't prove."

"What's that?"

"I believe she murdered him."

"David!"

"She was equal to it; and I'm beginning to see more clearly how she brought herself to the sticking point. The day before his death Margaret Wallace called----"

"Margaret Wallace? you don't say!"

"She told me so herself this afternoon. She was refused admission as she supposed by Nannie Foreshaw. I happen to know that Nannie couldn't have got out of bed and gone downstairs to save her life--that woman had taken care of that. Before I came to you I wrote to Nannie asking if she did, to make sure. I believe that woman played at being Nannie, imitating her voice. She may have known Margaret's story,

probably Grahame had told her, and was aware that if she returned and saw him her reign was at an end. So she precipitated matters. She juggled that will into existence, and, directly she had done so, killed him."

"It's a weighty charge you're making, David; be careful how you make it."

"Do you think I don't know that it's a weighty charge? I'm not making it. I'm only telling you what's in my mind, as between friends. I'll not breathe a word of the matter to any one but you till I can bring it into court, and prove it. At present, in your lawyer's sense, I've not proof enough to cover a pin's point. But, Andrew, though the mills of God grind slowly, they grind surely, and exceeding fine. Maybe one day God's finger will press her in between the stones, then you'll know that the conviction which is implanted in my breast is of the nature of the prophetic vision. God has shown me, though I cannot tell you how."

There was silence. The doctor, still standing, bent over the table on which stood the coffee and liqueurs, pointing with one skinny finger upwards. He continued in that attitude for a perceptible period after he had ceased to speak. Then Mr. McTavish's voice broke the spell which he seemed to have cast upon the air.

"David, you use big words. I don't--it's not my way. But confidence begets confidence. I'll tell you something in return--and that without insulting you by asking if you can keep a still tongue--because I know you can."

The doctor returned to a more normal attitude, seeming to do so with an effort, as if he were shaking something from him. He spoke in his ordinary tones.

"Let me light another cigar before you begin. This sort of talk's disquieting, especially after such a dinner as I've had. I think a tonic might not be amiss." He sipped his liqueur. "Andrew, this is not bad brandy."

"A hogshead wouldn't hurt you."

"Wouldn't it? Is it your custom to drink brandy by the hogshead? I thought you didn't use big words."

"It's a figure of speech, David--a figure of speech. If you have that cigar properly lighted, and will sit down like a decent creature, I'll have my say--that is, if you have not had enough of the matter under discussion."

"You're not more ready to talk than I am to listen. Now, Andrew, I'm at your service."

"Well, you suspect this lady of something more than misdemeanour. I may tell you that I doubt if she would have done what she did do--if she did it!--if she had known what she knows now."

"You speak in parables."

"I'll be plain enough. Did you know anything about Cuthbert Grahame's affairs?--his financial affairs, I mean."

"Something."

"Had you any idea how much he was worth?"

"He told me himself, not once but frequently, that he was worth nearer three hundred thousand pounds than two hundred thousand. He said, moreover, that his investments brought him in an average interest of over ten per cent. He had made several lucky hits."

"That's what he told us; it seems that that's what he told her. Did you see on what amount probate duty was paid?"

"Not I; I took no interest in the matter then. I was too disgusted with myself and everything. My one desire was to get the whole business out of my head; the trouble is that I haven't been able to do it."

"Under forty thousand pounds; and I may tell you that it was well under forty thousand pounds."

"What's become of the rest?"

"That's the mystery which we should like to solve--which she especially would like to solve; and what she's subjected us to in her efforts to arrive at a solution no language at my command is adequate to describe. She's a remarkable woman--a very remarkable woman. Because she has long since passed the limits of our endurance is one reason why I am rounding on her to you. It is not often that I am conscious of such a yearning, but we have arrived at a position in which I should actually like to have your advice. That's why I asked you here tonight."

"Then it wasn't just for old friendship's sake."

The doctor glowered from the recesses of the huge chair, expelling the smoke of his cigar from his lips and nostrils. Mr. McTavish laughed.

"Well--in a measure. Did you ever think he was romancing when he talked about his moneys?"

"I did not--and I don't. He was in earnest. I never knew him tell a lie when he was in earnest. I'd match his veracity against my own."

"Then it's queer--it's queer. At the time of his death we held securities for him representing some ten thousand pounds lent on mortgage; the bankers held about as much more. His widow turned into cash everything that there was to turn, with the exception of the house, which she will neither sell nor let."

"I know. It's going to rack and ruin; they say no one's set foot in it since the day he was buried."

"I daresay--it's one of her notions--she'll let no one even talk of it; it's her bogey. Altogether she's had scarcely thirty thousand pounds."

"It's in the house."

"Not it. It's been thoroughly searched by competent hands; she herself has overhauled it more than once."

"The money must be somewhere; I'm convinced he had it."

"Have you any notion where it is? Can you give me any sort of clue as to its possible whereabouts?"

"Not I. I know no more about it than--this cigar. Is it likely? I wasn't his man of business--you were."

"She says we have it."

"No!"

"Yes. She says we have it, or that we know where it is, and are joined in a conspiracy to keep it out of her possession. The way she's talked--and treated us! David, she's a remarkable woman."

"She is that. Don't I know it?--to my cost!"

"We've had to change the lock on our office door. She let herself into it with a pass-key--my own, I fear, for I lost it, though I don't know how; I've never seen it since. She ransacked everything the place contained. Got into the safe. By some extraordinary mischance, in which it is quite possible she had a hand, that night it wasn't locked. She went right through it. She saw a good deal we had rather she hadn't seen, but she saw nothing of Grahame's money."

"Did you catch her in the act?"

"Catch her! We've never been able to prove it against her yet, but the presumption's as strong as Hercules. She went to Brown's, and made him swear by all his gods that he knew nothing about it; then she made him open his safe, and went through all his private papers."

"Brown must be a fine sort of a man."

"She's a fine sort of a woman. She drugged me in my own house."

"No?"

"I say yes! She came here one night. I offered her a little something to drink--I was having something to drink, and I couldn't see her sitting dry. I've no doubt that when my back was turned she put something into my glass which took away my senses in a flash. When I came to it was early morning; the daylight was streaming through the blinds; she was gone; the whole place was upside down."

"You're a lawyer: didn't you give her a taste of the law?"

"What was the use? She'd pose as an injured woman--her grievance is real enough. We'd get no good; it might do us harm. The mischief is that she's got what she chooses to regard as some sort of groundwork for her suspicions. It's this way. She met the secretary of the Hardwood Company. The Hardwood Company's paid dividends averaging thirty per cent, ever since it started. The fellow got friendly with her--as plenty of men do get within five minutes of their meeting her. He told her that only one original shareholder remained on their lists, and, since the shares rushed to a premium directly the issue was made, that therefore he was the only person who received the full benefit of the thirty per cent. He added that the shareholder's name was Grahame--Cuthbert Grahame (you may see her pricking her ears at that!)-and (she always leading him by the nose!) that the dividends had not been paid to him direct, but to his solicitors, Messrs. McTavish & Brown, of Southampton Row. He was a talkable body, that secretary man--men are apt to be talkative when she gets them alone with her in a corner. He told her something

else: that the queerest part of the business was that while the shares still stood in Grahame's name, the dividends had remained unclaimed for quite a while, so that a considerable sum was waiting for some one to take it. The next morning she came to us running over with the story. Now I remembered those shares--an investment which returns thirty per cent, these hard times one has to remember. He had ten thousand of them; they were in our charge; we did collect the dividends. But one day he wrote asking us to send them to him, which we did do. My lady of course wanted proof. Do you know we couldn't give it her."

"I don't see why."

"Under ordinary circumstances nothing could have been simpler. Such a thing has never before happened in the whole course of my experience, but by some infernal accident we couldn't lay our hands on either his letter of instructions, or his acknowledgment of receipt."

"There was still the letter advising their despatch."

"David, ever since that woman appeared on the scene we have been persecuted by a malignant fate."

"Big words, Andrew, big words."

"She moves me to them. On the day Grahame's letter came I happened to be going abroad. Brown sent a clerk here with his letter and the shares, so that I might check them and see that they were right. I packed the clerk back, and sent the shares myself; but in my haste--I was running the boat train pretty close!--I was idiot enough not to take a copy of my own letter, and what I did with Grahame's I have not the dimmest recollection."

"Very unbusiness-like."

"Don't I know it, man! Of course she declined to credit a word of the story; said that she believed it was a fabrication from beginning to end; and that she was more than ever convinced that she was dealing with a set of rogues. The climax is to come! The day after she had drugged me she came to my office, and produced a Hardwood Company's share, which she had the assurance to assert that she had taken out of my own safe when I was in a state of unconsciousness!--think of it! She had taken it round to the Company's offices, and it had there been identified as one of the shares which were standing in Cuthbert Grahame's name."

"Was it one of his shares?"

"It was, beyond a doubt."

"And had she taken it out of your safe?"

"David, I can only tell you that she swore she had; and I'm bound to admit that if she hadn't, I don't know where she got it from. On the other hand, if she did I have not the vaguest notion how it got there. Plague take the thing!"

Mr. McTavish, emptying his liqueur glass, immediately refilled it.

"Don't you know what's in your own safe?"

"Do you take me for a feather-brain? I knew every trifle it contained, or thought I did. She says that she took up a bundle of papers, and that the share dropped out of one of them. If it did, no one knows less than I do who put it there. The only conclusion at which I can arrive is that, in returning the shares to Grahame, I overlooked one of them, and that, in my hurry, it got mixed up with some of the papers which I keep in my safe, and which were lying on my table at the time. Of all the evil chances that ever befel a man!"

"And what was the inference she drew?"

"The inference she drew! What do you suppose? Why, of course, that the other nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine shares were hidden somewhere in my house, exactly as that one had been. She had brought a solicitor with her to the office--think of it, David!--a pettifogging rascal of the name of Luker, who'd do anything for six-and-eightpence; and in his presence--picture it, David!--she told me that if I didn't permit her to subject my private premises to a thorough examination she should immediately commence proceedings for the recovery of the missing shares. And the creature Luker had the audacity to advise me to accede to her reasonable request--he called it her reasonable request! And I complied!--I complied! She, the wretched Luker, Brown, and myself, we went through every nook and cranny in the house, all of us together. The humiliation of it!--the maddening humiliation!"

With his handkerchief Mr. McTavish wiped his capacious brow, which was moist with indignant sweat.

"And did they find the missing shares?"

"David! Do you want me to make an end of you? The reptile Luker wrote that if restitution of the shares was not made at once he was instructed to immediately commence proceedings for their recovery. And that's only the beginning! If something isn't done to stop her it's very possible that she'll try to jockey us, by legal process, out of all the money that she supposes Cuthbert Grahame to have had. The law on such matters is in such a state--when twisted by such as Luker!--that there's no knowing what may be the issue; the one thing certain being that she may be the occasion to us of the gravest injury." The doctor emitted a sound which forced a startled inquiry from the other. "What's the matter with you, man?"

"I was laughing, to think that a couple of lawyers should be so mishandled by one of the laity! It's the funniest thing that ever I heard."

"It's no laughing matter, David, I can tell you that. Think of the scandal--that at the age to which I'm come I should be used as if I were a misbegotten rogue! She's a devil of a woman! And what's driving her is that she's come to the end of her tether."

"Do you mean that she's spent all her cash?"

"I've reason to know she has, or nearly all. She lives in a great house, has an expensive establishment, spends money like a queen. She took it for granted that long before this the bulk of Grahame's money would turn up. Now that it hasn't she's desperate. She means to get it out of somebody, somehow--or as much of it as she can--if it's only out of such poor creatures as McTavish and Brown."

"You're a pair of weans, you and Brown."

"So you see, David, how it is I have come to you for help--to you, my oldest friend. Why it is that I ask

you to search your brain and see if you can give us no clue as to what Cuthbert Grahame did with his money. No one was more intimate with him than you, and on such a point there is no one who is more likely to be able to give us help."

"If that's so then you'll get help from no one, for it's certain you'll get none from me. I tell you I know nothing of the matter."

"Do you think Miss Wallace could help us? She had an intimate knowledge of Grahame and of his peculiarities. She might be able to tell us something which would prove to be of assistance."

"I'll ask her, if you wish it. But I doubt if you'll gain."

"Do, David, do. And"--Mr. McTavish tapped his forefinger on the arm of his chair--"the sooner the better. As to advice, David, you know this woman; you've had dealings with her before; in a sense, so far as we're concerned, you're responsible for her existence. You see the dilemma we are in. What advice have you to offer?"

"None--not a ha'porth. I'm not advising."

"David!"

"I tell you I'm not, and it's just because I've had dealings with the woman already. I've tried one fall with her, and I'm suffering from it still."

"She's an awful creature!--awful!"

"There's only one thing I can say to you, Andrew, and that I've said already, and then you sort of sniggered. But to my mind it's a comfortable thought when we come to deal with persons like Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame, or Mrs. Gregory Lamb, or whatever she calls herself, and it's this, that if the mills of God do grind slowly, they also do grind surely, and they grind exceeding small."

CHAPTER XIX

IN COUNCIL

There were five of them assembled in Margaret Wallace's sitting-room. Margaret herself, in a linen gown of cornflower-blue, the product of her own deft fingers, which became her hugely. Miss Dorothy Johnson, from the rooms below, who indulged her fondness for unconventional attitudes by perching herself on the back of one chair and her feet on the seat of another. Bertram Winton, one of the handsomest of our actors, tall and dark, with big eyes and curly hair, whose clothes fitted him with a creaseless perfection which won the admiration of that considerable feminine public which bought his photographs and wrote for his autograph. Frank Staines, who was something of a mystery. He wrote a little, and painted a little, and drew a little, and sang a little, and played a little, and talked so much that there were people who said that he could do that better than he could do anything else. He had money. The exact quantity was not generally known, but there appeared to be enough of it to enable him to live in very considerable comfort, without rendering it necessary for him, to adopt his own phraseology, to descend into the market-place and "huckster" his brain. Between Miss Johnson and him there was a state of continual war, tempered by peaceful intervals of the briefest duration. It was commonly understood that he was very much in love with her, had frequently proposed to her and had been accepted several times, but that on each occasion a rupture had followed before they were able to make an interesting announcement to their friends and acquaintances.

Miss Johnson made a remark to Harry Talfourd, who stood leaning against the window with an air of almost sombre gloom, which caused hostilities to break out upon the spot.

"Let's get to the bed-rock of common-sense. It always seems to me that in matters of this sort commonsense is the one thing needed. Harry, what is it you want? You want your play to be successful--that is, you want it to bring you cash and kudos; and that is all you want. The question, therefore, which you have to ask yourself is, if Mrs. Lamb produces 'The Gordian Knot' will it bring me those two things? To that question you have only to supply a simple yes or no, and the problem's solved."

To which Mr. Staines replied--

"That is exactly the sort of remark one expects you to make--utilitarian, material, sordid. I opine that the one thing Harry requires you have not mentioned--that is, satisfaction for his artistic soul."

"Artistic tommy-rot."

"My dear Dollie, it is not necessary for you to be vulgar in order to inform us that you know nothing about the soul--we are aware of it."

"My dear Frankie, don't be under the delusion that you need open your mouth to let the world know that you drivell--it is written on your countenance."

"Thank you, Miss Johnson."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Staines."

Margaret interposed.

"While those two are thinking of some more nice things to say to each other, I should like to know, Mr. Winton, what you really think."

"I am afraid, Miss Wallace, that my point of view would be described by Staines as utilitarian. I propose to conduct my theatre--when I get it--on a commercial basis."

"One takes it for granted that an actor-manager is commercial or nothing."

"If he isn't commercial, my dear Staines, he's less than nothing--he's a bankrupt. No one loves a bankrupt, not even your artistic soul. My intention is to get a theatre; to have it properly equipped; to give the public as good plays as I can get; to have them as well acted as circumstances permit. If Mrs. Lamb is willing to place me in a position to carry out my intention--on my own terms--I don't know that I have any serious objection to her playing a part in my initial venture, particularly as that happens to be a part which, as Talfourd is aware, I have not hitherto been able to fit with a quite adequate representative. I realise that the position is not so simple as it appears, and am conscious that I run the risk of being overshadowed by the lady's personality. But that is certainly my risk rather than Talfourd's, and I am willing to run it in order to gain the end I have in view."

"Then you say, let Mrs. Lamb play Lady Glover?"

"I do, since I incline to the opinion that she would not play it in a fashion which would militate against the success of the piece."

"You hear, Harry?"

"I do; I have heard Winton on the point before."

"Then why don't you leave matters entirely in his hands, and let him arrange everything?"

Harry exchanged glances with the actor. He said, dryly--

"I am willing. If I am allowed to--say, run abroad, or remove myself into the country well out of reach, until, at any rate, the play's produced, I am content to let Winton do just as he pleases."

"I doubt if that would meet Mrs. Lamb's views. I imagine that she might regard your withdrawal as a personal affront. Talfourd, will you allow me to explain to Miss Wallace what I imagine is your exact position in this matter?"

Miss Johnson addressed a question to Mr. Staines before Margaret could reply.

"Frank, you can be honest sometimes, and you can be sensible. Try to be both of them now. What do you think of Mrs. Lamb?"

"It is a delicate subject, on which I should not presume to offer an opinion."

"That means that you don't love her."

"I have only loved one person in my life, and it certainly was not her."

Miss Johnson looked straight in front of her, as if she desired to convey the impression that she had no idea that any allusion was intended. Margaret urged Mr. Winton.

"Come, tell me what Harry's position really is, since I am quite unable to get it out of him."

"Shall I, Talfourd?"

"You may say what you choose, only give me leave to doubt if you are so well informed as you yourself imagine. I don't understand myself as well as I should like to."

"I fancy I understand pretty well. The truth is, Miss Wallace, Mrs. Lamb is fonder of Talfourd than he is of her."

"I am quite aware of that."

"I don't think you altogether appreciate my meaning. If there were no Mr. Lamb, Mrs. Lamb would not object to being Mrs. Talfourd--which is why she wants to produce 'The Gordian Knot,' and why Talfourd doesn't want her to."

"Do you mean that she's in love with him? Harry! is this true? You told me that she had never said anything to you she ought not to have done."

"Nor has she. Winton speaks crudely. I don't know what is his authority for his statement, he certainly has had none from me."

"Is it simply because--she feels for you like that--that she wants to produce your play?"

"Honestly, Meg, I don't know what her reasons are. I wish I did."

"Does she know that you're--engaged?"

"Not that I am aware of. So far as possible I have carefully avoided speaking to her of myself. Frankly, Meg, it's no use blinking the fact that as Mrs. Lamb's private secretary there's nothing for me to do; that she has not the slightest real need for such a functionary; and that I am very much exercised in my mind as to the motives which would actuate her in the production of 'The Gordian Knot'. Although I am quite aware that he meant well, I should have been obliged to Winton if he hadn't said a word to her about the thing."

"At that time I had no actual knowledge of how the land was lying."

"But you guessed." This was Margaret.

"Well, if you will permit me to be quite plain, Miss Wallace, I don't know that I regarded it as a

drawback even if I did guess. An actor depends for his existence on personal favour. He has to please the public in the mass, and, also, as individuals. When a woman tells me she admires me I expect her to take a stall to see me act; if she admires me very much, I expect her to take two or three, or a box. There have been women who have admired me so much that they have booked seats for an entire season. Now proceed a step farther. I can conceive of it as possible that a woman might provide me with the means to take a theatre because her admiration for me was so great. I shouldn't stop to ask myself trivial questions as to whether she was married or single, I should regard the matter as purely one of business--one proof of my success--and take the good the gods provided, while, at the same time, my position in the affair would be entirely a platonic one. I want Talfourd to treat the matter from my point of view, but it seems he can't."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not sorry!" The first remark came from Harry, the second from Margaret. She went on: "Now I begin to understand. Of course it's quite inconceivable, Harry, how any one could fall in love with you; but supposing any woman to be so foolish, I certainly don't want you to trade on her affection. I'm not saying it with any desire to wound you, Mr. Winton."

"Don't be afraid, I'm not easily wounded."

"But, you see, in this case there are other circumstances to be considered--there's me. I'm a factor in the question. And shall I tell you to what conclusion I'm drifting?"

"Let's have it."

"I should like to see Mrs. Lamb. You men know her, but I don't. She hasn't even come within range of my vision, and though I've the highest respect for you, as men, when it comes to your opinion of a woman, I don't think a man's opinion worth anything."

"You're quite right--it isn't." This was Miss Johnson.

"I used to have a high opinion of you." This was Mr. Staines.

"You used to have!--that I should ever have been so belittled!"

Miss Johnson turned disdainfully from Mr. Staines to Margaret.

"What you say is perfectly correct, my dear, only a woman's opinion of a woman is of the slightest value."

"The other day I heard a woman express her opinion of you in terms which, if I repeated them to you, might cause you to change your views."

"Some women!"

"I don't know that I go quite so far as Dollie, and there is something in what Mr. Staines hints, for, of course, there are women whose opinions of each other are merely so many libels."

"Hear! hear!"

"Do be still! Will somebody sit on Mr. Staines?"

"But this appears to be a case in which a woman's opinion should be the only thing which ought to count--especially if I'm the woman; and, lest you accuse me of overweening conceit, let me hasten to explain. Mrs. Lamb is, I presume, a lady of beauty----"

"She's not bad-looking." This was Mr. Staines to, of course, Dolly.

"Much you know about a woman's looks!"

"I used to admire yours."

"Pooh!"

"Apparently of fortune, conceivably of taste. She is supposed to entertain certain sentiments towards a certain gentleman which she ought not to entertain. Actuated by those sentiments she proposes to play the part of a feminine Mæcenæ and pose as a patron of the drama. These are the allegations which are made against her. Introduce me to her; let me talk to her for half an hour, and I will engage to settle there and then--and finally!--the question as to whether she is a fit and proper person to produce 'The Gordian Knot' and play Lady Glover."

"I'm content!" cried Harry.

Mr. Winton was more deliberate.

"Well, under ordinary circumstances, I should be inclined to do more than hesitate before accepting a lady as arbitrator in such a matter, but I have such a high opinion of Miss Wallace, though she herself appraises a masculine estimate of such a subject at less than nothing----"

"I make an exception in your case, Mr. Winton--thank you very much."

"If she will allow me to say so, I esteem her wide-minded liberality so greatly, and set such value on her keen-sighted appreciation of character----"

"Dear! dear! Margaret, bow!"

"Dollie! don't interrupt!"

"That I am quite willing to go so far as this: If, after talking the matter over with Mrs. Lamb, fully and frankly, and weighing all the pros and cons, you tell me that you think it would be better, for all parties interested, that she should have nothing to do with the play, then, so far as I am concerned, the question will be settled--she shan't."

"The point is," struck in Dollie, "how is the poor dear child to become acquainted with this wonderful woman, who ought to be immensely flattered if she knows how much you have her in your thoughts?"

"There will be no difficulty about that. The lady has an 'At Home' to-morrow evening, to which, practically, all the world is welcome. I'll tell her, Meg, that you'd like to make her acquaintance, and ask her permission to bring you."

"You'll ask her?"

Mr. Staines looked at Mr. Talfourd with, in his glance, a satirical intention which the other ignored.

"Why not? Nothing could be simpler."

"No--nothing could be simpler--only I thought you said she didn't know you were engaged. Do you propose to tell her in what relation Miss Wallace stands to you?"

"Certainly! Why do you look at me like that?"

"I should like to see her face when she receives the communication, and, again, when she meets Miss Wallace. I know something of Mrs. Gregory Lamb. I fancy they may both of them be rather dramatic moments."

Margaret told him, laughing--

"Dear Mr. Staines, you may study the expression of her countenance when she meets me to your heart's content, if you choose. Suppose we all of us go together?"

Mr. Winton rose from his chair.

"Thank you; that is a proposal which I am afraid I must decline. Mrs. Lamb might suspect us of conspiracy if we bore down on her in force. I will be in Connaught Square to-morrow evening, but perhaps a little late, when I think it possible, Miss Wallace, that one glance at your countenance will be sufficient to tell me exactly how the matter stands. Remember the arbitrament of my fate--as a manager, an issue of no slight consequence--is in your hands."

"Poor, innocent, ignorant Mrs. Lamb!" exclaimed Miss Johnson. "Meg, if she only knew what issues of life and death you are bringing with you, I don't believe she'd let you into her house--however nicely Harry might ask her permission to bring you."

The young lady spoke much truer than she knew.

CHAPTER XX

THE IMPENDING SWORD

"I must have ten thousand pounds, and"--Mrs. J. Lamb paused--"within a week."

"Must!"

Mr. Isaac Luker folded his hands together with a gesture which suggested the act of prayer. He seemed singularly out of place in his environment. They were in the apartment which Mrs. Lamb called her boudoir, a word which has a different meaning in the mouths of different women. In this case it stood for a room which represented what was possibly the last word in gorgeous decoration. Everything was of the costliest. If the result was a trifle vivid, it was not altogether unpleasing. It was a room in which one could be very much at one's ease--in certain moods--if one were of a certain constitution. There was something in its atmosphere which made a not ineffective appeal to the senses, not so much to the sense of beauty or of intellect, as to that of physical well-being. In some subtle way the owner's strong personality impregnated the whole place. On crossing the threshold a person of delicate perception might have become immediately conscious of something which could scarcely have been called healthy.

But the prevailing note was gorgeousness, and anything less gorgeous than Mr. Isaac Luker one could hardly conceive. Mrs. Lamb's costume harmonised with the apartment, it was so evidently the product of one of those artists in dress to whom expense is no object. And it became her very well. In it she looked not only a handsome woman, but almost a real great lady. Mr. Luker's apparel, on the other hand, was not only unbecoming and ill-fitting, but it was apparently in the last stage of decay. None of the garments seemed to have been made for him, and they were all of them odd ones. He was tall and thin. He wore an old pair of black-and-white checked trousers, which were too short in the leg and too big everywhere else; an old black frock-coat, which he kept closely buttoned, and which must certainly have been intended for some one who was both shorter and broader. His long thin neck was surrounded by a suspicious-looking collar, which was certainly not made of linen, and he wore by way of a necktie something which might have once done duty as a band on a bowler hat. One understood, after a very cursory inspection, why a gentleman who had such a keen regard for appearances as Mr. Andrew McTavish should object to being brought into involuntary, and unsatisfactory, professional contact with Mr. Isaac Luker.

Yet those who knew had reason to believe that Mr. Luker did a considerable business of a kind--though it was emphatically of a kind. He had one or two peculiarities. He was an habitual gin drinker, and though he could seldom be said to be positively drunk, he could just as rarely be called entirely sober. To all intents and purposes he lived on gin. He had it for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and for afternoon tea and supper, and he did not seem to find it a very nourishing food. Then, perhaps partially owing to the monotonous regularity of his diet, he seemed to be incapable of saying what he meant, while his yeas and his nays were as worthless as his oaths. For a solicitor to be a notorious liar and drunkard one would suppose would be a serious handicap in his profession. Oddly enough, with Mr. Luker it was, if anything, the other way. The sort of clients he courted wanted just the sort of man he was. He, speaking generally,

never did any clean business; he was only at home when dealing with what was unclean; and as there is more of that kind of commerce about than might be imagined--and some of it is amazingly lucrative--he did tolerably well. Indeed, there were those who declared that, although he did not look it, he was uncommonly well-off, it being one of his characteristics that he was as incapable of spending money as he was of telling the truth or giving up gin.

As he stood there, with his hands folded in front of him in an attitude of prayer, Mrs. Lamb regarded him with what could hardly be regarded as glances of admiration. When she addressed him it was with a frankness which was hardly in keeping with her *rôle* of great lady, and which is not usual when one deals with one's legal adviser.

"Listen to me, Luker. I want none of your humbug, and I want none of your lies. I want ten thousand pounds inside a week--and you've got to get them. I'll give fifteen thousand for the ten, so there won't be a bad profit for some one."

"How long do you want the money for?"

"Oh--three months."

"On what security?"

"What security? On the security of my property."

"Your property?" Mr. Luker did not smile--a smile was probably another thing of which he was incapable--but his wizened features assumed a curious aspect. "Of what does your property consist?"

"None of your nonsense. To begin with, there are those ten thousand shares in the Hardwood Company. As you know very well, they're worth over fifty thousand pounds at the present moment."

"They would be if you had them--but you haven't."

"McTavish & Brown have got them, and you're going to make them disgorge."

"We've first of all to prove that they've got them."

"Oh no, we haven't; they have to prove that they handed them over to Cuthbert Grahame, which is a very different thing, as you know very well."

"My dear Isabel, you're a very clever woman; your fault is that, if anything, you're too clever."

"I've heard you called too clever before to-day."

"My dear----"

"Don't you call me your dear! I won't have it."

"Very well, although it is possible that few men have a better right----"

"Right! Don't you dare to talk to me about right!--you!--don't you talk to me like that, Mr. Luker! You

just simply listen to me. I want ten thousand pounds before this day week, and you've got to get it. No one in London knows better than you from whom and how to get it."

"Mrs. Lamb--by the way, how is your worthy husband?"

"Never mind my worthy husband--you keep to the point."

"Even supposing we are able to saddle McTavish & Brown with the responsibility for the Hardwood shares--which is problematical--it'll take a good deal more than three months to do it. It is not to be supposed that they'll accept an adverse decision without taking the case through every court available. That may take years. If in the end it is decided that they will have to pay, it is not by any means certain that they will be able to. Costs will have swollen the original total enormously; it all will have to come from them. There is nothing to show that they are in a position to pay such a huge sum as that will be."

"Oh yes, there is; they're rolling in money; I've seen enough of them to know so much."

"You think you have. I doubt if that is a matter on which your judgment can be trusted. If the case ultimately goes against them, the possibilities--I should say the probabilities--are that they will declare themselves bankrupt. Then where will you be? You will have to pay your own costs, and, instead of getting the amount adjudged, after another interval of dreary waiting, you may receive, as a final quittance, perhaps sixpence, or a shilling, in the pound. And in the meantime, you must remember, you will have to live."

"You old croaker!"

"Let me make a suggestion."

"Your suggestions!"

She brought her fist down on the back of an armchair with an emphasis which almost suggested that she would have liked that chair to have been some portion of his body.

"Let me lay the whole case before a friend of mine, and, after he has given it careful consideration, it is possible that he may make you a proposition."

"What sort of proposition?"

"That I cannot tell you--the best he can."

"You understand that I must have ten thousand pounds within a week?"

"I hear you say so. If my friend can see his way no doubt he will let you have them."

"Mind he does see his way!"

"As to that----"

Mr. Gregory Lamb's sudden appearance in the doorway perhaps allowed to serve as an excuse for his sentence to remain unfinished.

"You here!" exclaimed Mr. Lamb, as if he were not too well pleased to see him. "I didn't know."

Mr. Luker's greeting, although well meant, was a little peculiar.

"My dear Mr. Lamb, how well you are always looking!--and always so beautifully dressed. What a lovely pin you have in your pretty necktie! Now I know a friend who would give you----"

"I don't want to know what your friend would give me! Confound it, Luker, I never see you but you tell me what some one you know would give me for something I have on. You might be a marine store-dealer."

"There are worse trades, Mr. Lamb--there are worse trades. Now with regard to that exquisite pair of trousers----"

"Look here, Luker, if you're going to tell me what some one you know will give me for my trousers, I'll throw something at you."

"You mustn't do that, Mr. Lamb, it might be something worth money--everything in the room is so very beautiful. Mrs. Lamb, I wish you good-morning."

"Now, no nonsense, Luker. I want that within a week--and you've got to see I have it--if you don't want trouble!"

"I understand perfectly, and will bear what you have said well in mind. You shall hear from me again very shortly."

"I will see I do!"

"I have had clients, Mr. Lamb, who would have conveyed that pin without paying for it--it presents such temptations to an honest man. I do hope it's properly secured. Good-morning!"

When Mr. Luker had retired Mr. Lamb turned to his wife, with knitted brows.

"Isabel, it's beyond my comprehension why you have anything to do with that animal. He's got scoundrel written large all over him."

"I shouldn't have thought that would have prejudiced him in your eyes."

"I suppose you think that's smart. I know there was a time when we both of us had to sail pretty close to the wind, but I thought that time had gone for ever. You've told me so over and over again. You're a woman of large fortune, of assured position, a person of importance. I should have thought that from the point of view of policy alone it would have been worth your while to have dealings with solicitors of standing only, and to have nothing to do with such a brute as that. Aren't you ashamed to have him seen going in and out of the house, or to have the servants know that he is here?"

"I'm not easily ashamed--you ought to know that. Is that all you've come for?--to tell me what you think about what is no concern of yours?"

"What's this I hear about your bringing out a play, and acting in it yourself?"

"Who told you that?"

"Winton--to my amazement!"

"What did he tell you?"

"Something about your producing a play of Talfourd's--Talfourd's, of all people in the world! My hat! he said that you proposed to act one of the principal parts in it yourself. Isabel, that's going too far; I won't stand it."

"You won't what?"

There was something in the lady's tone and in her attitude before which he obviously quailed.

"I don't think that it's becoming in a woman of your position, as--as my wife."

"It's not my fault that I'm your wife."

"Still the fact remains that you are. By the way, has Talfourd been saying anything to you about me?"

"What should he say?--except to advise me to sew you in a sack and drop you into the river."

"That's just what he'd like--he's that sort of man."

"Is he? He's what you never were, never will be, never could be--a gentleman. Why you don't even begin to understand what a gentleman is."

"Pon my word, I wonder that I let you talk to me like this. I don't want to quarrel with you--I hate quarrelling!--I really do. You couldn't treat me worse if I were a shoeblack."

"I never met any one yet whose shoes you were worthy to black. Why, Luker's a man compared to you. He doesn't sponge upon a woman."

"It's not fair of you to speak to me like this--it is not! I know you're not fond of me----"

"Fond of you!--fond!"

The lady flung out her arm, as if the idea of her entertaining any feeling of that kind for her husband was a grotesque one, and she laughed. As he continued his tone suggested a snarl.

"I don't know that I'm particularly fond of you. You don't go out of your way to make yourself agreeable to a fellow. You've only got to say the word to be rid of me for--well, at any rate, a good long time."

"What's the word? L.S.D.?"

Mr. Lamb coughed.

"A fellow can't go away with empty pockets."

"I thought so. Out with it! What are you at?"

"The truth is, Isabel, I'm not feeling very well."

"If you were feeling as I'd like you to feel you'd be feeling very much worse."

"That's frank! A nice thing for a wife to say to her husband! I believe you're capable of anything."

"I am--I always have been--and I always shall be, you bear that constantly in mind. Why can't you say what you want? If it is prussic acid to use upon yourself I'll give you money enough to buy a barrelful."

The expression of Mr. Lamb's countenance was sullen, so also was the tone of his voice, which perhaps on the whole was not to be wondered at.

"I want to go to the Riviera."

"That means Monte Carlo. Well go--at once--and never come back again."

"If you'll give me the coin I'll start in a jiffy."

"How much do you want?"

"I daresay I could manage with a thousand. I've hit upon a system."

"You've hit upon a system!"

"If you'll only keep still for a moment I'll tell you what it is, and then you'll see for yourself it's an absolute cert. I'll turn the thou. into fifty in less than no time. I can't help doing it!--you see!--and then I'll give you half."

"You'll give me half! Then am I to understand that you won't go unless I give you a thousand pounds?"

"I couldn't do it on less--the system I mean. I've worked out all the details and I really couldn't. I'll show you if you like. It's want of capital that wrecks a man in a thing like this. If you haven't got the proper amount--the lowest possible amount that's absolutely necessary--you might as well throw your money into the sea."

"Then you'll never go at all, because I haven't a thousand pounds to give you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple. I don't think I've fifty pounds at my bankers, and I'm pretty sure that they won't honour my cheque if I overdraw."

"Isabel!"

"You owe money, don't you?"

"I daresay I owe a bit here and there."

"So I've been given to understand. I also owe a bit. And my creditors, like yours, won't wait."

"Mine will have to."

"Will they? I thought that was just what they wouldn't do."

"Who's been telling you tales about me?"

"A little bird. So you see, Gregory, I'm more in want of a thousand pounds, because you can't carry on a house like this for long on fifty pounds, even if I have so much at the bank, which, as I say, I doubt."

"Fifty pounds! You're playing the fool with me--it's a favourite game of yours. What's become of the quarter of a million you told me that man Grahame had left you?"

"That's what I should like to know."

"You don't mean you've spent it? You can't have done--not in the time."

"I've never had it to spend."

"What rot are you talking? What game are you playing? Have you all along been telling me nothing but lies?"

"Cuthbert Grahame told me himself that he was worth more than a quarter of a million; soon after he died I told you that only a small portion of the money could be found."

"You told me nothing of the kind--you've never told me anything. Whenever I asked you a question you've always shut me up. You've kept me all along in the dark."

"Then I tell you now. Only a small sum was ever found, and that's been spent--and more than spent."

"Then am I to understand that he was fooling you when he talked about his quarter of a million?"

"I don't believe that he was. I believe he was telling the truth; that he was worth what he said; only it's never been found, and no one seems to know where it is." She held out her clenched fists in front of her, shaking them, as if she were endeavouring, by the exercise of sheer physical force, to assist her mental process. "Sometimes I feel that I know--that I am very near to knowing--that if I could do something I should know quite. It's as if I'd been told something in a dream, and, on waking, had forgotten what it was. I don't like to think of the time he died--I can't." She looked about her, as if unconscious of his presence, with something on her face, in her eyes, which startled him. "Yet if I could--if I could! I believe it would all come back to me what I have forgotten, and I should know where the money is. But I can't! I can't! Since--since the pillow slipped from under him, I--I've never been the same."

She dropped into a chair, looking straight in front of her, with her hands dangling at her sides, as if she saw--she alone knew what. This was such a new mood for her that its very novelty scared Mr. Lamb.

"Don't look like that, Belle! What are you looking at?"

"God knows! God knows!"

Mr. Lamb squirmed.

"Don't! I say, drop it! You're a cheerful sort of person, upon my word! I come here to get a pound or two, and you go on like this! Do you mean to tell me straight that we're hard up?"

"There are three things that can save us, and three things only. If I could think I might find the money."

"Then, for the Lord's sake, think! Only don't think like that; it gives me the creeps to hear you."

"I can't think, anyhow, about that; I've tried, and I can't. If I could get the money out of McTavish & Brown, that would be something."

"Get it out of any one, but please remember that sharp's the word."

"Then there's the play--Harry Talfourd's play--I believe there's fame and fortune in that--and safety. Do you know what that means--safety?"

"Gracious, Isabel! don't shout at me like that! My nerves were all mops and brooms when I came; you've made them ever so much worse. I'm all of a twitter. I'll talk to you when you're in a more reasonable mood; you'll upset me altogether if I stay much longer." Mr. Lamb withdrew, to return immediately, at least so far as his head and shoulders were concerned, the rest of his body he kept on the other side of the door. "Deal fairly with a chap--do! I must have cash from somewhere, or I shall be in a deuce of a hole. Can you let me have fifty?"

"I can't."

"Can you make it twenty-five?"

"I can't. I can't let you have anything. Do you want me to yell at you? I--can't--let--you--have--anything! Do you hear that?"

"All right! don't shout at a man like that! I should think you must be going off your head. I never saw you in such a cranky mood before."

Mr. Lamb beat a precipitate retreat, this time finally. His wife, left alone, remained seated on her chair in that very curious attitude, with that very curious look upon her face.

"It must be imagination--what they call an optical delusion. Perhaps, as he says, I'm going off my head. One thing's certain, it can't be real. This is not his room; that's not his bed; that's not----" She veiled her eyes with the palms of her hands. "No! no!--I'm too much alone. I shall go mad if I'm so much alone--mad!"

She sat silent for some moments, with her features all contorted, as if she were wrestling with actual physical pain. Then, rising, she took out of a small cupboard in an ormolu cabinet a decanter containing some colourless liquid. Pouring some of it into a wineglass she swallowed it at a draught.

It was pure ether. She resorted to it to minister to a mind diseased.

When, later, she descended to the apartment which was called, as it almost seemed ironically, Mr. Talfourd's workroom, that gentleman rose to greet her with a smile. She also smiled. To all outward seeming she was herself again--self-possessed, satisfied with herself and with the world, at peace with every one. They exchanged a few banal sentences, both remaining on their feet, she looking at him with eyes which, to phrase it diplomatically, flattered, he meeting her glance with an appearance of serene unconsciousness that there was anything in it which was singular. Presently she touched on the topic which was to the front in both their minds.

"About the play--have you thought it over? Am I to play Lady Glover?"

He still was diplomatic.

"You will understand that I, being a conceited and self-centred author, the matter of my play bulges out until it assumes for me what you will probably, and correctly, consider exaggerated proportions. Will you let me think it over a little longer? In the first place, I have settled nothing with Mr. Winton, and, in the second, I want to ask you to do me a favour."

"You are aware that between you and me for you it is but to ask and to have--anything, everything, I have to give."

If her words were significant, the manner in which they were spoken underlined them. Neither the manner nor the matter of his reply could be termed sympathetic.

"I don't know if you are aware that I am engaged to be married."

If something flickered across her face which was not there a moment before, it went as quickly as it came.

"No, I wasn't. Are you?"

"I, of course, don't expect you to be interested in the trivialities of my life, and I only mention it as a mere detail, but--the lady would very much like to know you. May she?"

"My dear Mr. Talfourd! hadn't you better put it the other way? May I know her? and when? May I call on her? or will she pay me the great compliment of coming to see me?"

"You're very kind. With your permission she will come and see you to-night."

"To-night? I'm at home--of course! Do you know I'd almost forgotten it. Bring her by all means. Tell her she's to come early, before the people, and that she's to stop late, after the crowd has gone."

Of such clay are we constituted. She had not the dimmest notion that in giving that very warm invitation she was hanging up over her own head a sword of Damocles, which, in this case, was suspended by something which was almost less than a single hair.

CHAPTER XXI

OUT OF THE BLUE

Mrs. Gregory Lamb's "At Home" was crowded by rather a nondescript gathering. The lady's hospitality was scarcely of the kind which discriminates. Had she set herself to pick and choose her acquaintances, their number might have been considerably less. She had learnt that the people she wished to know were apt not to be anxious to know her; rather the other way. She had to be content with the society of those who did wish to know her. Whether she was particularly desirous of the honour of their acquaintance was another matter altogether. As she wished to know somebody, using the word in the sense of a noun of multitude, she had to put up with what she could get. The result was a little confusing. This is not to say that there were no decent persons among the hordes which thronged her rooms: there were. Possibly the chief objection which could be urged against them was that, for the most part, they were hungry. Not only as regards the physical appetite; though a large proportion of them were quite willing to consume all the food they could obtain, and all the drink. They were hungry in every sense of the word. To use a significant euphemism, a very great majority of Mrs. Lamb's guests were "on the make". They all wanted something. Many wanted a great many things, and wanted them very badly. There was a generous fringe of what is called the "literary, musical and artistic world"--those excellent people who will go into every house into which they can gain admittance. Singers who are looking for people who will listen while they sing, and who will pay for listening. Authors in search of an "opening," victims of that quaint delusion that in order to achieve popularity it is necessary to keep one's person well in the public eye, as if it were not easier for the novelist who lives in the centre of Timbuctoo to gain, and keep, a circulation of a hundred thousand copies--that consummation so devoutly to be desired!--than for the pet of London drawing-rooms. Composers who wanted some one to hear their "works"; musicians who were apparently content to play on their various instruments, and keep on playing, whether they were listened to or not; artists who nourished more or less timid hope that, having provided them with food, and drink, and house-room, their hostess would purchase half a dozen of their "sketches," by way of providing a pleasant climax to their evening's entertainment; actors--and actresses!--who were willing to do anything, from the "splits" to "Hamlet," and to do it then and there; dramatists, who could have told you tales--and tried to!--of managerial incompetence which would have made your blood run cold, if they had not been so monotonously alike. These worthy folk, foredoomed to failure, were at Mrs. Lamb's in force.

There were others. Birds, some of them, of the same plumage, who had achieved a more successful flight, and promised to sustain it, and perhaps fly even higher. Men and women who had won for themselves prominent places in their several callings--perhaps not quite in the front rank, but still near enough--who, having been in many such, understood what kind of house it was that they were in. It is to be feared that they regarded their hostess at best with but amusement, wondering, if she really had as much money as people said, how it was that she was willing to get so little for it.

Then there were the nondescripts--that large battalion. Some actually with titles, though probably a trifle smirched. People who were the Lord alone knew who, or what they did for a living. Persons who claimed to be something in the City, and no doubt were; whose wives, if they had them, gave you the

impression that their husbands were in the same line of business as the Rothschilds. There was probably no trade or profession, from the highest to the lowest, which went unrepresented that night in Connaught Square.

And besides all these there were the score or so of individuals whom the hostess really knew, or thought she did. And among them moved Mrs. Lamb, as if she knew them all. Beautifully dressed, probably the best, without doubt the most expensively, dressed woman there. There were diamonds on her fingers, her wrists, on her bosom, about her neck, in her hair. If they were real, and it were blasphemy to doubt it, she would have been reduced into something worth having if she had been put up to auction as she stood. She looked, if not exactly divine, then certainly not unprepossessing. There were many present, both male and female, who thought her lovely, one of the loveliest women they had ever seen. That was just the assemblage to which such charms as hers would make their most strenuous appeal, so that, since a woman loves appreciation, in her generation she was wise.

For one so young, and in years she still was very young, she bore herself with singular ease. She had cast herself for the *rôle* of great lady. If the type on which she had fashioned herself smacked somewhat of the theatre, her success was none the less, but rather all the more, on that account. In her way she really and truly was irresistible. So full of smiles and of sweetness, so good to look upon. So tall and well set, with such splendid arms and shoulders, such a rounded neck, such good-humour in her face. There was such a suggestion of youth about her--the youth which must prevail, of vital force, of physical vigour. She presented in herself such a striking example of the creed that's all for the best in this best of all possible worlds. She was such an excellent product of that great and shining god, Success. He had showered on her all his gifts, and she on her part seemed quite willing to divide them with whoever would. She seemed to have the knack of saying the right thing to the right person, being possessed either of a wonderful memory for names and faces, or, in an almost miraculous degree, of the trick of arriving, on the instant, at just conclusions from the scantiest data. She knew who wrote songs; what songs they had written; even what songs they were about to write; and who liked it to be thought that they were distant connections of the Rothschilds. She either had this information stored away in innumerable cells in her illimitable brain, or she picked it from people while they talked to her, out of their eyes, lips, pockets, without their suspecting that she was doing anything of the kind.

She might have stood as the personification of human happiness, as the possessor of everything that the heart could desire. There were many there who credited her with being both these things, envying her more or less, admiring her perhaps even more. They would have readily believed that in her bed of roses there was not one crumpled leaf. Her radiant bearing, her beaming visage, seemed to suggest that she lived, and moved, and had her being in the lotus-land of happy dreams, which, for her, had grown realities.

As the evening advanced she seemed to become, if anything, more light-hearted--gayer still--as if the success of her gathering, the happy looks with which she everywhere was greeted, had inoculated her with some subtle essence which raised her out of herself. Harry Talfourd and Margaret Wallace came, in a "growler," when she was at her best and brightest. Although it was late, and some of the earliest comers were going, others were still arriving. A long line of vehicles were slowly depositing their occupants at the front door. In this line Mr. Talfourd's cab took its proper place, in the rear, and in that line it bade fair to continue for some considerable time. The lady and gentleman soon grew impatient.

"Are we going to stay in this cab all night?" inquired Margaret.

The gentleman put his head out of the window.

"It looks as if we were. We're about half a mile from the house, and there seems to be no end of confusion; people are both coming and going, and there's a fine old muddle. I say, Meg, it's quite fine and dry; do you think you could get out and walk the rest of the way? or would it make a mess of you?"

"Make a mess of me! what do you mean? Open that door; I'll soon show you."

He opened the door, and she showed him.

Getting through the wide open portals of Mrs. Lamb's residence, and then up the staircase, on which people were ascending and descending in a continual stream, occupied some time.

"I feel," observed Margaret, when they had reached the drawing-room door, "as if I had gone through a course of the 'home-exerciser,' or whatever they call the thing which is guaranteed to give employment to every muscle in your body. If all these persons are Mrs. Lamb's friends she must be a well-loved woman."

In the drawing-rooms themselves there was room to move slowly, if one observed a few necessary precautions. At their first entrance nothing could be seen of their hostess. As Harry piloted her through the room Margaret found sufficient occupation in the spectacle presented by her fellow-guests. In the course of her somewhat varied experiences she had met some curiosities, but never before had she encountered such specimens of humanity as were about her now. While she was wondering who they could be, and where they could have come from, Harry gently pressed her arm.

"There's Mrs. Lamb in the other room; I'll introduce you."

Margaret looked, and saw, in the smaller room which was beyond, a woman standing, with her back towards her, whom she became instinctively conscious was her hostess. Not only was she the most striking figure in that great crowd, but she was surrounded by a number of people, to all of whom she seemed to be talking at once. Her head being turned away, her face was not visible from where they were, so that it could have told her nothing; yet so singular sometimes is feminine human nature, that Harry had hardly finished speaking when Margaret replied--

"Please don't introduce me to that woman; I'd rather you didn't. Take me away at once."

There was something so unusual in the girl's tone that Harry stared at her in amazement.

"Meg! is there anything wrong?"

"Thank you, there is nothing wrong, only--I want to go."

"Go! You can't go now--it's impossible--before I've introduced you, since you're here for that special purpose."

"I don't want to be introduced. I'd rather you didn't. Harry, you mustn't!"

"Meg, don't look like that. She's not an ogre; she won't bite you. Child, what's gone wrong with you all of a sudden? You needn't stop more than five minutes--and this atmosphere's enough to asphyxiate any one;

but, after what I said to her this morning, and since you have come, the commonest courtesy compels me to introduce you; afterwards we can go at once; any excuse will serve. Anyhow it's too late now for us to think of going before I've made you known to her."

What Mr. Talfourd said seemed to be the fact. The current had borne them so close to their hostess that she had but to turn round to find herself within arm's length of them. Margaret was silent. Harry did not look at her face; he was careful not to do so. The sudden curious change in the girl's manner had affected him more than he would have cared to admit. He knew that she was not a person who was liable to be beset by fantastic whims and fancies, and that there was probably some substantial reason for the alteration which had taken place in her. His wish was to get through the ceremony of introduction with as much speed, and as little ostentation, as he could, and then depart, if the feat were possible, more quickly than they had come. With this intention, taking the bull a little by the horns, he addressed their hostess while her back was still turned towards them.

"Mrs. Lamb!"

At the sound of the voice, for whose accents she had been listening all the evening, the lady moved round with quite a little swirl of her draperies; there was just sufficient open space about her to enable her to do it.

"Mr. Talfourd! I thought you had forgotten me, and were never coming. And--have you brought the lady?"

"I have. Permit me to introduce to you Miss Margaret Wallace."

There have possibly been moments in most of our lives when we have been visited by something of the nature of a thunderbolt, and sometimes it has seemed to drop out of the clearest of blue skies. That was the moment in her life in which the thunderbolt descended on Mrs. Lamb, and with such crushing force that, for a too perceptible period of time, it left her literally bereft of her right senses. Its utter unexpectedness was no slight factor in the havoc which it wrought. Possibly more than she had been able to do for a considerable interval she had succeeded in putting behind her matters which were wont to press too closely; for the moment she had forgotten Pitmuir--all that it meant. This was a case in which forgetfulness meant happiness, or a very tolerable substitute. If only for a few fleeting minutes her mind was at peace.

And, on a sudden, without a moment's warning, not dreaming that such a meeting was even within the range of possibility, she found herself confronted by the one person in the world whom she would have traversed the universe to avoid. There, in her own drawing-room, within two feet of her was the girl who was the only living creature whose image haunted her, both awake and asleep.

She had had communion of late with ghosts--unwillingly enough, for she had resorted to every means with which she was acquainted to drive them from her. Yet come they would. Therefore it was not, after all, so strange, that in the first moments of what practically amounted to delirium, she supposed that this bonny, fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, whom she so hated and so feared, was one of them.

When she heard her name, and saw her face, she moved back upon the people who were behind, oblivious that they were there. The whole fashion of her countenance was changed. She held out her arms, as if to ward off something whose approach she feared. And she exclaimed, in a voice which none of those about had heard from her before--

"You can't come in!--you can't! He says you're not to--and you shan't! Go away! go away!"

Not one person in the throng which was around her had a notion what she meant, Margaret no more than any of them. She herself drew back and clung to Mr. Talfourd's arm, as if in fear. But her fear was as nothing to the other's. Their hostess offered in herself a picture for her guests' inspection which it was not pleasant to behold. She seemed to have all at once become transformed into a gibbering idiot. While she persistently drew farther and farther back, she kept repeating--

"You shan't come in!--you shan't! He says you're not to--and you shan't! you shan't! I say you shan't!"

There was among the onlookers a medical man, one who had had experience of different phases of lunacy. Perceiving that this was a case which entered into his domain, he forced himself to the front. He put his hand upon his hostess' bare shoulder.

"Mrs. Lamb! what has affected you? There is nothing here to cause you the slightest disturbance. Control yourself, I beg."

His tone of calm authority had instant effect. Mrs. Lamb was still, she ceased to gibber. Her arms fell to her sides. She remained motionless, staring in front of her, as one in a dream. Putting her hands up to her face, a convulsion seemed to pass all over her. When she removed her hands she was awake, and understood, and knew what she had done. The knowledge was more than she could bear.

"Let me pass," she cried.

They let her pass. She swept through her guests, who huddled themselves together to let her go, like some incensed wild creature, out of the room, from their sight.

CHAPTER XXII

MARGARET SETTLES THE QUESTION

Harry Talfourd hurried Margaret Wallace into the street as fast as circumstances permitted, while the guests at Mrs. Lamb's were looking at each other, exchanging whispers, asking what had happened, what the thing which had happened meant. A few seconds after the hostess' departure the crowded rooms were filled with the buzz of voices, which rose higher and higher until it became a pandemonium of noise. Mrs. Lamb's "At Home" had resolved itself into chaos.

Outside in the street Mr. Talfourd did not find it easy to get a cab; the chaos within was already beginning to make itself felt without. The whole roadway was a confusion of vehicles. Perceiving that it was inadvisable to stand still, since they immediately became the cynosure of curious, and even impertinent, eyes, Harry marched resolutely onward, holding the girl tightly by the arm. They had to go some little distance before they could find a four-wheeled cab which would condescend to give them shelter.

So soon as they were in, Margaret drew back into the corner of her seat with a movement so eloquent that Harry seemed to hear her shiver. He was silent, trying to collect his thoughts. He was as much at a loss as any of the excited people they were leaving behind. When he spoke it was lightly, as if he desired to make as little of the matter as might be. He was conscious that in the farther corner, as far away from him as she could get, was the girl he loved, in a mood wholly unlike any that he had known before. He was fearful of what might be coming next. So he endeavoured not to be serious.

"This promises to be a night of adventure. Did you ever see such a scramble for cabs? People were rushing out of the house as if it were on fire. We'll hope there'll be no accident before they've finished. What did you think of Mrs. Gregory Lamb? Something must have occurred to upset her equilibrium; she showed quite a new side of her character." Margaret was still. He seemed to hear her breathe; he wondered if it were possible that she was crying. He put out his hand, touching hers gently with his finger-tips. Although she did not repulse him she remained impassive, not in any way acknowledging his caress. "Meg, I hope you're not worrying yourself about that woman's behaviour. She's not quite responsible, I fancy. She certainly wasn't to-night, but there was nothing that need trouble you."

"I am wondering what she meant."

"Meant? My dear child, she meant nothing, absolutely nothing. She's a trifle mad, that's all."

"I'm not so sure. I believe she did mean something."

"What on earth makes you think that? What could she mean?"

"I can't explain. At present I don't understand myself; but I shall--I know I shall. Only I'm afraid."

"Afraid! Sweetheart, don't talk like that! You make me feel as if I had done something I oughtn't to have done."

"You have done nothing. Still I wish you hadn't introduced me. I asked you not to."

"But, Meg! the whole thing was your own proposition; the whole idea was yours from first to last."

"Yes, I know; but then I didn't understand."

"What didn't you understand?"

"I hadn't seen her."

"You hadn't seen her? Meg, have you ever seen Mrs. Lamb before?"

"Never."

"Has she ever seen you?"

"That's what I'm wondering; that's what I'm trying to make out."

"It's a very mysterious business altogether; and the way you're taking it seems to me to be not the least mysterious part of the whole affair--and I can't say that I'm fond of mysteries. However, as some one or other says in a play, though I'm afraid I can't tell you what play, 'Time will show'."

When they reached Margaret's rooms they found that Frank Staines and Mr. Winton had arrived already, and were waiting for them at the street door. They all went up together. So soon as they were in the room Mr. Winton asked his question--

"Well, Miss Wallace, is Mrs. Lamb to create Lady Glover?"

Had he put to her an inquiry on the answer to which the whole happiness of her life was dependent, it could hardly have moved her more.

"Never! never! never!"

She repeated the word three times over, with each time an additional emphasis. Mr. Winton, probably accustomed to strenuous utterances on the part of ladies to whom the theatre was the chief end and aim of their existence, appeared to be entertained by her intensity. Putting his hands behind his back he regarded her with smiling face.

"And isn't she to produce the play?--that is, if she's willing to do so if she's not to be allowed to play in it?"

"She is to have nothing to do with it--nothing."

"You appear to have arrived, Miss Wallace, at a decision which is final and conclusive, and to have done so in a very short space of time."

"I have."

"The matter is placed beyond the pale of my discussion?"

"It is."

Mr. Winton turned to Harry with a little gesture of amusement.

"Then, Talfourd, we shall have to seek for another capitalist, and as that is not a bird which is easy to find, 'The Gordian Knot' will have to be shelved for a still further indefinite period. Let's trust that some of us will live to see it produced."

In her turn Margaret faced Harry with an air of penitence.

"I'm so sorry, but I would rather that it were never produced at all than that it should owe anything to that woman--and you know how I have set my heart on its success."

He tried to comfort her, as if the loss were hers.

"'The Gordian Knot' won't spoil by keeping; don't let it trouble you a little bit; dismiss Mrs. Lamb from your mind as if she had never been. She's nothing to you, or to me, or to any of us; she's just--like that!"

He snapped his fingers in the air, as if by the action he expressed her valuation. Margaret answered with an enigmatic smile.

"Like that? I don't think she'll be to me like that--ever."

"But, my dear girl, why not? why not?"

"Ah! that I cannot tell you, because I don't know. But I shall know, and, when I do, I daresay I shall wish I didn't."

Harry threw up his hands in the air as if it were a case which baffled him. Frank Staines, who had been listening with a twinkle in his eyes, observed--

"I understand, Miss Wallace, that your appearance at Mrs. Lamb's furnished the occasion for quite a dramatic interlude".

Margaret moved her shoulders, as if the recollection made her shudder.

"I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind--thank you very much. I'm awfully sorry to turn you people out, but--I think I'd like to go to bed, if I may."

When the three men found themselves in the street Winton said to Harry--

"Miss Wallace's idea does not seem to have been altogether a success".

Harry did not reply at once; when he did his tone was a little grim.

"I'm not so sure. My own impression is--though if you were to ask me I could not tell you in so many set terms on what it's founded--that we're well rid of the lady, and that we are rid of her I think there's very little doubt."

Frank Staines remarked--

"If the lady's mad, or if she's subject to fits of madness--and if she isn't I don't know what she is--it's just as well that you've discovered it before it was too late".

Judging from their silence that seemed to be the opinion of the others also.

The next morning Miss Wallace was distinctly in an uncommunicative mood, as Miss Johnson, who paid her a very matutinal call, found, whereupon the young lady expressed herself with characteristic frankness.

"Really, Meg, I've known you for quite a time, and I was just beginning to think that you were a really Christian person, but now it's actually bursting on me that you can be nothing of the kind. You sit there, mumchance, looking all sorts of things and saying nothing; and if there can be anything more exasperating than that, I should like to know what, it is. You promised, last night, before you went to Mrs. Lamb, that you would tell me everything that happened--I'm sure something did happen, by the looks of you--yet the more I ask you questions, the more you won't answer them. Do you call that being as good as your word? I don't--so that's plain. I'm disappointed in you, Margaret Wallace."

Margaret smiled, a little wanly.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Dollie, please! but I can't talk to you just now, and especially about last night. Ask Harry, or Mr. Staines, they'll tell you everything, and perhaps a little later I will myself, but just now I really and truly can't."

Dollie, eyeing her shrewdly, perceiving she was in earnest, bowed to the inevitable.

"Very well; I shouldn't dream of asking anything of Mr. Frank Staines, he might treat me even worse than you are doing. But it's possible that I may put a few questions to your Harry. The fact is that if some one doesn't tell me something soon I shall simply burst with curiosity. I have never concealed from any one that curiosity's my ruling passion--it's the case with all literary persons, my dear! Meg!"--she went and put her arm about the girl's neck, and the tone of her voice was changed--"if anything horrid happened at that woman's, never mind; after all, horrid things don't really matter, they generally turn out much better than they seem. I once had thirteen MSS. rejected in one week, and yet I bore up, and I planted them all before I'd done with them. I've never seen you look like this before, and I don't half like it. I always make you the heroine of all my stories, because you're the best plucked girl I ever met; so buck up, and stop it as soon as you conveniently can."

Miss Johnson had not departed very long before Margaret had another visitor--Dr. Twelves. He found her much more talkative than Dollie had done.

CHAPTER XXIII

MARGARET RESOLVES TO FIGHT

So soon as the doctor appeared in the doorway Margaret ran to him with outstretched hands, in her voice a curious, eager note.

"I knew you'd come!--I knew it!"

The doctor took her soft hands in his well-worn ones, regarding her from under the pent-house of his overhanging brows with his keen hawk's eyes, which age had not perceptibly dimmed, as if he sought for something which he fancied might be hidden in some corner of her face.

"Did you? How did you know it?"

"I don't know; but I did--I was sure."

"Maybe you've the gift of second sight. I've heard it said it was in your father's family."

"I wish I had; it would be the most useful gift I could have just now."

"Would it? How's that? Maybe you knew I'd come because you wanted me."

"Wanted you! Doctor, don't you feel unduly flattered! But there's no one in the world I wanted half so much as you."

"Is that so? Then it's queer, because I just happen to be wanting you nearly as much. But before we fall to talking come to the light, and let me see your face. There's something there which puzzles me, which I've never seen on it before; it's sure I am it wasn't there the other day."

Taking her by the arm he would have led her to the window, but she placed her hand against his chest and stopped him.

"No, no, doctor, you mustn't take me to the light, and you mustn't look at my face either. I'd rather you turned right round and look at the wall. There's quite a pretty paper on the wall, and some drawings of mine which you'll find deserve your very closest attention. I just want to talk to you, and I want you to talk to me, and answer some questions which I'm going to ask--and that's all."

"And that's all? I see. And I'm not to look at your face? Good. It's prettier than the paper, and far more deserving of attention than the drawings, but far be it from me to quiz a lady when she'd rather I didn't. Yet before you start the talking--perhaps when you've started you'll be slow to finish--let me say a word. You remember what you told me about that visit you paid to Cuthbert Grahame--that last visit when they wouldn't let you in?"

"It's exactly about that I wish to speak to you."

"Then that's queerer still, because it's about that I've come to talk. You told me that it was Nannie Foreshaw who refused you admission, and that she poured some water on you; and I told you that I didn't see how she could have very well done that, since, at that very time, she was lying, with her leg broken, in bed. When I left I wrote and asked her what she had to say. I've had an answer from her, and here it is." He took an envelope from his pocket, and from the envelope a letter, speaking all the time. "You'll bear in mind that Nannie's not so young as she was, and that, of late, things have fared ill with her, as they have a trick of doing when one grows old. She's had a broken leg, and that's no trifle when the marrow's getting dry in the bone; and her master--whom she'd had in her arms even before he'd lain in his mother's--had come to his death in a way that wasn't so plain as it might have been. She's never quite got the better of that broken leg; she walks with a stick, and she'll never walk without one; and she'll never be rid of the thought that, when Cuthbert Grahame died, though she was only just above, she couldn't get down to him, or shut his eyes, or see him before he was put in his coffin, or stand by his grave when he was buried. That thought troubles her more than the other. Between the one and the other, and the stress of advancing years, she's not so good a penwoman as she used to be. And so it comes about that this letter which I have here was not written by her own hand, though I have no doubt that they're just her own words which are set down in it."

Unfolding the sheet of paper he proceeded to read aloud.

"'Dear Mr. David'--she's called me that these forty years, and before that it was Master David, and it doesn't seem as if she could break herself of the habit, though, mind you, I'm an M.D. of Edinburgh University, and legally entitled to the prefix 'Doctor,' which is more than can be said for a good many that's called it. 'It's beyond my thinking'--it's very colloquially written is this letter, which makes me the more sure that it's just her words which are set down in it--'It's beyond my thinking how you could have supposed that I could ever have turned my darling away from the door?--I never supposed anything of the kind, but that's by the way--'and refuse to let her in? My dear Miss Margaret! Mr. David, if I were dying I'd open the door if I knew that she was there--ay, I believe I would climb out of my grave to do it.' You observe what exaggerated language the woman uses? That's her all over. 'And to think that it should have been her on the day of which you speak--that awful day! I'll never forgive myself now that I know it.' That's her again. 'And, Mr. David, I'll find it hard to forgive you either.' That's the woman to a T--logical. 'If you'd never brought the creature to the house none of it would ever have happened, and my darling would never have been denied the door. And hot water thrown on her sweet head! How slow is the judgment of God!' Observe how she flies off at a tangent. 'Now I'll tell you the whole story. That day as I was lying in my bed, where she had laid me, I heard a great clatter in the house. When, after it was over, she came up to see me, I asked her what it was about. She said that a strange man had come begging to the house, and had tried to force himself into it, but that she had had to imitate my voice, to make him think it was me that was talking to him, before he would go. The insolence of her, that she should try to imitate her betters, and tell me of it to my face. And now it seems that it was no strange man at all, but just my darling who had come begging to be let into her own home. That wicked woman! Tell my sweet, when you see her, Mr. David, just how it was. And tell her if I had known it was she I would have crawled down, if it had been on my hands and knees, to undo the door, and bid her welcome. And say to her that there's none dearer to me in all the world than she is, and well she ought to know it. There is one prayer I offer constantly, that I may be spared to see her sweet face again, and hold her in my arms, and listen to her dear, soft voice. There is much more that I would say, but it cannot be written; it is only for her and for me.' Then the old woman goes off rambling; there is more, but nothing to the point. Here is her letter; you

may read it for yourself if you like; there are tender messages by the yard. You'll see that that is not the epistle of a woman who would drive you from her door."

"But I don't understand. Who does she mean imitated her voice?"

"The woman who called herself Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

"Who called herself Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame? I've heard something about some woman, but nothing that was at all plain. Tell me who she was, and how she came to call herself by his name."

The doctor told, as succinctly as he could, the story of the woman he had picked up by the wayside; how, though he had found her helpless, she had proved herself to be more than a match for them all. Margaret listened with eyes which grew wider and wider open. When he had finished she broke into exclamation.

"Then Nannie is right; it was through you that it all happened."

He resorted to his favourite trick--he stroked his bristly chin, as if the action assisted him in the search for an appropriate answer.

"In a measure, young lady--in a measure. My original intention was to perform an act of mercy. You would not have had me leave the creature there in the night to perish. The whole business is but an illustration of the truth of how great events from little causes spring."

"To give her assistance, shelter--that was right enough; but, according to your own statement, you were responsible for that mockery of marriage."

The rubbing of the bristles went on with redoubled energy.

"I might say something on that point, but I'll not; I'll just admit I'm guilty. And I'll do it the more willingly because there hasn't been a day on which I haven't told myself that if there's a creature on God's earth that needed well and regular hiding that creature's me, because of what I did that night. I did a great wrong, a great folly, and a great sin. Margaret, though I am old and you are young, I am ready, if you wish it--and you'll be right to wish it--to humble myself in the dust at your feet. My only consolation is that in His infinite mercy, ultimately, there may be forgiveness even for me." He paused, then added, with in his voice and manner a suggestion of utter self-abasement which was in itself pathetic, "And the worst I've still to add".

"The worst?"

She shrank from him, with what seemed to be a gesture of involuntary and almost unconscious repulsion.

"Ay, the very worst. Only don't draw yourself from me like that, lassie--for the love of Christ; for I'm but a poor old man that's sinned, and that's very near his end, and that would do all he can to repair his sin before death has him by the throat."

"I--I didn't mean to be unkind, but--what were you going to say?"

"One thing's about his money--Cuthbert Grahame's money. Several times he spoke to me about you--more than kindly. I believe he had it in his mind--as I had, and have it, in mine--to repair the wrong he'd done you. I have reason to think that it was his intention to leave you at least a large portion of his fortune, to re-make the will I had helped him break. I believe that, with one of his cranky notions to be revenged on her for the part she'd played, he communicated his intention to her; that he went so far as to instruct her to draw up such a form of will as he required. My own impression is that she either actually did do this, or pretended to, and that, when the time came for him to affix his signature, she performed some feat of jugglery, which, under the circumstances, was easy enough, and so got him to sign a document which expressed the exact opposite of his wishes."

"Do you mean that he thought he was leaving me his money when actually he was leaving it to her?"

"That's about the truth of it--I believe it strongly. I am persuaded that the will she produced she got from him by means of a trick. But that is not the worst."

"Doctor, you're--you're like the old fable, you pile Pelion on Ossa."

"I believe that when she had got the will into her possession, all signed and witnessed, she was confronted by the fact that exposure of its contents might render it invalid at any moment. That is probably what would have happened, and in a very short time, so that to make sure, she killed him then and there."

"Killed him!"

"I am convinced that Cuthbert Grahame was killed by the woman who called herself his wife, and that within ten minutes of the signing of his will. She propped him up with pillows, then, by suddenly withdrawing those which supported his head, she let it hang down, and so choked him. In order to avoid suffocation it was always necessary to keep his head well raised, a fact with which no doubt she had made herself acquainted."

"Doctor! But was there no inquest?"

"Certainly; and I gave evidence. But what could I say? I had no proof--not an iota. I could only express my conviction that it was impossible for him to have moved the pillows himself; and I did. I doubt if that bare statement had any effect upon the verdict. She was a very clever woman."

"Clever! you call her!--clever! If you are right she was an awful woman--you mustn't call her clever. That sort of thing's not cleverness."

"Isn't it? I don't know what it is then. If we had realised her cleverness from the first we might have been prepared for her; she might have met her match. It is only by fully recognising the fact that we have to deal with an uncommonly clever woman that we shall have the slightest chance of getting the better of her, and bringing her to book."

"Bringing her to book! Doctor! where is she? Is she at Pitmuir?"

"That's not the least strange part of the whole strange business--where she is. I've been wondering if it's a sign that God's finger has been slowly moving to set on her His brand. The young gentleman in whom, I presume, you take a certain amount of interest, since, one day, you design to honour him by

allowing him to make of you his wife--Mr. Harry Talfourd--told me that he acts as secretary to a lady."

"I know."

"The lady's name is Lamb--Mrs. Gregory Lamb."

"Yes."

Margaret, as she uttered the word, was conscious of a catching in her breath; she herself did not know why.

"Mrs. Gregory Lamb is the woman I found by the roadside; who told me that her name was Isabel Burney; who called herself Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame; who juggled into existence the will under which she inherits; who murdered the man out of whom she got it by a trick."

Margaret was silent, curiously silent. Then she drew a long breath, and she said--

"Now I understand".

The doctor was struck by something in her intonation which was odd.

"Just what is it you understand?"

She repeated her own words.

"Now I understand. The veil which seemed to obscure my sight is being torn away; things are getting plainer and plainer. She was not mad, as we thought; it was we who were ignorant. Doctor, I believe that the finger of God, of which you spoke just now, has moved already."

"It is likely. It is some time since I looked for it to move, but He chooses His own time. As for what you say about your understanding, to me your words are cryptic--unriddle them, young lady, if you please."

Margaret, in her turn, told her tale: of her visit to Mrs. Gregory Lamb; of its abrupt and singular termination. The doctor listened with every sign of the liveliest interest.

"As you observe," he cried, when she had done, "it would seem that the finger of God has moved already. She knew you although you did not know her, and the sight of you was as though one had risen from the grave; it filled her with unescapable terror."

"It's difficult to explain--I've not been able to explain it to myself until this minute--but I did know her, that is, I felt as if I ought to know her. Directly Harry pointed her out to me, something struck at my heart and set me trembling. I don't often tremble, but I did then. It was as if I were confronted by some dreadful danger, which had threatened me before, and from which I had then only escaped by the skin of my teeth. And yet I don't know that the feeling which affected me most strongly was terror. No, I don't think it was. It was something else--something which I can't describe. I believe--doctor, I believe it was hatred. I hated that woman with a hatred which was altogether beyond anything of which I had dreamed as possible, of which I had supposed myself to be capable. I don't hate people as a rule; I don't remember ever having met any one whom I seriously disliked. I do think that in almost every one I have come across I have seen

something which I liked. But--in her! I didn't want Harry to introduce me, to take me nearer, because I was filled with what seemed even to me an insane, indeed a demoniacal desire to kill her where she stood."

While the girl was speaking her appearance seemed to gradually change, till, when she stopped, she seemed to stand before the old man like some rhadamanthine, accusatory spirit, ready to pronounce judgment and to execute the judgment which she herself pronounced. The doctor watched her with a visage which remained immobile, almost expressionless.

"Your words suggest a kind of justice which has become extinct--in politer circles."

"Yet justice shall be done!--it shall be done! I will see to it. I never did her a harm, nor wished her one. Yet she has done me all the mischief that she could, for wickedness' sake. If she killed Cuthbert Grahame, she should have killed me also, for, if I live, I will bring her to the judgment-seat. You say she is in enjoyment of the money which she won from him by a trick, and whose safe possession she insured to herself by murder----"

"Pardon me; to her that's the fly in the ointment. It's precisely the money which she hasn't got--which is doubly hard, since, to gain it, she did all that she did."

"I thought you said that she had it."

"She has the will under which she inherits, but, so far, she has inherited comparatively little. Did Grahame ever talk to you about his money?"

"In those latter days, when I began to be a woman, there were only two things about which he would talk, one was his money, the other his desire that I should be his wife. I loved him dearly! No daughter ever loved her father better than I loved him, but not like that!--not like that! When I said no, he would talk of his money, holding it out as a bait."

"Did he ever tell you how much of it there was?"

"He was always saying all sorts of things; I cannot remember all he said. I know he told me again and again that he had been saving his money for years for my sake, for me to use when I became his wife--his wife! He said more than once that there were fifty thousand pounds a year waiting for me if--if I would only say the word."

"Fifty thousand pounds a year? A nice little bait with which to cover the hook. Some girls would have swallowed the bait and never minded the hook."

"Doctor!"

"Calm yourself, young lady; don't blast me with the lightning of your eyes. I'm but saying what's well known to all the world. And did he say where that snug little income came from?"

"From his investments. He was always boasting of the lucky investments he had made."

"Did he ever tell you in what?"

"He wanted to often, but I wouldn't listen. I daresay he did mention some of the names, but I paid no

attention and have forgotten them if he did. I hated to hear of his money. I knew what it meant to him, and I couldn't get him to understand that it didn't--and never would!--mean the same to me. His talk about his money helped to poison my life."

"One knows that to a young girl money has a way of not meaning so much as to some of us older folk, so I humbly ask your pardon if I seem to dwell on it too long. Yet I would ask you to cast back in your mind and think if he ever dropped a hint as to where the securities, the documents which represented these investments, might be found?"

"Weren't they at the bank? or with his lawyers?"

"They were not. Cannot you recall a hint which he may at sometime have let fall as to their whereabouts?"

She put her hands up to her temples, either to ease her throbbing temples or to aid her memory in its task of looking back.

"I can't think! I can't think!--not now! There are so many things of which I have to think, that they seem to have left me no power to think of anything else. Some day something which he once said may come back; I haven't forgotten much he did say to me; it's all somewhere in my brain, only I can't tell you just where--not at this very moment. At this moment I can only think of her."

"Of whom?"

The voice which made the inquiry was Harry Talfourd's. He stood in the open doorway with his hat in his hand. Perceiving that his appearance seemed to have taken them by surprise he proceeded to explain.

"I did knock--twice; but I presume that you were so much engrossed by what you were saying to each other that my modest raps went unheeded. I heard you say, Meg, in tragic, not to say melodramatic tones, that you can only think of her. Shall I be impertinent if I venture to ask who is the lucky person who so fully occupies your thoughts?"

"The lucky person, as you call her, is Mrs. Gregory Lamb. Harry, they say that in England the duelling days are over. They may be--that is, so far as so-called 'affairs of honour' are concerned--but for duels of another sort the day is never over. I am going to engage in a duel with Mrs. Gregory Lamb. You and Dr. Twelves here will be my seconds. I shall need all the assistance that seconds may honourably give to their principal, for it will be a duel to the death."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE INTERIOR

Rather a curious state of things prevailed in Mrs. Lamb's residence in Connaught Square. The largest and best regulated establishments are apt to be disorganised when festival has been kept the night before--that is true enough. But in this case the disorganisation was something altogether out of the common. Mr. Lamb, who never attended his wife's receptions, and so pleased himself and the lady, had come home with the milk, just sober enough to wonder why the place was in such a state of singular confusion. The servants seemed to be occupying the reception rooms, enjoying themselves in a fashion in which servants are not supposed to do. He had a vague recollection of having a drink with a footman or some such menial while endeavouring to ascertain what was the meaning of the proceedings, and of pledging a housemaid's health in what he was convinced was a glass of his wife's champagne. But as, later, he was only too glad to be assisted upstairs by any one and every one, his memory of what took place was scarcely to be relied upon.

His wife had shut herself in her room, constraining her guests to take their departure without affording them an opportunity of saying good-bye to their hostess, and offering her their thanks for a very pleasant evening. Exactly what occurred behind that locked door she alone knew. When her senses returned she was still in her splendour of the previous night. She half lay, half sat, upon her boudoir floor, with her head upon a couch. A broken wine-glass was at her side. A decanter which had held ether was overturned on a buhl table. The day streamed through the windows.

It was some seconds before she recognised these facts. Then she rose to her feet and looked about her. The first thing she did was to go to the boudoir door and try if it was locked. When she found that it was, and that the key was nicely adjusted in the keyhole, so as to prevent any one peeping in from without, she strode through another door, which stood ajar, into her bedroom, which adjoined. She tried the outer door of that, to find that it also was locked. She glanced at a silver clock which stood upon the mantelpiece. According to it the time was twenty minutes to one, so that more than half of the day had already gone. Then she went to a cheval glass, which mirrored her from head to foot, and glanced at herself.

What she saw seemed to afford her a grim sort of amusement. Her hair was all in disorder, one long tress trailed down her neck. Her eyes were dull and heavy. Her cheeks were smeared; such "aids to beauty" as she patronised had become misplaced. Her gown was all creased and crumpled; a stain straggled right across the bodice. In a few curt words she recognised the situation so far as the dress was concerned.

"That's done for."

It looked as if it were, it might have been worn twenty times instead of only once. She removed her jewels--her bracelets from her wrists, rings from her fingers, her necklace, ornaments from her hair. When they were all off she took them in her hands and stared at them.

"At any rate, you're worth money. I daresay I could get something on you if I tried, though perhaps not so much as some might think."

She tossed them on to the dressing-table with a mirthless laugh. Disrobing herself, donning her nightdress, she ensconced herself between the sheets. There she tossed and tumbled about in such a fashion that one was almost disposed to suspect her of indulging in some new form of physical exercise. When she had got the bed into a condition which suggested that it had been occupied throughout the entire night by some peculiarly restless person, ceasing to turn and twist, for some minutes she lay quite still, as if she listened.

"Those servants of mine don't seem to be making much noise; there aren't many sounds of their moving about the house. I should like to know where Stephanie is; she ought to have woke me long before this."

Stretching out her arm she pressed the electric button which was by her bedside--once, twice, thrice, indeed half-a-dozen times, on each occasion for an unusual length of time, and with a fair interval between each pressure. Nothing, however, transpired to show that she had rung at all, certainly no one answered her summons. As she began to realise that apparently she was not meeting with attention of any sort or kind, her temper did not improve. She kept up a continuous ringing; still no one answered, nor was there aught to show that there was any that heard. She began to be concerned.

"Has every one taken French leave, and am I alone in the house? What's it mean?"

She kept her finger on the button for another good five minutes, then she decided that the moment had arrived when it would probably be desirable that she should make some inquiries on her own account. Rising, she put on some clothes, over them a dressing-gown. Then, unlocking the bedroom door, she went out on to the landing. Nothing could be heard. She descended to the floor below, on which were the drawing-rooms. No attempt to tidy them had been made since the guests departed; they were in a state of almost picturesque confusion. Not even the electric lights had been turned off; they were blazing away as merrily as if it were still the middle of the night. The apartments contained certain articles which, as refreshments were provided in the dining-room, could scarcely have been there when the guests retired. Bottles and glasses were everywhere--all kinds of bottles and all kinds of glasses, indeed Mrs. Lamb had nearly stumbled over what looked like an empty brandy bottle as she came out of her bedroom door. To Mrs. Lamb the sight of those various empty receptacles was pregnant with meaning.

"The beauties! I suppose they're sleeping it off. They shall smart for this, every one of them."

She turned towards the staircase which led to the servants' quarters, with the intention, no doubt, of making them smart, when she encountered one of them. An unkempt, untidy figure, clad in a nondescript costume, consisting of checked tweed trousers, carpet slippers, dress-coat and waistcoat, crumpled shirt and collar and no necktie, came strolling leisurely down the stairs as Mrs. Lamb was about to ascend them. It was James Cottrell, the butler, in general, so far as appearances went, the most immaculate of beings. His mistress stared at him in not unnatural surprise.

"Cottrell!--you!--in that state!--at this time of day!--why, you're not even dressed."

So far from showing any signs of being ashamed or disconcerted, Mr. Cottrell's manner was not only self-possessed, it was affability itself. Thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets, he tilted himself on his heels, till his legs touched the stair behind, and he smiled.

"No, Mrs. Lamb, I am not dressed--that is, my costume is not in that perfect state of completeness which I prefer. It is not my habit to make personal remarks, but since we are on the subject, I may observe that you're not dressed either. I shouldn't call that dressing-gown full dress--would you? Your hair don't look--to me--as if it had been done for days, and you really must excuse my mentioning that your complexion seems to have got itself all mixed up anyhow."

"Cottrell, you're drunk; how dare you speak to me like that?"

"No, Mrs. Lamb, I am not drunk; I do assure you that I am at least as sober as you are. If you want to know what drink can do for a man, I recommend you to go and look at your husband--there is a drunkard, if you like; he's like a perambulating sponge. Last night it took six of us to get him upstairs; that man ought to be black-listed. As for daring to speak to you, Mrs. Lamb, there may be some folks whom you inspire with awe, but you don't inspire me with any."

"Don't you think I'll let you speak to me like that, although you are a man and I'm a woman. You'll leave my service at once--and without a character."

"As for a character, any character which you might give me, Mrs. Lamb, would, in all human probability, do me more harm than good. It will be my constant endeavour to conceal the fact that I ever occupied a position in your establishment; it might do me a serious injury were it to become known. As to leaving your service, I shall be only too glad to do so inside sixty seconds; only there's a little formality which I should like to have completed before I go. I should like to have my overdue wages, Mrs. Lamb. They are more than three months overdue, and I should like to see the colour of my money, Mrs. Lamb."

"You shall have your wages; you needn't be afraid."

"Thank you; that is good news. Because, to be quite frank, I was beginning to be afraid--in fact, we all were."

"You impertinent brute! Where are those other creatures?"

"Other creatures? You refer to my colleagues, male and female? We are all of us creatures, Mrs. Lamb--including you. I believe that two or three of them have already quitted your service, including the young Frenchwoman who was supposed to be your own particular maid. She said that she never bargained to wait on a woman of your class, so she's gone. I noticed two young women in the kitchen when I was down there just now. They seemed to be in a more or less tearful condition. Poor wretches! perhaps they never expected to find themselves in such a place as this. As for the rest of my colleagues, I fancy they are still in bed. I do not doubt that if you take them their overdue wages they'll get up, and get out of the house also, as quickly as you like. I imagine they'll be only too glad of the chance."

Mrs. Lamb looked at Mr. Cottrell as if she were meditating measures of a distinctly active kind. Although he might not have been conscious of it, for some seconds he stood in imminent peril of realising that, at least physically, his mistress was more than a match for the average man. But, apparently, after thinking things over she changed her mind and postponed hostilities.

"You shall be paid for this, my man--they all shall--just wait a bit." She moved, as if to return to her bedroom, then paused. "There's some one at the door."

There did seem to be some one at the front door, some one who saluted with equal vigour both the bell and the knocker. Mr. Cottrell was philosophical.

"Ah! there's been one or two already this morning. You've perhaps been in such a queer state yourself that you didn't hear them, though they made noise enough; but there have been several visitors. Jones the fishmonger wants his little account, and Franks the butcher wants his, and Murphy the greengrocer, and the baker, and the grocer, and the milkman, and, I think, the laundry, and three or four more besides. They all want their little accounts--good big ones some of them are. I peeped through the dining-room window, but I didn't notice just who was there, and I didn't open to them either. I've had about enough of opening to those kind of people; they won't go round to the side entrance, and it's no use asking them to. But that sounds as if it was the landlord come to put the brokers in for rent. A landlord always thinks himself entitled to make as much noise as he likes at his own front door."

Some one seemed to consider himself at liberty to make as much clatter as he liked.

"Cottrell, go down at once and see who is at the door."

"Wouldn't you like to go and see yourself, Mrs. Lamb?"

"If you don't obey my orders and go at once I'll throw you out of the house with my own hands, and you shall whistle for your wages."

"Like this? Do I look as if I were in a fit state of attire to open the door of even such a lady as yourself, Mrs. Lamb?"

"Are you going?"

The lady mounted two or three steps; there was something so significant in her manner that Mr. Cottrell temporised.

"I shall be only too happy to open the door as I am!--if you will allow me to pass." She allowed him, and he passed, firing a passing shot as he went. "You must understand that I intend to be perfectly frank with whoever's there--perfectly frank, and truthful. I have had more than sufficient of telling lies on your account, Mrs. Lamb." At this point, throwing the hall-door wide open, he addressed some unseen individuals who were without in tones which were perhaps unnecessarily loud. "If any of you people want money--and by the look of you I can see you do--it's no use your asking me, and so I may tell you at once, because I want money too, and from the same person, and that's Mrs. Lamb; and as Mrs. Lamb happens to be standing at this moment at the top of the staircase, in her dressing-gown and with her hair all over the place, perhaps you'll step in right away, and just say to her what you've got to say. Well, sir, and what might you happen to be wanting? Oh, it's Mr. Luker, is it? May I ask, sir, what you mean by pushing me about as if I was a mechanical toy?"

It was indeed Mr. Isaac Luker, who had come into the hall with complete disregard of the fact that Mr. Cottrell was standing in the doorway. Being in, the visitor regarded the voluble butler with characteristic impassivity. Then, stretching out the forefinger of his right hand, he tapped at the centre of Mr. Cottrell's crumpled shirt-front, and he delivered himself thus:--

"My advice to you is to put your head under the pump if there is one, and under the tap if there isn't,

and let the water run for a good half-hour, for a complaint like yours it's the best medicine you can possibly have".

It seemed that Mr. Cottrell was so taken aback by the proffer of this very handsome advice that for a moment or two he was at a loss for a retort; before he found one his mistress had interposed.

"Luker, come up here!"

Mr. Luker looked at the lady at the head of the staircase, at Mr. Cottrell, at the invisible persons who still remained without. He seemed to hesitate, as if in doubt whether or not to take a hand in the game just where he was; then, arriving at a sudden resolution, he did as the lady requested: he went upstairs, followed by the retort which Mr. Cottrell had found at last.

"Perhaps if you were to try a little of that medicine you recommend on your own account it mightn't do you any harm."

The observation went unheeded. Mr. Luker was captured by the lady the moment he reached the topmost stair. She pointed to the flight in front.

"Up you go!" Up he went, with her at his heels. On the next landing she called his attention to the open bedroom door. "In you go." Perceiving what the apartment was he favoured her with what he perhaps meant for a whimsical glance, and in he went. "Go straight through into the next room--that's my boudoir." He went straight through, and she also. Closing the door of her bedroom she stood with her back to it, putting to him a question almost as if she were aiming a pistol at his head. "Have you brought that money?"

Mr. Luker did not at once give her the answer she so imperatively demanded. Instead, holding his ancient top-hat in front of him as if it were some precious possession, he ventured on a remark of his own.

"Things seem a little at sixes and sevens; they almost suggest that domestic relations are a trifle strained. That man who calls himself a butler is not behaving as if he were a butler; and I regret to notice something about the establishment which one hardly expects to find in a lady's high-class mansion."

"Cottrell's going--at once. All the servants are going--lot of drunken brutes! I'm only waiting for the money to pay them their wages."

"Oh, I see. And--those other persons on the doorstep, do they want money also?"

"I don't know who's there, and I don't care; but I daresay every one wants money. I do! Did you hear me ask if you've brought that money I told you to bring?"

"To what money are you alluding?"

"You know very well! None of your fooling! Have you brought that ten thousand pounds?"

"Ten thousand pounds!" He held up his hands, with his top-hat between them. "Ten thousand pounds! She speaks of that great sum as if it were a mere nothing!"

"Have you brought it?"

"I certainly have not."

"Then what have you brought?"

"I have brought--nothing."

"Look here, Luker, I'm in an ugly temper. You ought to know the signs of it as well as any man, so I advise you to take care. I told you you were to bring me ten thousand pounds. When I said it I meant it; why haven't you brought it?"

"My dear Isabel----"

"Haven't I told you not to call me that?"

"Very well; it's a matter of utter indifference to me what I call you--utter! I was merely about to remark that I have laid your proposition before my friend, and, as I anticipated, he has decided that he doesn't care to lend money except on adequate security."

"Adequate security! Don't you call a quarter of a million adequate security?"

"Certainly, if you had it, but you haven't. And you have nothing tangible to show that you ever will have, or any part of it."

"There are those Hardwood Company shares--ten thousand of them."

"You tell me that you are in an ugly temper, and I can perceive for myself that you are not so calm as I should wish, otherwise I should ask for permission to be quite frank with you."

"You had better be frank! Never you mind about my temper; it won't be improved by your shuffling. Out with what you've got to say!"

"Remember, it will only be said at your express invitation."

"Do you hear? Out with it!"

"Then briefly and plainly it's this: If you were anybody else it's possible that money--some money--might be got on your expectation of the Hardwood Company's shares, but, as things are, it's out of the question."

"Why? What's the matter with my being me?"

"A good deal, as you're as well aware as I am. In a matter of this sort it's character which tells, and, unfortunately--I say it with deep sorrow!--your character's against you."

"What's my character got to do with a thing of this kind?"

"Everything. Suppose my friend were to advance you money upon your expectation of these shares, from your point of view you'd have him between your finger and thumb, and you'd keep him there."

"How do you make that out?"

"The process of extracting compensation from Messrs. McTavish & Brown would be, at best, both a lengthy and a tiresome one, one, moreover, in which not a step could be taken without your active assistance. You'd find that out, and you'd say, 'If you won't let me have so much more I won't move a finger, then you'll lose all that you've advanced already'. And you'd mould your conduct on those lines to the bitter end--my friend might find it a very bitter end. That would not suit him at all."

"You----! I've half a mind to kill you!"

"Keep it at half a mind; many of my friends and clients have found it wiser to stop right there."

"Then do you mean to tell me that I can't get money out of any one--anyhow?"

"Not at all; money can always be obtained upon security. You have personal property--the furniture of this house, jewels, and so on."

"What I might get out of that sort of thing would be gone before I got it."

"Then you might get money out of Messrs. McTavish & Brown."

"You've told me over and over again that it would take no end of a time to do that. I can't wait; I want money--a lot of it!--now."

"There's such a thing as compromise."

"Compromise? What do you mean?"

"If you insist on receiving the full amount of your demand, no doubt Messrs. McTavish & Brown will keep you waiting as long as they can--if you ever succeed in getting it at all. But, supposing you agree to accept half----"

"Or three-quarters."

"Or three-quarters. The major sum might be mentioned first; but, if time is of importance, I should advise you to allow yourself to be persuaded to accept half, or even a trifle less, and to give a full quittance for all claims, on condition, say, that the amount agreed upon is paid within four-and-twenty hours."

"They shall pay it!--I'll see to that! And then when I've got it I'll go at 'em for the rest."

"Ahem! I cannot allow myself to be associated with any such scheme as that."

"Can't you? We'll see! You stop where you are. I'll dress, and then you shall go with me to Messrs. McTavish & Brown as my legal adviser! and when I leave them I'll be richer than when I started, or they'll be sorry!" Mrs. Lamb passed into her bedroom, through the partially open door of which her voice

proceeded: "Don't you go meddling with any of the things in there; I know exactly what there is, so don't you think I don't. If I suspected you of taking so much as a paper-knife, I'd have it out of you if I had to strip every rag of clothing off you to get at it."

CHAPTER XXV

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

Messrs. McTavish & Brown, solicitors, of Southampton Row, London, W.C., had a large, sound and lucrative family connection. They numbered among their clients several people of really excellent position, persons whose names ought to have been in the *Doomsday Book*, and were in Burke's *Landed Gentry*, and in various other places in which one would desire one's name to be found. Among those names was that of Dykes--Lady Julia Dykes, relict of Sir Eastman Dykes, third baronet of Fennington Park, Essex. Sir Eastman had himself been one of the firm's clients, one whom they had every reason to value highly. His testamentary dispositions had been of such a kind that the administration of his estate had practically been left in the hands of Messrs. McTavish & Brown until the coming of age of his eldest son. A handsome income had been left to his well-beloved wife, together with the nominal guardianship of everything which once was his; actually, however, she did nothing of the slightest importance except with the cognisance and approval of the gentlemen in Southampton Row.

Lady Dykes was a lady of a certain age, and of almost more than a certain presence. She was one of those persons who are constitutionally prone to lean--metaphorically!--upon some one or something, and she leaned upon Messrs. McTavish & Brown rather more than they altogether cared for. She consulted them not only every week, but sometimes on each day of the week; often on matters which had no connection with the law, and had nothing to do with them either.

She had been known to ask their advice on the question of the retention or dismissal of a cook. On one memorable occasion she had actually written to them to learn if they thought that it would be becoming for her to attend a drawing-room in a scarlet satin gown. To make the matter worse, that letter was addressed to Mr. McTavish in person. As it was a standing joke with Mr. Brown, who allowed himself an indecorous latitude in matters of real importance, that her ladyship had matrimonial designs upon that well-seasoned bachelor, it was a painful moment to Mr. McTavish when he learned that she requested his advice upon what, to his thinking, was a matter of such singular delicacy.

On the afternoon on which Mrs. Gregory Lamb set out with Mr. Luker to visit Messrs. McTavish & Brown, Lady Dykes was paying one of her very numerous visits to her solicitors. She was closeted with both partners in Mr. McTavish's private room, the senior partner having insisted on summoning the junior to take part in the inevitable conference, he having an almost morbid disinclination to be left alone with her. McTavish had an uncomfortable feeling, however much he might try to hide the fact from Brown, that her ladyship was disposed to show herself much more friendly when he had no one to keep him in countenance. Had they dared, both men would have made it a general rule to put her off on to one of their managing clerks, but they had learned from experience that though the soul of generosity she was quick to take offence, and, therefore, if she would talk nonsense, all they could do was to make her pay for it--which they did.

The time had arrived for her eldest hope, Eastman, to take up his residence at the university. On the present occasion she had called to renew, for the fiftieth time, the interminable discussion as to what was

the exact annual amount he was to be allowed while there, and what exactly he was to do with it.

"I am particularly anxious," she explained, as she had done over and over and over again (some ladies think that the more they repeat themselves the more emphatic they become--which is a mistake), "that he should not waste his money, and worse than waste his money, on what I cannot but consider, and every mother would consider--every mother who cares for her child (and how many mothers do!)--extremely undesirable connections. For instance"--she started on a little story which her legal advisers had heard from her lips more than a dozen times--"Mrs. Adams was telling me only a few weeks ago that her second son, Bernard, who is at Cambridge, at Caius College, or Trinity, or Keble, or St. John's--it's one or the other--I'm not sure which, though I know he's in some part of the building"--she always spoke of a university as if it consisted of one large building, though she must have known better--"has been lavishing--positively lavishing!--articles of various kinds, gifts, presents of every description, from bonbons to gloves, and from shoes to ribbons, and I don't know what else beside--it seems he kept a list of them, I don't know why, and she found it--it made me dizzy to hear her merely read it through, it was that long!--upon, of all creatures in the world--it seems inconceivable, for I've known the boy from a baby, and so did Sir Eastman--but it was a young woman in a tobacconist's shop. Picture what his mother's feelings were; picture what mine would be if I made a similar discovery. If there is one rule to which I have adhered through life it is to allow no one connected with me to have anything to do with females of questionable antecedents. And a tobacconist shop! Am I not right?"

She looked directly at Mr. McTavish, who coughed, and answered--

"Certainly, Lady Dykes; quite right".

Mr. Brown said nothing; he looked the more.

"You yourselves, although of the opposite sex, know perfectly well how necessary it is to have such a rule. You would not have built up this great business were it not universally known that you invariably refuse to accept as clients persons--especially when they are of the feminine gender--who are not of the highest respectability. I myself should not be here at the present moment were I not assured that was the case--of course that you understand. You would no more allow a woman of a certain class to enter your private office, Mr. McTavish, than I should allow a navvy to enter my drawing-room."

It was perhaps a trifle unfortunate that Mrs. Gregory Lamb, attended by Mr. Isaac Luker, should have chosen that particular moment to introduce herself into the premises of Messrs. McTavish & Brown. On the road Mr. Luker had endeavoured to persuade the lady to leave the negotiations as much as possible in his hands, a suggestion which she had repudiated with scorn.

"If any one can play this sort of game better than I can, I've never met them. All you have to do is to chime in when I tell you. If I fail to jockey some coin out of them somehow, then it will be time for you to try your hand."

"I am not so sure of that. It occurs to me as at least possible that if you fail it won't be worth any one's while to take a hand."

It was not in consonance with the lady's plan of campaign to resort, throughout the entire proceedings, to any of the minor civilities of life. For instance she deemed it neither necessary nor advisable to announce her presence by knocking at the outer door. She simply swung it right back on to its hinges, and

strode straight in, not with the lightest strides. In the outer office it was customary for visitors to mention who it was they wished to see, possibly, also, the nature of their business, and then wait in patience till it was intimated to them that they were at liberty to penetrate farther. No such formula was likely to suit Mrs. Lamb, for one reason if for no other. She was well aware that if the heads of the firm had their way nothing would induce them to suffer her to enter their presence. Indeed so soon as the clerks in the outer office recognised who it was, one of them, starting up, prepared to rush to his principals to warn them of her coming. But the lady was too quick for him. While he was already half-way through the farther door, the lady, catching him by the shoulder, swung him round in a fashion which was a sufficient testimony to the fact that her arm still retained at least a good deal of its pristine vigour. Before he had a chance to recover she was in the apartment which was reserved as a sanctum for the senior clerks, her appearance causing a sensation among those respectable elderly gentlemen, which was both ludicrous and surprising. The senior engrossing clerk, Mr. Riseley, was the only one among them who retained even a fragment of presence of mind. He endeavoured to interpose his person between the lady and the approach to Mr. McTavish's private sitting-room.

"Mrs. Lamb, what is the meaning of this behaviour? Such conduct is not to be endured; I must ask you to leave this room at once!"

"Get out of the way," was the only answer which Mrs. Lamb vouchsafed.

"I shall do nothing of the kind--certainly not; my duty to my employers forbids it. You can see neither Mr. McTavish nor Mr. Brown, they--they are both of them most particularly engaged."

Mrs. Lamb condescended to waste no more words on him. He was rather larger than the other clerk, so she used both arms, darting them out in front of her as if they were battering-rams, dashing her half-open palms against him with such force as to drive him against a neighbouring table, overturning both it and its proper occupant with a clatter on to the ground. Then she went rushing into the senior partner's holy of holies as if she had been some mad bull, crying "Come along, Luker," as she rushed.

Mr. Luker went along, not quite so demonstratively as she did, still, considering his build and the difference in his methods, he managed pretty well. Yet he did not move fast enough for his energetic client. As he was coming through the door, seizing him by the arm, she gave it a jerk which sent him whirling half across the room and his hat flying into a corner. The instant she was in she slammed the door behind her, snapped the lock, and pocketed the key.

As Lady Dykes had just been dwelling on her consciousness of the fact that under no consideration whatever would Messrs. McTavish & Brown allow doubtful female persons to set foot inside their offices, it was rather an unfortunate moment for her to make her entry. So both the partners decidedly seemed to think. As for Lady Dykes, she started from her chair with as much agility as her figure would permit, and stared at the intruder open-eyed.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Who is this person? and what does she want?"

Mr. Brown, having his wits about him, made for the second door (most lawyers have at least two entrances to their own particular preserves), observing as he moved--

"Lady Dykes, might I ask you to----"

He got no farther; Mrs. Lamb cut him short. Her wits were even more on the alert than his. Perceiving, on the instant, his objective, dashing after him, pushing him aside as if he were some insignificant thing, she gained the second door, banged it to, locked it, and pocketed that key also. Then, turning, she confronted her victims with a laugh which did not by any means ring pleasantly in their ears.

"It seems as if I had arrived in the very nick of time. I couldn't have bagged the pair of you more neatly if I'd had an appointment with you--could I?"

Lady Dykes, who was the most nervous of her sex, was trembling almost as if she were a species of human jelly-fish.

"Dear! dear!" she gasped. "Who is this person? and what does she want? Make her open the door at once, and let me out! My footman will be wondering what has become of me."

Mrs. Lamb favoured her with an answer--of a kind.

"I'll tell you who I am. I'm one of their clients! I'm one of the helpless, ignorant women whom they've robbed and plundered, but before all's finished they'll find that I'm not so helpless and ignorant as they thought. And I'll tell you what I want: I want back some of the money they've stolen, and before anybody leaves this room I'll have it. I've stood their shuffling long enough, but I won't stand it any longer, as I'm here to show them."

Mr. Brown, who still seemed to have most control over his tongue, addressed himself to Mr. Luker.

"Mr. Luker, I believe you are a fully admitted solicitor. As such I call on you to notice that Mrs. Lamb's words are actionable. And I request you, unless you wish to get yourself and her into serious trouble, to insist on her opening the two doors which she has improperly locked, and on her leaving these premises at once. Surely it is not necessary for me to point out that, otherwise, the consequences to both of you will be of the gravest possible kind."

Mrs. Lamb placed herself in front of the irate Mr. Brown.

"Don't you waste your breath talking to Mr. Luker; he's not on in this scene--not just at present, anyhow. If you've anything to say, you say it to me; it's me you have to deal with, not him."

"Mrs. Lamb, I will have nothing to do with you of any sort or kind; after the monstrous fashion in which you have behaved it is the sheerest absurdity to suppose that we can have any communication with you except through a properly accredited representative."

"So I've behaved in a monstrous fashion, have I? I'll teach you to talk to me like that."

She began the lesson then and there. Gripping him by both shoulders she shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. He was a slightly built man, not physically strong; had he been a rat he could scarcely have seemed more helpless in her hands. When, presumably, she was of opinion that the first lesson had lasted long enough, she honoured him with a few remarks.

"You take from me everything on which you can lay your claws; you strip me of every shilling I possess; and then, when I ask for some of it back, you insult me. You--dirty--thief!" Here there was another bout of shaking. "There are men doing penal servitude who aren't half such mean, sneaking

scamps as you are--and plenty of them."

She flung him from her against the wall, leaving him to struggle for breath as best he might. Lady Dykes, in an armchair, was developing what promised to be a very fine attack of hysterics. She was beginning to make as much noise as Mrs. Lamb herself. Mr. McTavish, who, judging from his appearance, had been in imminent peril of a stroke of apoplexy, seemed all at once to regain his power of speech.

"Upon my word, you're--you're--you're the most dangerous woman I ever heard of!"

"And you're the most dangerous thief! Perhaps before I've done with you you'll find that thieving's almost as dangerous to yourself as to those on whom you practise."

There came a smart rapping on one of the doors, and a voice from without.

"Shall we send for a policeman, sir?"

"By all means!--at once! Let him break down the door if he can't get in any other way! This--this woman's--positively dangerous."

"You're right there; I am--you've made me dangerous. And don't you think that a policeman, or ten policemen, will keep me from being even with you if I once get started; not all the policemen in London couldn't do it!"

Mr. Luker, seemingly under the impression that his client was going a little too far, even for her, ventured on an interposition.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Lamb, but, if you will allow me to say so, I think this matter can be settled on a perfectly peaceful basis. If these gentlemen are disposed to be reasonable, and I feel sure they are, everything can be arranged without unpleasantness of any sort or kind. The point is----"

Mrs. Lamb took the words out of his mouth, substituting, that is, words of her own.

"The point is, that, among other things, you've robbed me of ten thousand Hardwood Company's shares."

"It's an infamous falsehood! We've done nothing of the kind!"

"Haven't you? I know you have, and so do you; but you're one of those brazen-faced old sinners who would go to the gallows with a lie on your lips. Those shares are worth fifty thousand pounds, and more; but as you've robbed me of every penny I have in the world, and left me with nothing but starvation staring me in the face----"

"It's--it's incredible how any one should dare to say such things!--incredible!"

"So there's nothing left for me but to try to come to terms with the robbers, and that's what I have come for. If you'll give me a cheque for forty thousand pounds--now!--this minute!--you may keep the other ten, and much good may it do you. So just you move yourself. Sit down at that table and write me a cheque for forty thousand pounds."

"Forty thousand pounds! Do you suppose----"

"I suppose nothing. You do as I tell you, or you'll be sorry."

Again Mr. Luker ventured on an interposition.

"If, once more, you will excuse me, Mrs. Lamb, if you will permit me I will point out to Mr. McTavish how much more than moderate you are disposed to be in your demands. I have Mrs. Lamb's permission to inform you, Mr. McTavish, that she is in absolute want of ready cash; that she is practically in a state of destitution; and that therefore she is willing to waive her lawful claims to such an extent that she is prepared to accept the sum of five-and-twenty thousand pounds; a fair proportion to be paid at once, and the balance on a given date; and to give you in exchange a discharge in full for all her claims against you respecting the Hardwood Company's shares."

Mrs. Lamb's manner, as she acquiesced in her solicitor's modification of her terms, was not precisely gracious.

"If I take twenty-five thousand pounds that will be going halves. If I am to be robbed I suppose I may as well be properly robbed; but I'll have at least ten thousand pounds in cash. So, now, Mr. McTavish, without any more fuss, perhaps you'll let me have a cheque for that ten thousand."

"Ten thousand pounds! I'll not give you a cheque for tenpence."

"You're two men, and I'm only a woman, but you'll find that I'm much more than a match for the pair of you; and if you're not careful I'll thrash you both till within an inch of your lives; I'll leave marks on you which you'll carry to your graves. As for you, you bloated old whisky barrel, I've only got to give you one or two smart ones in the proper place, and you'll be in your grave before you think. So if you want to keep on living, you'll make no more bones about handing me that cheque."

"This--this is worse than highway robbery! In my own office you--you positively threaten----"

"Threaten! I'll do more than threaten! Quick! Are you going to fork up or am I to break every bone in your body?"

"I--I--I will not be bullied----"

"Bullied! I'll show you!" She snatched up a stout malacca cane which stood by Mr. McTavish's table, and which was that gentleman's property. "To start with, I'll splinter this over your bodies, then I'll smash everything else in the place, and you into the bargain. Now is it going to be the coin or----"

The hand holding the stick went up into the air, the gesture rounding off the sentence with sufficient significance.

"You wicked woman! how dare you threaten me with my own stick? Help! Where is that policeman?"

"Policeman! Do you think I care for a policeman? Not that much!"

Down came the stick with a swishing sound through the air. As it descended Mr. Luker caught the lady by the wrist.

"Mrs. Lamb, I do implore you to pause a moment for consideration. I reiterate my conviction that if you will only exercise a little patience this matter can be settled amicably and without violence."

"Luker, if you don't want to let yourself in for a little handling on your own account you'll let go of my wrist."

"On the contrary, Mr. Luker, I beg you will keep a tight hold--the woman must be stark mad."

"Mad!" With a sudden twist Mrs. Lamb wrenched herself loose from Mr. Luker, and that same moment there was a smart rapping at the door, and an authoritative voice was heard without.

"I'm a police constable. What's going on in there? Open this door at once."

"Break it open, constable, break it open. I'm Mr. McTavish, and I authorise you. We're--we're in actual danger of our lives."

There must have been some one on the other side who knew how to deal with a locked door, for in a surprisingly short space of time it was open. A constable was revealed, supported by a considerable body of clerks, of all ages, in the background. The representative of law and order advanced into the room.

"What's taking place in here?"

"I'm Mr. McTavish, officer, the senior partner in this firm. This--this woman has been endeavouring to extract money by means of threats. I must request you to eject her from these premises at once."

"Do you charge her?"

"Not at this moment, though, no doubt, later proceedings will be taken which will bring home to her a sense of her misconduct. At present all I want you to do is to turn her out."

"And this woman also?"

The allusion was to Lady Dykes. Mr. McTavish was shocked.

"Dear me, no; that is Lady Dykes, of Fennington Park, one of our most esteemed clients, who has already been subjected to the most terrible annoyance. The man"--pointing to Mr. Luker--"you will turn out with the woman."

The constable touched Mr. Luker on the arm.

"Now, sir, offer the lady a good example, and show her the way out."

Mr. Luker put his hat on, and, without a word, prepared to act on the officer's advice. Mrs. Lamb caught him by the shoulder.

"You cur! Don't be a fool, Luker, and do as he tells you."

The constable smiled, good-humouredly.

"If you're a wise man, sir, you will do as I tell you, and you'll talk the matter over with the lady afterwards."

Mr. Luker seemed to incline to the opinion that the policeman's was the voice of wisdom. Withdrawing himself from the lady's detaining fingers, still without a word, he left the room. The constable addressed himself to Mrs. Lamb.

"Now, madam, we policemen hate to have to be rude to a lady; might I ask you to oblige me by following your friend's very excellent example? That's the way out."

He jerked his thumb towards the open door. Mrs. Lamb looked at him and at the others. Apparently what she saw forced her to the conclusion that what she called "the game" was "up". She brought Mr. McTavish's malacca cane on to a writing-table with a resounding thwack.

"You couple of thieves! I'll wring your necks for you yet before I've done!"

She dashed the stick upon the floor and went, the clerks treading on each others' toes in their anxiety to give her as much room as she required.

CHAPTER XXVI

SOLICITOR AND CLIENT

A pseudo-historical utterance was paraphrased by Mr. Luker when the lady joined him in the street without.

"It may have been magnificent, but it wasn't war."

It is possible that Mrs. Lamb knew very little about the charge at Balaclava. It is certain that she had never heard of the phrase with which the critical French general has been credited. And she was in a red-hot temper, so that in any case she was in no mood to appreciate her legal adviser's recondite allusions. The lady's own remark was idiomatic in the extreme.

"Luker, I'd like to knock your head clean off your shoulders. If it hadn't been for you I'd have got all the ready I wanted out of that couple of cripples, or----"

"Or you'd have been on your road to the lock-up. There's no 'or' about it; if it hadn't been for me you would have been. My dear Isabel----"

"Don't call me----"

"All right; I won't. If I were to call you all that I think you ought to be called, you mightn't like it. I was merely about to remark that your methods are too primitive. In London you can't go into an office and get all the money you want out of a couple of lawyers, old or young, with the aid of a stick. It can't be done. If it could be done people would be doing it all day long."

"Can't I?" Mrs. Lamb's tone was grim. "You don't know me yet. You wait till I get them to myself, either together or singly, and I'll lay you the National Debt to sixpence that I don't leave 'em till I've got what I want. I've my own methods, and I've found them pay me very well up to now."

"I don't doubt your capacity; when I think of where you were and of where you are I've no reason to. But in dealing with people like McTavish & Brown, with a strong case like yours, diplomacy pays better than violence. If you'd left the conduct of the affair to me I'd have at any rate exacted from them the promise of a satisfactory sum in settlement of all claims. As it is, where are you?"

He held out his hand, palm uppermost, as if to show that there was nothing in it. She walked by his side for some little distance in silence; when she spoke her tone was still grim.

"I'll tell you where I am--I'm with you. And I tell you what it is--as I couldn't get any money out of them, I'm going to get it out of you."

"Are you? I don't see how."

"Don't you? I do."

"You can't get blood out of a stone."

"No; because there's no blood in a stone. But I can get money out of you, because you've plenty."

"I wish I had."

"Don't you worry; your wish was granted before it was uttered. I'll show you where some of it is, if you like."

In his turn Mr. Luker for a while was still. Then stopping, he held out his hand.

"I wish you good-afternoon, Mrs. Lamb."

"You needn't; I'm coming with you."

"I'm afraid I have an appointment which will prevent my enjoying the pleasure of your company any longer."

"Oh no, you haven't. Besides, it will make no difference if you have--I'm coming with you."

"You are coming with me? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm going to accompany you to your private residence, Mr. Luker. I want to have a quiet chat with you. I can have it there better than anywhere else. We shall be snug, and all by ourselves."

He looked at her with his bleared, half-open eyes--he seemed to be physically incapable of opening them to their full extent--with an expression which some ladies would not have considered flattering, nor were his words exactly complimentary.

"I would as soon go home with a tigress as with you in your present mood--indeed, of the two, I think I would prefer the tigress. I have been in too many tight places to feel inclined to walk, with my eyes open, into quite such a tight place as that would be. Once more I have to inform you that I have an appointment which will prevent my having the pleasure of your company any farther, so I wish you good-afternoon."

"And once more I tell you that I'm coming home with you."

"Oh no, you're not."

"Oh yes, I am."

"I think you are mistaken."

He beckoned to a policeman who happened to be standing by the kerb at a little distance from where they were.

"What do you want with him?" she demanded.

"I am going to appeal to that officer for protection, and I don't think you will find that I shall do so in vain. You will compel people to summon the police--it is extremely unwise."

The constable was sauntering towards them. Recognising, apparently, that there was logic in what Mr. Luker said, without waiting for the policeman to approach, also without going through the empty formula of wishing the solicitor good-afternoon, she marched off and left Mr. Luker alone. When she had gone, perhaps, a hundred yards, she stopped and looked back. Mr. Luker, who was still where she had left him, was seemingly enjoying a little friendly converse with the constable. She continued her progress for, possibly, another hundred yards, and then again looked back. This time Mr. Luker had vanished. She could distinguish the stalwart figure of the constable striding along in solitary state in the distance. She signalled to a hansom. "Stamford Street, Blackfriars Bridge end," was the direction she gave the driver. When the vehicle had brought her to the point she desired, descending, she dismissed it. She stood for two or three minutes, scanning the passers-by, keenly observing, so far as she was able, every one in sight. Then, turning into Stamford Street, she presently turned again into a street on her right. She was coming into a very shady neighbourhood, in which one opined that women of her appearance were very occasional visitants. She twisted and turned, however, with the unerring rapidity of one who knew it uncommonly well, until at last she found herself in what was rather an alley than a street, and a cul-de-sac at that, for at the end was nothing but a high blank wall. Here the tenements were not only extremely small, apparently consisting of five or six rooms at most, they were also of disreputable appearance. Pausing in front of one she regarded it with an attentive eye. The fact that the blinds were down gave it a deserted look. She knocked once, twice--there was no bell. When no one answered she drew a conclusion of her own.

"He's not come yet; I'll wait."

She did wait, for a good half-hour, with exemplary patience, in spite of the fact that long before the period of waiting was at an end she had become an object of much interest to a large number of curious eyes. Just as the observers were beginning to wonder how long she did intend to stop, the object of her flattering quest came into sight, in the shape of the legal gentleman from whom she had so lately parted--Mr. Isaac Luker. Contrary to her hopes and expectations he was not alone; once more her wily old friend had proved equal to the needs of the occasion. On either side of him were men whose character, or, rather, want of character, was written large all over them--two more unmistakable ruffians one would have to go far to see. At sight of her Mr. Luker came to a standstill.

"I thought I should find you waiting for me here; your presence is not at all unexpected. So, as in this neighbourhood the police are not much protection, and I suspected that I might stand in need of protection, I brought my two friends here with me. They think little of putting a woman of your sort into the river, as gentlemen of their profession generally do, so I'll leave them to deal with you after the mode with which they are most familiar."

"Is this 'er?" inquired one of the friends, a beetle-browed person, with an open gash running right down his filthy cheek.

"That's her, my good friend. You talk to her, in any way you please, while I go inside."

As he produced his latch-key Mrs. Lamb moved towards him in a forlorn-hope sort of spirit.

"Let me come in! There's something which I must say to you."

Without giving her a hint of his intention the beetle-browed person struck her with his clenched fist on the shoulder in such fashion that, had she not lurched against the wall, Mrs. Lamb would have gone headlong to the ground. Mr. Luker stood to comment on the action.

"That's right, my friend; that's how she likes to talk to others."

He disappeared into the house; they heard him locking and bolting the door. The beetle-browed person placed himself in unpleasant proximity to Mrs. Lamb; his manner was, if possible, even more eloquent than his words.

"Now then, are you going to take yourself off, or have we got to move you? Make up your mind, because our time's valuable."

She made up her mind, there and then. Realising that she was doomed to still another disappointment, she took herself off, with Mr. Luker's two "friends" at her heels. When she was back again into Stamford Street she stopped and spoke to them.

"There are police here, as, if you try to follow me another step, you'll find."

"We don't want to follow you--not much! We only want to keep you off the governor, that's all. You can go where you like, and you can do what you like, but if you come near his crib again we'll mark you."

Hailing another hansom Mrs. Lamb left Mr. Luker's two "friends" standing on the pavement.

CHAPTER XXVII

PURE ETHER

At the house in Connaught Square Mrs. Lamb had to knock and ring four times without, apparently, attracting the attention of any one inside. She was meditating gaining admittance through the area door, when a fifth assault upon the bell and knocker was productive of a more definite result. After a good deal of what seemed unnecessary fumbling with the handle, the door was opened sufficiently wide to admit of Cottrell, the butler, being seen within. He was attired in the same extremely undignified costume in which he had greeted his mistress in the morning, which, however, showed certain signs of what might be called degeneration. The shirt-front was, if possible, more crumpled than before; the collar was gone; the waistcoat had, in some mysterious way, strayed out of the straight, so that while it was on one side of his body the shirt was on the other; his hair was ruffled; the whole man looked as if a plentiful application of cold, clean water might do him a great deal of good.

He held the door just wide enough open to enable him to display his person and to see who was there, seeming to be not at all abashed when he perceived that it was his mistress.

"So it's you, is it! So you've come at last; it's about time; we thought you never were coming. I hope you've brought some money--everybody hopes so. It's no good your coming into this house if you haven't--not the least."

Mrs. Lamb was in a bad temper, which, perhaps, on the whole was not surprising. She had been in a bad temper when she had started to visit Messrs. McTavish & Brown. The incidents which had marked the afternoon had not tended to sweeten it. On the contrary, for quite a time she had been looking for somebody on whom, to use an expressive euphemism, she might "let herself go". Had Mr. Cottrell been aware of the lady's state of mind, even in his then peculiar condition, he might have realised that there are occasions on which discretion is the better part of valour. He would certainly hardly have afforded her not only so excellent an opportunity of giving expression to her feelings, but also so capital an occasion of making her quarrel just. She looked at Mr. Cottrell with something in her eyes which should in itself have been sufficient to serve as a warning; there was still time for him to perform a strategic retreat. Without a word she went quickly up the steps, flung the door wide open, seized him by the shoulders, and sent him spinning into the street. He sat, for some moments, on the kerb, as if overcome. Then, exceeding rash, he retraced his way up the steps as best he could, with the apparent intention of inquiring why he had been handled in such unceremonious fashion. Before, however, he had gained the actual summit, he went flying backwards, with the lady's assistance, in such summary fashion that it was only the back of his head being brought into contact with the pavement that stopped him.

When he understood, dimly, what had happened, he began to raise an agreeable hullabaloo, mingling imprecations on all and sundry, with curses on the lady in particular, and cries of help to the public and the police. Mrs. Lamb, for the third time that day, was brought into contact with a constable. A policeman appearing round the corner, perceiving Mr. Cottrell gesticulating on the pavement, came sauntering up to learn what was wrong. The butler explained.

"I give her into custody, that's what I do!--tried to murder me, that's what she's done!--broken my brains out!--assault and battery, that's what it is; and that's what I charge her with, policeman. You put the handcuffs on her, and take her to the station, and I'll come round and give all the evidence that's wanted."

The officer was calmer than Mr. Cottrell. He heard the butler to an end, then he glanced at his mistress.

"What's wrong?"

She explained.

"That man's my butler, although you would not think it to look at him. He has taken advantage of my absence to get into that condition. He kept me waiting for more than twenty minutes on the doorstep, and then when he opened he was not only drunk but insolent. I have dismissed him from my service, and put him into the street, and out in the street he stops. I should be obliged by your moving him away, and preventing his making a disturbance in front of the house."

The policeman, who was young, leaped to the conclusion that right was on the side of the lady. He was disposed to give the butler but a short shrift.

"Now, then, move on! Away you go! We don't want any of your nonsense here!"

Mr. Cottrell vehemently objected.

"Don't talk to me like that, policeman! She owes me three months' wages; there's another nearly due, and another instead of notice. You let her pay me five months' wages before she talks of putting me out into the street."

The policeman looked up at the lady.

"Is what he says true?"

"It's an entire falsehood. Any claim he may have to make must be made in the proper quarter."

She threw the door wide open. By now other members of the household had, unwisely enough, come up to see what the discussion was about. Her action revealed them.

"You see, officer, here are some more of my servants. They, also, have taken advantage of my absence, and are like that man--drunk. I dismiss them all--now. Perhaps you won't mind coming in and seeing their boxes packed; I suspect them of having property of mine in their possession."

The policeman went in--Mr. Cottrell went in also, with his assistance; he saw their boxes packed. It was a process in which the packers fared badly, the butler in particular. Each servant in the house, almost without exception, was shown to be in possession of property which was indisputably Mrs. Lamb's. Their mistress' attitude was one of magnanimity. She declined to prefer a charge against them, at any rate just then, whatever she might do later. Though, of course, under the circumstances, to pay them anything in the shape of wages was altogether out of the question. All she wanted to do was to see their backs. And she saw them. A shamefaced, miserable, draggle-tailed crew they looked, as, one after the other, under the policeman's cold official glance, they took their boxes out into the street. Then Mrs. Lamb presented that zealous young officer with a sovereign. He made short work of clearing the debris away from the front.

So Mrs. Lamb was left alone in that great mansion without a servant to wait on her of any sort or kind.

She went into the boudoir; that and her bedroom, and indeed the whole house, was exactly in the same condition in which she had found it in the morning. It seemed as if no one had moved a finger to put anything in order. Removing her hat, she sat down and tried to think. The result was a failure. Her thoughts would not travel on the lines she wished; they would launch out in undesirable directions. She had scarcely been there a minute before she began to become conscious of an unpleasant feeling that she was not alone, when, all the time, she knew she was. An odd, morbid obsession began to overpower her, as, directly she was alone, it had shown an uncomfortable aptitude to do of late. Putting her hands up to her eyes she rubbed them with her palms, as if she were endeavouring to rub something away from them. Then, removing her hands again, she looked about her, queerly.

"Of course it's ridiculous, and I suppose the real explanation is that I'm not so well as I ought to be; but it's funny how I'm always seeming to be back in his room, and how plainly I can see it all; and the bed--the bed." There was a rigid expression on her face which it was not agreeable to observe, as she herself seemed to understand. Standing up she gave herself a little shake, as if she were trying to shake something from off her. "This won't do--it won't do. It's not healthy. And yet there's something which I ought to look at--to see; to understand. It's something in the room. It's not the bed--not only the bed; it's something else. I wish I could think what it was; I wish I could understand; then perhaps it might go."

The overturned decanter which had been on the buhl table in the morning was still there. She picked it up, holding it up to the light. It was empty. She went to what seemed to be a buhl liqueur case which stood on the floor in a corner. It was locked. She went to her bedroom to look for the key. It was not in its usual place.

"I can't think where I put it; those brutes can't have had it. I had it myself last night, I know. Where did I put it? I can't wait to think--I can't wait; besides it doesn't matter. Anything will do to open it."

She took a polished brass poker. With it she made a hole in the lid of the case large enough to enable her to insert her fingers. Then, with her hands, she tore the lid away--a sufficiently easy task, since the wood proved to be less than an eighth of an inch in thickness. The case contained six bottles. She took out one; it was labelled "Pure Ether--Poison". Withdrawing the stopper, paying no attention to the statement on the label, she poured out nearly a wineglassful, which she instantly swallowed, coupling with it, as it were, a somewhat gruesome sentiment. "Here's to Isaac Luker! I wish he was in reach; I'd like to kill him."

Scarcely were the words out of her lips than the door opened to admit her husband. He stared at her.

"Belle, there doesn't seem to be a servant in the place--not a creature. Where are they all off to? What's it mean?"

She replied to his question with another.

"Gregory, doesn't there seem to you to be something singular about this bedroom?"

"Bedroom? It's not a bedroom; it's a boudoir. What do you mean? Belle, what's the matter with the house? What have you got in your hand? What are you drinking?"

Mrs. Lamb was looking round her in a fashion which induced her husband to draw back, as if in doubt.

"Have you ever seen it before--anywhere? Isn't there something strange about it?--especially the bed?"

Mr. Lamb seemed to be of opinion that his wife's manner was distinctly disagreeable; apparently he did not know what to make of it.

"Bed?--what bed? There's no bed here. You're--you're not well. Don't talk like that; you make me go all over creeps. I say, Belle, I do wish you'd give me some coin--if it's only a tenner. I'm broke to the wide."

"Gregory!"

"Well?"

"Come here; I want to speak to you."

"Thank you, I'm awfully sorry, but I've got an appointment with a man; I can't stop. About that money--Belle! now, what's up?"

With a swift, unexpected movement, interposing herself between him and the door, his wife had slipped her arm through his, and was looking at him with something in her big black eyes which made him more uncomfortable than he would have cared to admit. Considering the bold, ringing, almost blustering tones in which she was wont to speak, there was something unpleasantly significant in the half-whisper in which she addressed him now.

"Gregory, you must stop--you mustn't go. There's something which I wish to say to you--a great deal which I wish to say to you, and I must say it to you now--here"--her voice sank still lower--"in Cuthbert Grahame's bedroom."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MR. LAMB IN A COMMUNICATIVE MOOD

In the evening of that day Margaret Wallace and Harry Talfourd dined with Dr. Twelves. The young lady, who throughout the day had remained in a curious mood, was indisposed to avail herself of the doctor's hospitality; but she was over-persuaded by the doctor, who was insistent, and by Mr. Talfourd, who was on his side. Throughout the day they had talked and talked and talked. Harry was of opinion that, on a certain theme, they had talked too much. There was something about Margaret which was new to him; which he did not understand. It troubled him. So when the doctor changed the subject by asking them to dine with him he accepted, for himself, at once; and when Margaret hummed and hawed, and began to make excuses, for her also. He told her that she would have to dine with the doctor--and she had to. The two men bore her off with them in triumph.

The doctor entertained his guests at the Holborn Restaurant. In his youth he had known the place when it was a dancing-hall; had visited it while undergoing various transformations during his recurrent trips to town, and, whenever he came to London, made a point of patronising it still. The meal was hardly a jovial one. The host and Harry did all they could to keep the conversation on impersonal and frivolous lines, but Margaret would have none of it. She could scarcely be induced to open her lips to put food between them; talk she would not. The colloquial gifts for which she was famous seemed to have deserted her entirely; she was tongue-tied. When, in a dinner party of three, the lady, who is both young and charming, cannot be persuaded to speak, the meal is apt to prove but a qualified success. The doctor's little festive gathering turned out to be not quite so festive as it might have been.

As chance, or fate, had it, the two men's well-meant efforts to keep the conversation in exhilarating channels were doomed to meet with complete fiasco. After the meal was finished, as they strolled along Holborn, enjoying the fine evening, considering whether to take a cab, and if so, where to tell the cabman to take them to--for the doctor was firm in his conviction that this was an occasion on which they were bound to make a night of it--the issue was taken out of their hands in a wholly unexpected fashion. A gentleman, who did not seem to be so capable of seeing where he was going as he ought to have been, all but cannoned against Mr. Talfourd, drawing back to apologise just in time.

"Beg pardon! Why, it's Talfourd! Hollo, Talfourd! who's the lady? and who's----" The speaker was staring at the doctor. "Hollo! I've seen you somewhere before!"

The doctor was returning him look for look.

"And I've seen you. You're Mr. Gregory Lamb, who lodged one time at David Blair's over the other side of Pitmuir, to whom I was foolish enough to loan a brace of sovereigns, for four-and-twenty hours, as I understood, but which you've never paid me back unto this day."

Mr. Lamb was not at all abashed; he never was by reminders of that kind--they were legion.

"Why, of course, it's the doctor--the cranky old doctor. I remember you quite well. How are you, old chap? You haven't--you haven't a brace of sovereigns on you now?"

"I have not a brace which you are likely to be able to bag, Mr. Lamb. I understand that you have married since I saw you last."

"Since you saw me! I was married then."

"Indeed? But I gathered that you had since married the widow of an old friend of mine--Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

"Widow? She wasn't his widow; she never was his wife."

"Pardon me, but she went through the Scotch form of marriage with him in my presence."

"That was all her dashed impudence. She was my wife long before that; before she ever knew that he was in the world. Doctor, my wife's a devil of a woman, and she's been treating me in a devil of a way. If I were to tell you all that she's been doing, so far as I can understand, mind you--it's quite between ourselves--you'd go straight to a police station, and you'd ask for a warrant; but I'm her husband, so I can't. Listen to me--this is between ourselves--if you'll come to a place I know, and where they know me--most respectable place--and do me the pleasure of having a drink with me--and Talfourd, and the lady--never leave out a lady when it's a question of a little refreshment--I'll tell you what she's just been telling me, not five minutes ago. It'll surprise you. Good as confessed to committing murder; half expected her to murder me--give you my word it's a fact. Come and have a little something and I'll tell you all about it--between ourselves, you know."

The doctor exchanged glances with Mr. Talfourd and with Margaret.

"It seems to me, Mr. Lamb, that you've had more than a little something already."

"You're wrong, old chap--quite wrong; do assure you. It's ether--beastly ether."

"Ether?"

"Ever heard of the stuff before? I never did. Seems she lives on it; takes it in quarts. She crammed some of it down my throat--fairly took me by the throat and crammed it down. I'm like a child in her hands--give you my word. She's a devil of a woman. Never tasted anything like it before; seems to have sent me stark staring mad. Don't know whether I'm standing on my head or heels. Let's go and have some Christian liquor, and I'll tell you all about it."

Again the doctor exchanged glances with his companions.

"If you'll allow me to offer you a seat in my cab I'll take you to a friend who'll be able to give you some of the finest whisky in England, and there, at your leisure, you can tell us all about it."

"My dear old chap, when they called you cranky I always said that there was more in you than they might think, and I stand to it to the present moment. I say----"

The doctor did not wait to hear what he said; he bundled him into a four-wheeled cab after Margaret

and Harry. When the cab had started Margaret asked--

"Where are you taking us?"

"I am taking you to my friend, Andrew McTavish, who has a commodious residence in Mecklenburg Square--just handy. There, over a glass of whisky, Mr. Lamb will be able to tell us just what his wife told him. He'll find us interested listeners."

There was a dryness in the doctor's tone which was lost upon the gentleman at his side, who occupied the short distance they had to traverse by protestations of the regard he had always felt for the old acquaintance whom fortune, or destiny, had again thrown across his path.

That night Mr. Brown was his partner's guest at dinner. Both gentlemen were still smarting from the outrage to which Mrs. Gregory Lamb had subjected them that afternoon. Dinner was finished; they were in the library, planning schemes of vengeance, when the servant announced that Dr. Twelves was outside, and was desirous of seeing Mr. McTavish. Before the servant was able to explain that the visitor was not alone, the doctor himself marched in with his retinue. The partners rose from their chairs in surprise.

"McTavish--Brown--I have the honour to introduce you to Miss Margaret Wallace, a young lady of whom you have heard a good deal, and whom I am sure you'll be delighted to know. This is Mr. Harry Talfourd, of whom you may have also heard something. And this, gentlemen--this is Mr. Gregory Lamb, the husband of the lady of whom, I fancy, you have perhaps heard rather too much."

If the look upon the partners' faces meant anything, there could be no doubt upon the latter point. Both Mr. McTavish and Mr. Brown stared at Mr. Lamb as if he were not only the strangest, but also the most unwelcome, object they had ever beheld. Then Mr. McTavish turned to the doctor, with a gasp.

"I'd have you to know, Dr. Twelves, that you're taking a great liberty. You're presuming on our friendship in venturing to bring this individual to my house, and at this time of night. Brown, I'll trouble you to ring the bell. Mr. Lamb shall be shown to the door, before we have him behaving as his wife did this afternoon."

Mr. McTavish had become rubicund with agitation; the doctor remained placid.

"In less than five minutes, Andrew, you'll be acknowledging that I've done you a very considerable service in bringing Mr. Lamb to this house, and you'll be begging my pardon for the remarks which you have just made."

Mr. Brown, obedient to his partner's request, had rung the bell. A servant appeared. Him Dr. Twelves addressed before Mr. McTavish had a chance of speaking.

"You'll have the goodness to bring a decanter of whisky, and the other necessaries, at once."

When the man looked at his master for an endorsement of this order the doctor explained.

"Andrew, Mr. Lamb has a communication to make which I think you will find of interest; he proposes to make it while enjoying a glass of prime whisky."

"I cannot imagine what Mr. Lamb has to say which can be of interest to me, but, since you wish it--

John, bring the whisky."

A decanter being placed upon a table, the doctor prepared a potent mixture which he handed to Mr. Lamb.

"I think, Mr. Lamb, I understood you to say that Mrs. Lamb was married to you before she met Cuthbert Grahame?"

"Of course she was--ever so long. She was never his wife; that was only her bluff. This is something like whisky. Gentlemen, your very good health, and the lady's--never overlook a lady."

"You perceive, Andrew, that Mrs. Lamb was already Mrs. Lamb when she encountered your late client, Mr. Cuthbert Grahame, and, therefore, any document in which she is described as his wife is, I believe, on the face of it, null and void."

Mr. McTavish made as if about to speak, but a movement of the doctor's left eyelid seemed to act as a check. The doctor turned to Mr. Lamb, grimly affable.

"You like this whisky, Mr. Lamb?" Judging from the fact that that gentleman had already emptied his tumbler it seemed as if he did. "Allow me to fill your glass." The speaker suited the action to the word; he did very nearly fill the glass with neat spirit. "From what you said I should imagine that you have recently had rather a singular scene with your wife, Mr. Lamb. You were about to tell us what occurred. Was it anything very remarkable?"

"I should think it was remarkable. Your very good health, gentlemen. After the stuff she forced down my throat this is something like whisky; ether she forced down my throat--rank poison. Why, do you know she sees things--actually sees things--give you my word--makes your blood cold to hear her talking. She made out we were in a bedroom--Cuthbert Grahame's bedroom she called it; it was only the boudoir. She talked about the things which were in it just as if they were in it, when of course they were nothing of the kind--just the ordinary furniture! 'You see that bed?' she said. Of course I didn't; there wasn't a bed to see; not even the ghost of a bed. 'That's Cuthbert Grahame lying in it. You see how he's propped up by pillows?' The idea of such a thing in a boudoir! 'Now I'm going to pull away those pillows from under his head.' She actually pretended to be pulling at pillows, or something--positive fact! 'Now,' she said, 'you see how his head's fallen? You hear what a noise he makes in trying to breathe? He's choking. I've only got to leave him like that for a time and he'll be dead. He almost choked to death when a pillow slipped the other day, so I know.' Quite serious she was all the time--frightfully serious; made me all over creeps to hear her--give you my word."

"Do we understand you to tell us that she said, 'Now I'm going to pull away those pillows from under his head,' and that then, in pantomime, she went through the action of pulling them?"

"Certainly; that's just what she did do--just exactly. Then she pretended to drop them on to the floor, and talked about the noise he made in trying to breathe. Awful!--really awful!"

"Was that all she said? or did?"

"I should think not; there were all sorts of things; she kept on for a devil of a time. But I can't remember just what they were just now--strange how you do forget things. Oh yes! there was one thing--I remember

one thing!--most extraordinary thing. She said, 'You see that fireplace'. Of course there wasn't a fireplace; she was standing right back in front of a window. Absurd! But she saw it--stake my life she saw it--you could tell. 'There's something about that fireplace which I ought to see, but I can't think what it is; something which I ought to understand, but I can't. If I only could!' You never heard anything like the way she said it; you never heard anything more impressive on the stage--positive fact! 'You see those two wooden posts,' she went on. Of course I saw nothing of the kind, because, as I've told you, there was nothing to see--I don't see things. 'Those two pillar things, I mean, which have been carved out of the woodwork of the mantelpiece, one on either side, just near the bottom. Do you know, Gregory, I believe that there's something about those two posts which I ought to see, which I ought to understand! But I can't! I can't!' Give you my word that she began to cry; twisted her hands together and went on like anything--actually. Seemed so silly! 'I believe,' she cried, 'that if I could only see, if I could only understand, I should know where Cuthbert Grahame's money is, that I should find the quarter of a million which is lost.'"

As Mr. Lamb gave a dramatic imitation of his wife's manner, which, considering all the circumstances, was not so bad, Margaret, who hitherto had remained in the background, came to the front with a question.

"Are you sure she said that there was something about those two posts which--if she saw, if she understood it--would make known to her where Cuthbert Grahame's money was?"

Mr. Lamb had something of an aggrieved air as he replied.

"Am I sure? Of course I'm sure; I shouldn't say she said it if I wasn't sure. My statements are absolutely to be relied upon, Miss Whoever-you-are."

The doctor glanced from Mr. Lamb to Margaret.

"What's he mean, or what's she mean about two wooden posts? It's all double Dutch to me; I don't understand in the least. Is it any plainer to you?"

"I think that it is all quite plain to me; that I can understand what she doesn't; that I can see what she can't." Her voice sank. Although she spoke gently her tones, to adopt Mr. Lamb's word, were most "impressive". "I believe that, unwittingly, she has delivered herself into my hands; that the duel which she and I are fighting has advanced another stage; that soon we shall be exchanging shots; and that then there will be but one of us two left to tell how it all fell out."

CHAPTER XXIX

MARGARET PAYS A CALL

The next morning, between eleven o'clock and noon, Margaret went out visiting. She had paid much attention to her costume, more than she was wont to do. Her mind travelled back to the day on which she had been repulsed from Cuthbert Grahame's door; she endeavoured to recall what on that occasion she had worn. Women have a mnemonic system of their own; with them clothes and events are inseparably associated. They recall one by a reference to the other. Miss Wallace had no difficulty in recollecting precisely what garments she had worn; she had even a fair perception of how she had looked in them. She made it her immediate purpose to look again as much as possible as she had looked then. Almost providentially, as it seemed, the dress itself was still in existence, hidden away at the bottom of a box. She had never worn it since. First, because, although cheap enough, it was fashioned of very delicate material, and the hot water which had been poured upon her had blotched it here and there with stains which she had found it impossible to attempt to conceal. Then it was connected with an episode which, whenever she saw it, would instantly recur. The recurrence afforded her no pleasure. As, after excavating it, she surveyed its many creases, she meditated.

"It almost looks as if, from the first, I had preserved it with a particular end in view, with the intention of producing it, when the mathematical moment arrived, as what the French call a *pièce de conviction*. It's ages behind the fashion, but that will only serve to impress its significance more forcibly on her."

She contrived something in the way of head-gear which was reminiscent of the hat she had worn that day. Her nimble fingers reproduced the various trifles which in a woman's attire are of such capital importance; she even dressed her hair in a fashion which was obsolete. When, fully costumed, she surveyed herself in a looking-glass, it seemed to her that the results were most surprising.

"Wonderful how the modes do change! It is not so many years ago, and I am sure that then I was up-to-date; but now I look as if I had come out of the ark; I might be in fancy-dress. I shall have to take a cab; I should never dare to walk through the streets like this; they'd take me for a guy. When Mrs. Gregory Lamb sees me, if she's still in anything like the state of mind which that charming husband of hers described last night, it won't be wonderful if she takes me for a ghost."

She put in a portfolio certain drawings which she had risen at a very matutinal hour to make; the portfolio she placed beneath her arm, and, thus equipped, she sallied forth upon her errand. The street in which she had her lodging being of modest pretensions, was but little frequented by cabs. She had a five minutes' walk before she found one. And during that short promenade she was the object of so much attention, especially from the females as she passed, that she was glad when, seated in a hansom, she was at least partially concealed by the friendly apron.

She found the door of Mrs. Lamb's residence in Connaught Square wide open. On the steps stood a shabbily dressed man, with his hands in his trouser pockets, an ancient bowler pressed tightly down upon his head, and a clay pipe between his lips. When Margaret addressed him he moved neither his hat, nor

himself, nor his pipe.

"Is Mrs. Lamb in?"

"From what the governor told me I shouldn't be surprised but what she's gone back to bed."

Margaret considered the man's words. His manner was not exactly rude, it was peculiar.

"Which is her bedroom?"

"That's more than I can tell you. I ain't been upstairs myself. I've got a bad leg, and ain't too fond of going up and down stairs, especially when there ain't no need of it. But you'll find it somewhere that way, I expect."

"May I ask who you are?"

"Me?" Taking his pipe out, the man drew the back of his hand across his lips. "I'm representing the landlord; that's what I am."

"Representing the landlord? Do you mean that you're a bailiff?"

"A bailiff--that's it! I'm in possession; three quarters' rent--nearly four. My governor was only just in time. Seems there's a bill of sale on the furniture. They came up with their vans as my governor was going over the place; wanted to clear everything out, they did. Of course my governor soon put a stopper on that. There was a bit of a talk. I shouldn't be surprised if they was to pay my governor out. It's a queer business from what I hear."

"Please let me pass, I want to see Mrs. Lamb."

The man drew well back into the house.

"Certainly; any lady can see Mrs. Lamb for what I care. I expect you'll find her somewhere about upstairs."

As she ascended the staircase Miss Wallace indulged in inward comments.

"The house looked very different the night before last; nobody would have guessed then that the shadow of ruin was already hovering over it. She must be a curious person to give a party to all that crowd of people when she knew that at any hour the brokers might be in for rent. And to talk of financing Harry's play! and paying him three hundred a year for doing nothing! But then she is a curious person. The house looks as if nothing had been touched in it since Mrs. Lamb's reception came to a premature conclusion--it smells like it too. What have we here? What a state of things!"

She glanced into the drawing-rooms, which remained in a state of amazing confusion. Mounting to the floor above she found herself confronted by two closed doors.

"I wonder if one of these is her bedroom. I'll try this."

She turned the handle of the door which was directly in front of her, softly, and walked right in. It was

the lady's bedroom, and the lady was in bed. Margaret had entered so quietly that apparently not the slightest sound had informed the mistress of the house that any one was there. The girl stood still.

"Pah! what an atmosphere! I'd sooner have every pane of glass broken than breathe air like this. I shouldn't think the windows have been open for days." She glanced at the bed. "Is she asleep?--at this hour?--with the broker's man downstairs?"

Laying her portfolio on a small table, she moved closer to the bed. Its occupant continued motionless. The girl, leaning forward, touched her, lightly, on the shoulder. Still no sign of life. The girl exchanged the light touch for a sudden, vigorous grip, giving the shoulder a wrench which must have roused the soundest sleeper. The woman started up in bed.

"Luker! is that you?" she cried.

When freshly roused from slumber, she saw who it was; her first impression seemed to be that she was still the victim of some haunting dream. Speechless, she stared at the girl, drawing farther and farther back the longer she stared. Her whole frame--her pose, her limbs, the muscles of her face--seemed to become rigid, set, as if she were afflicted by some new and awful form of tetanus. She appeared to be incapable of twitching a lip or of moving an eyelid. Even when Margaret spoke she persisted in her fixed and dreadful glare, as if she were some unpleasant statue.

"I am Margaret Wallace--as you are aware. I am she whom you drove from Cuthbert Grahame's door, pretending you were Nannie Foreshaw. These are the clothes I was wearing when you drove me away with lies and with hot water. See--here are the stains of that hot water still. Your sin has found you out; judgment is pronounced; your punishment has already begun. Between you and me it is a duel to the death. It is your choice, not mine, but since you have forced it on me, I will fight you to the end, and I shall win. I know all about you--who you are, what you've done. I know that you were already a wife when you pretended to marry Cuthbert Grahame; that you committed bigamy. I know that you got that will from him by means of a trick. I know that so soon as you had got it you murdered him. You snatched the pillows from under his head--see! like that!" She caught up the two pillows which lay upon the bolster and dropped them on the floor. "Can't you hear the noise he makes in trying to breathe? He's choking. You've only to leave him like that for a little while, and he'll be dead. And you left him! I know--I know."

The woman listened to the hot, eager words which streamed from the girl's lips as if the speaker were some supernatural visitor, and the accusations were being hurled at her from on high; and still she never moved a muscle, she even seemed to cease to breathe.

"You see!--we are in Cuthbert Grahame's bedroom, you and I. I know it as well as you do--better--and you know it very well. You'll never forget it--never!--to the last moment of your life. There is the mantelpiece; it is made of wood--carved wood. It is old; old as the house itself; beautifully carved. You see there are two wooden pillars, one on either side, carved so that they stand out. You are quite right in supposing that there is something about them which you ought to see, to understand. I have come to tell you--to show you--what it is."

Taking from her portfolio two drawings she held first one and then the other in front of the motionless woman.

"I have made a drawing of the mantelpiece, just as you see it, and as I see it, and as it is. Is it not like

it? Here are the two side-posts; but here"--exchanging one drawing for the other--"is only one of them. That is a picture of the pillar which is on the left-hand side of the mantelpiece as you stand in front of it--you will remember, on the left-hand side. I have written down an exact description of it in case you should forget, because there is only one thing which you will never forget, and that is on the bed. Look closely at the drawing; it represents the pillar exactly. This long, slender part, which runs from here to here, is called the shaft. You hold it with both hands, or, as you are very strong, you will perhaps be able to manage with one, and you turn it right round in its socket--completely round. It will probably be a little stiff, as it has not been touched for so long; but you'll find that you'll be able to make it move. This narrow piece at the top is called the neck. After you have turned the column you pull it to the left. It slides in two grooves. It may be a little stiff, like the column, but if you push, or pull, hard enough, and long enough, it will yield. This still narrower piece near the foot of the column, just above the plinth--the plinth in the bottom of a column is called the *torus*, or the *tore* (*torus* is a Latin word which architects use, and it just means swelling)--when you have turned the pillar, and slipped the neck, you get as firm a grip on the top of the torus as you can, give a smart jerk, and it will fall over on a hinge. Have you ever read *The Arabian Nights*? You don't look as if you had read anything. If you haven't, you never will; you'll never have a chance. But I suppose you've heard of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves; the cave in which they kept their treasure; the password, 'Open Sesame,' which caused the cave to open. All these manoeuvres of which I have been telling you--turning the shaft, sliding the neck, pulling forward the torus--are the 'Open Sesame' which will lead you to the place where the treasure is--greater treasure than was in the cave of the forty thieves. These performances which you will have gone through will have unlocked, unbolted and unbarred. All that remains is that you slide that whole side of the mantelpiece to the left. You'll have no difficulty. Behind you'll discover a cupboard, deep though narrow, going far back into the wall, with shelves laden with treasures. On those shelves is the quarter of a million of money--I daresay more--which once was Cuthbert Grahame's, waiting for some one to carry it away! Here are the two drawings which are the key to the riddle. I present them to you freely. They were made specially for you. Although the broker's man is in for rent, and the bill of sale men clamour at the door, and you are penniless, and ruin stares you in the face--ruin utter and complete--though your need of it's so great, you'll not get that money which is hidden in the mantelpiece--you'll not dare! you'll not dare! Because the bed still stands in the room--you can see it now!--the bed on which you murdered Cuthbert Grahame; and Cuthbert Grahame still lies on it--you can see him too!--waiting and watching for you to return to where you threw the pillows on the floor--waiting and watching for you. You'll not dare go back into that room again, because in it the dead hand is waiting to grip you by the throat. And after to-morrow it will be too late--Cuthbert Grahame's money will be there no longer. Here are the drawings. I will leave them with you, as I said. You will be able to study them at your leisure, conscious of who is looking over your shoulder."

Margaret laid the drawings on the coverlet. With her portfolio again beneath her arm she quitted the room, as noiselessly as she had entered. All the time Mrs. Gregory Lamb had not moved or spoken a word.

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. LAMB IN SEARCH OF ADVICE

On the evening of that same day, at the door of Mr. Isaac Luker's little house in that *cul-de-sac* near Stamford Street, some one knocked, in a rather unusual manner, as if after a prescribed fashion, then whistled half-a-dozen sharp, shrill notes up the scale. This performance was repeated thrice before anything happened to show that it had attracted attention within. Then a window was opened above; the solicitor's head came out.

"Who's there?"

A feminine voice replied--

"It's me--Isabel. I want to speak to you. Don't keep me waiting out here. Come down! let me in at once."

There was a brief pause before the answer came, as if the man of law was endeavouring to see as much of his visitor as he could.

"Not much--I won't have you in this house; don't you think it; I'm not a fool. If you won't go without a fuss I'll soon get those who'll shift you."

"You are a fool. I don't want money from you, or anything of that kind. I want to tell you something--that's all."

"Then tell it me from where you are; I'm listening."

Mrs. Lamb's voice dropped, so that her words were only just audible to the man above.

"Cuthbert Grahame's money's found."

Another pause, possibly of doubt.

"Is that a lie?"

"I'll swear it isn't; it's as true as I stand here."

"Where is it?"

"It's in his house"

"His house? What house? I didn't know he'd got a house."

"His house at Pitmuir--where I met him--where he died."

"How do you know it's there?"

"I'll tell you all about it if you'll let me in."

"You'll tell me before I let you in."

"Margaret Wallace--that girl--you know--she came this morning and told me it was there."

"I don't believe it. Why should she, of all people, come and tell you a thing like that? Tell that for a tale."

"She did; I swear she did. The money's there--I know just where--a quarter of a million at least."

"A quarter of a million?"

"At least! If I was there I'd have it in my hands inside two minutes. I'm as sure of it as I am that I'm alive. Don't be silly; let me in, and let's talk where we can be alone. I'm on the square--I swear it. I don't want anything from you; I just want your advice--that's all."

There was another pause.

"Mrs. Lamb, I've got a telephone installed in these premises. I'm going to telephone to a friend that you're here; I'm going to ask him to step round in a few minutes. If, when he comes, you've been making trouble, there'll be trouble for you--you'll be the sorriest woman that ever lived. I give you my word; when I give you my word on a point like that you know it goes. You wait there until I'm ready."

The head was withdrawn; the window closed; the lady waited, impatiently enough. Her patience was sufficiently tried. It seemed to her that she waited an hour; she certainly did wait twenty minutes. More than once she was on the point of sounding a loud rat-a-tat on the knocker by way of a little reminder. It was only with an effort she restrained herself, being conscious that possibly Mr. Luker's decision still hung in the balance, and that it needed but little to turn the balance against her. She had just arrived at a final conclusion that he had played her false, or, at any rate, intended to ignore her existence, when the door was opened, on the chain.

"I've telephoned to my friend; he's coming; so, if you're in an argumentative frame of mind, you'd better take my strong advice and stay outside. No argument will be allowed in here."

It seemed to Mrs. Lamb that the wary Mr. Luker was carrying his wariness almost a trifle too far. She was unable to altogether conceal that this was her feeling.

"Bless the man! I don't want to argue! I just want to explain exactly how the matter stands. When you've opened that door you'll find that I mean just what I say, neither more nor less."

"My friend, when he arrives, will see that you don't mean more; you can take my word for that. Come inside!"

Mr. Luker removed the chain; the lady entered; he led the way to a room on the ground floor at the

back. It was much better furnished than the exterior of the house, and its occupant's appearance, might have led one to expect. A telephone, on its bracket against the wall, was one of the most prominent objects the room contained. Mr. Luker called her attention to its presence.

"You see? I'm not so much alone here as you might think; I'm in constant communication with my friend; and as he'll be here very shortly, perhaps you'll say what you have to say as quickly as you can."

"It'd have been said already, if you hadn't kept me cooling my heels outside while you were playing the fool in here with your telephone."

As clearly and succinctly as possible--she could keep to the point when she liked--Mrs. Lamb told her tale, exhibiting Margaret's drawings, partly by way of corroboration and partly to elucidate certain points which needed explanation.

"And you believe it?"

"Believe that the money's inside that mantelpiece? I'm as certain of it as I am that I see you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"His will was hidden in one corner of the room. All along I've felt sure that there were more hiding-places in it than one. I shouldn't be surprised if there were half a dozen. It's just the kind of room, and he's just the kind of man. As for the mantelpiece, I've been bothered all along by a feeling that there was something about it which I ought to understand, and didn't. Now I know what it is. Cuthbert Grahame's money's there as certainly as you are here. I tell you he was just the sort of curiosity--he wasn't a man when I knew him!--who might be expected to play a trick like that."

"But why should the girl come and tell you the tale when it was to her advantage to keep it dark--especially from you?"

"That's more than I can say. I know she's a white-faced little devil, and that I hate her. I lay she didn't do it out of any love for me."

"That, I think, we may take for granted--which makes the puzzle more. It looks to me as if she expects you to walk headlong into a trap which she has carefully baited."

"Curse her traps! What do I care for her traps? She can't set one which will catch me. The money's there, and the money's mine--and I'll get it."

"Then get it. It will be useful to you just now, even if there's less than a quarter of a million."

"Useful!--my God!--useful!" Stretching out her arms on either side, she drew a long breath. "But, Luker--that's the mischief!--it's in his room; the one in which he died."

"Well; you've told me that already--what of it?"

"What of it? Why!--she laughed; there was something in the sound of her laughter which caused him to bunch himself together, as if touched by a sudden chill--"I daren't go in it."

"You daren't go in it? What do you mean? The house is your own, isn't it? What's there to be afraid of? Who's to keep you out?"

"That's it!--I don't know! I don't know! Luker, there's something come over me lately; I didn't used to be troubled with nerves."

"You didn't."

"I never was afraid of anything--or any one."

"You weren't; you've always had the devil's own courage since you were a girl."

"There's been nothing I daren't do."

"It would have been better for you, perhaps, if there had been something; there's such a thing as daring to do too much."

"You think so? Perhaps that's it; perhaps I have dared to do too much."

"As to that you know better than I do; I'm not your father confessor, nor wish to be. The Lord forbid!"

"I don't know how it is, but, lately, I've gone all to pieces. I'm afraid of all sorts of things. When that girl came this morning I was afraid of her; she frightened me out of my senses. I thought she was a ghost; I couldn't have moved or spoken to save my life; I listened to her like a stuck pig. Luker, things have upset me more than I thought anything could have done. I'm--I'm all a bundle of nerves."

"It's that stuff you've been drinking."

"Stuff? What stuff?"

"When I was at your place yesterday I saw a decanter lying on the table; some of the contents had been spilled. I dipped my finger into the stuff and tasted it. It was ether. When women of your temperament take to drinking ether, that's an end of them."

"But I've got to drink it!--I've got to! I never touch it unless I'm forced! Luker, if I didn't, sometimes, I should go stark, staring mad."

"Then you'll go stark, staring mad. Ether's a royal road to madness for such as you. Better stick to gin."

"Gin!--gin's no good; a barrellful would be no good when I'm like that."

"I see--that's the point you've got to." He was eyeing her intently. "Is there any particular reason why you should be afraid of going into the room where that man died?"

She became instantly conscious of the keenness of his scrutiny, perceiving that in it there was a new quality. Her manner changed.

"Any particular reason? No; there's only the general reason that I'm all mops and brooms; that I start at shadows. Besides, I'm going into it, and you're going with me."

"Am I? That's news."

"Luker, if you'll come with me to Pitmuir, and stick to me while I find Cuthbert Grahame's money, I'll give you five hundred pounds."

"Hard cash?--before we start?"

"I can't do that; you know I can't do that. But, Luker, I'll give you a thousand when I've found the money. I'll set down my promise in writing; give you any sort of undertaking you like."

"Yes; but suppose you don't find the money; suppose what that girl told you is nothing but a cock-and-bull story? I tell you plainly that I can't make head or tail of the whole business. I've no faith in the girl, or her story, or her motives. And I'm pretty sure that she has no intention, under any circumstances or on any conditions, of presenting you with Cuthbert Grahame's fortune, or of putting you in the way of getting it for yourself either."

"But I know it's there. I can't explain to you how I know it--I don't understand myself--but I do. And though it seems queer, at the back of my head I've known it all the time. Luker, as sure as you are living, that money's there."

"Then, in that case, instead of going yourself, why not instruct some one on the spot to examine the premises on your behalf; to pull down this famous mantelpiece, or the whole house if necessary, and report the results to you?"

"Who shall I instruct? Before they move they'll perhaps want money--I expect my position is pretty generally known--and where am I to find it? In any case, they'll take their own time, and time is precious. Besides, there are enough fingers meddling in my affairs already. And who am I to trust? I don't want any one except myself to know how much I find. To speak of nothing else, shouldn't I have to pay succession duty if it were known?"

"I suppose you would. Isabel, you're a curious person; a little too fond, perhaps, of doing things for yourself; yet, in delicate matters--in very delicate matters--it's a fault on the right side. How do you know you can trust me?"

"You and I have seen too much of each other for me not to know when, and where, and how far I can trust you. I'm not afraid."

"You're right; you needn't be. I don't think I am likely to round on you. But, on the other hand, frankly, I'm afraid of you."

"Nor need you be afraid of me. It's only when I'm upset that--that I'm trying--that's all."

"Even if it is all, it's a pretty big all."

"About the thousand pounds. As I said, I'll give you any sort of bond you like, undertaking, if you stick to me, to pay you the moment I get the money in my hands. Anyhow you know that you'll be safe. It's not bad pay for what I'm asking you to do."

"I don't say it is. When do you propose to start?"

"To-morrow morning, by the ten o'clock train from King's Cross. I planned it all out before I came."

"That's quick work."

"It'll have to be quick work. If I don't have money, and plenty of it, within forty-eight hours, I'm undone."

"I understand. By the way, I presume that you're prepared to pay all out-of-pocket expenses, for both parties, as we go on. For instance, I shall require you to hand me a return ticket to wherever we are going before I set foot inside the train. I'm a poor man, although you sometimes amuse yourself by pretending to think otherwise, and I, at any rate, can afford to take no risks."

"You shall have your ticket, and I'll pay everything. I've the money to do it--but it's about as much as I have got."

"Ah, but by to-morrow, about this time, you'll be more than a millionaire. I've always understood that that wonderful quarter of a million of Mr. Grahame's produced, on an average, more than twenty per cent.; so that if you had a million, averaging a modest three per cent.--and some millionaires would be glad to get as much--your income would be less. Then there are the arrears, which have been accruing! Think of the arrears, Mrs. Lamb--on a quarter of a million, at twenty per cent.! Now if you will sit down here, and will give me, on this sheet of paper, that little undertaking you mentioned, I think that, on my part, I can undertake to accompany you on your little trip to the north."

CHAPTER XXXI

MRS. LAMB RETURNS TO PITMUIR

When Mr. Isaac Luker and his client, Mrs. Gregory Lamb, arrived at the small roadside station, in the county of Forfar, towards which they had been journeying throughout the day, they were neither of them in the best of tempers. It had been a long day's journey. There had been some misunderstanding about the connection of the trains at Dundee. They had missed the one by which they had meant to travel; there had been a dreary wait for the next. When at last they started on the last stage of their journey the engine went dawdling along the branch line in a style which both, in their then frame of mind, found equally trying. They would hardly, at any time, have been called a sympathetic couple. Neither, for instance, would have selected the other as an only companion on a desert island. By the time the train paused for, so far as they were concerned, its final stoppage, either would have been almost willing to fly to a desert island to escape the other's society.

It was between nine and ten at night--a misty night. The damp seemed to be rising out of the ground, and to be covering the country with a corpse-like pallor. There was a faint movement in the air, which it did not need a very imaginative mind to compare to a whisper of death. They were the only passengers who alighted at the station, which seemed to consist of but a narrow strip of bare earth, about the centre of which was constructed what looked like a ramshackle shed. Illumination was given by two or three oil lamps, and by a lantern which the only visible official carried in his hand. To this personage Mrs. Lamb addressed herself.

"Is any one waiting for me?"

The official proved to be a Scotsman of a peculiarly Scotch type; his manners and his temper were both his own. No attempt is made to reproduce the dialect in which he spoke.

"And who might you happen to be?"

"I'm Mrs. Gregory Lamb."

"Never heard the name. Pass out! Tickets!"

Mr. Luker nudged the lady's arm.

"I thought you telegraphed under the name of Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame?"

She made a somewhat ill-considered attempt to correct the error she had made.

"I mean that I'm Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

"Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame? You said just now that you were Mrs. Gregory Lamb."

"I spoke without thinking. I telegraphed some instructions to the station-master in the name of Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame."

"In the name of Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame? A body can't have two names."

"I ordered a close carriage to meet Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame by the train before this, then, when I found I'd missed it, I sent a wire from Dundee to order the carriage to wait for the next."

"There's no carriage within miles."

"No carriage? Then what is there?"

"There's what they call a fly."

"And is the fly here?"

"Sam Harris wouldn't let it come."

"Who's Sam Harris?"

"He's the man that owns it."

"And pray why wouldn't Mr. Harris let it come?"

"You'd better be asking him instead of me. He lives about two miles from here--perhaps a trifle over."

"Two miles! Then is there nothing here to meet us?"

"There's a cart."

"A cart!--an open cart!--in this weather! What kind of cart?"

"He was outside the gate when I saw him last, but maybe by now he's grown tired of waiting, and he's gone. If you go outside you'll be able to see for yourself what kind of cart it is better than I can tell you. Any way, you can't stop here; I'm off home. Tickets!--and if you haven't your tickets you'll have to pay your fare--that's all."

The two passengers surrendered their tickets. With such dignity as she could muster the lady strode towards the little wooden gate, Mr. Luker following limply behind. He made no attempt to feign a sense of dignity which he did not possess. To judge from his appearance and his attitude he had not only sunk into the lowest stage of depression, but he was willing that all the world should know it. A very woebegone figure he looked: so tall and so thin, with the pronounced stoop; in the old familiar garments which he had worn for so many years in town, a costume which seemed singularly out of place on that spot just then; the frayed, shabby frock-coat, tightly buttoned up the front, the collar of which he now wore turned up about his chin; the trousers which were at once too baggy and too short; the ancient top-hat, which had seen so many better days.

Outside the gate was what, in the semi-darkness, looked uncommonly like an ordinary farmer's cart, and not too comfortable, or cleanly, an example of its class. Mrs. Lamb stared at it in disgust.

"Have you brought that thing for me?"

As regards manners the driver seemed to be a near relation of the railway official's, if anything his were more pronounced.

"I don't know who you are. How am I to know?"

"I'm Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame of Pitmuir."

"Oh; that's what you call yourself--ah!"

"You appear to be an impudent fellow."

"And you appear to be a free-spoken woman."

"How dare you talk to me like that? I ask you again, have you brought this thing for me?"

"I've brought this thing, as you call it, which is as decent a cart as ever you saw, and more decent maybe than you deserve to sit in, to carry the person as calls herself Mrs. Cuthbert Grahame to Pitmuir, and I'm beginning to wish I hadn't."

"Why is there no fly here?"

"Because Sam Harris wouldn't let his come."

"Why not? I ordered it."

"You ordered it! Mr. Harris said that he wasn't going to have the likes of you sitting in a fly of his--that's why. So he sent this cart instead. If this cart isn't good enough, I'll take it back at once. I'll take it back anyhow if there's much more talking."

The lady and her solicitor exchanged glances. While they were apparently seeking for words the driver volunteered another remark, in keeping with those which had gone before.

"There's another thing. I'm to be paid before I started; Mr. Harris said I was."

"You'll be paid when you reach Pitmuir."

"Shall I? Then I'll say good-night."

The man gathered up his reins as if about to depart.

"Stop! What are you doing? You appear to be a pleasant character."

"From all accounts, ma'am, that's more than can be said of you."

Under other circumstances the fellow might perhaps have regretted his temerity. Mrs. Lamb was not a lady to quietly endure impertinence from any one. As matters stood she was at his mercy, a fact of which he was evidently aware. She had to choke back her resentment as best she could.

"How much do you mean to charge?"

"There's twelve shillings for driving you; there's three for waiting; there's five for myself--that's a sovereign."

"A sovereign!--monstrous!"

"Very well; there's no call for you to pay it. I tell you again, I'll say good-night."

Mr. Luker interposed.

"How far is it?"

"Better than five miles."

"And how long will it take, in this delectable vehicle of yours, to get us there?"

"An hour or thereabouts. The road's none so good, and it's not easy going on a night like this. It's thicker over yonder."

"And for an hour, or thereabouts, I'm to be jolted, over a bad road, through this death-like mist. Thank you; the prospect is not inviting. I think we had better go over in the morning. Where, in the neighbourhood, can we get a night's lodging?"

"Nowhere."

"Nowhere? Are you sure?"

"If you think you know better than me you'd better go and look for yourself. I tell you there's not a house round here where they'd have you under the roof--nor her either. I wouldn't, nor yet Mr. Harris, nor any one else."

"This is delightful--thoroughly delightful."

Anything less suggestive of delight than his tone could hardly be imagined. The lady spoke.

"I telegraphed to an old servant of mine, Martha Blair, to go up to the house and to take some one with her, or if she couldn't go herself then to get two other girls to go, to light fires and to make things ready for my coming. Do you know who has gone?"

"No one's gone; I do know that. You'd get no woman from round here to go up to Pitmuir at night, especially if it was known that you were coming."

"Prospects grow more and more delightful."

This was a groan from Mr. Luker. The lady, taking him by the coat sleeve, began to talk to him in an undertone. The driver promptly interrupted.

"If you two are going to talk things over between yourselves you can do it after I'm gone. I'm off; I've

had enough of waiting, so I'll wish you both good-night."

The lady stopped him; she drew out her purse.

"Here's a sovereign. Now drive us to Pitmuir, and be as quick as you can."

The man examined the coin as well as he could in such a light; he even tested its quality with his teeth. Drawing a bag from some mysterious receptacle inside his waistcoat, he untied a piece of cord which tied it round the neck, placed the coin carefully within, feeling it to make sure that it was, retied the bag, and returned it to its place. These operations took some time; before they were concluded his two passengers were more tired of waiting than he was. Mrs. Lamb mounted to the seat beside the driver. Mr. Luker scrambled into the vehicle itself. There was nothing for him to do but to squat upon the floor, making himself as comfortable as he could by leaning his back against the side. Then the cart started.

The driver had been perfectly correct in stating that it was not a very good road. So far as could be judged in the mist and the darkness, when one had to rely entirely on the sense of feeling, it consisted for the most part of ruts and ditches. The springs upon which the body of the cart was hung were not very resilient, indeed they were rudimentary. Mrs. Lamb had all she could do to keep on the seat; the gentleman behind was shaken in such a style that he had traversed the whole interior of the vehicle before he had gone two miles. Considering all things, it was perhaps as well that the rate of progress was not more rapid, though the driver had a somewhat disconcerting knack when the road was excruciatingly bad of seeming to move faster than was absolutely necessary, and when it was comparatively smooth of going slower than he need. More than once Mrs. Lamb tried to engage him in conversation, putting questions to him on subjects on which she was particularly anxious to obtain information. She desired to know if Nannie Foreshaw was still in the flesh; how Dr. Twelves was getting on; if he yet practised, and so on. But the man either paid no heed at all, or, if he replied, his answers were of such an unsatisfactory nature, conveying such extremely unflattering allusions, that the lady was finally convinced that she had better remain, however unwillingly, in ignorance than attempt to obtain enlightenment from such an impossible quarter. She would have liked to have taken the fellow suddenly by the shoulders and flung him out of the cart. He would possibly have found her capable of doing it. More than once she was on the point of making the effort, only an overwhelming consciousness of the greatness of the issue which was at stake restrained her.

At last, after what seemed very much more than an hour's drive, he brought the vehicle to a sudden stop.

"You'll get out here," he intimated to them curtly.

"Get out?" The lady peered about her through the mist and darkness. "This is not the house."

"Yon's Pitmuir."

"Pitmuir? But I paid you to drive us to the house; I can see no signs of it."

"You did not. I'd not drive you to the house for a pocketful of money."

"What fresh trick are you going to try on now? And what tomfoolery are you talking?"

"It's tomfoolery maybe, and maybe it isn't. You said, carry you to Pitmuir, and I've carried you. Do you know they say that Cuthbert Grahame's walking about among the trees, waiting in the avenue, looking for the woman who called herself his wife. Do you think I'll take you to meet him? Not while I've my senses. If you are set on meeting him, you'll not meet him in my company--that's my last word. Yon's Pitmuir. That's the gate in front, not a dozen yards from where we are--that's nearer than I care for. You'll just both of you get out."

CHAPTER XXXII

AT THE GATE

Verbal discussion was plainly useless; it was soon made sufficiently clear that nothing short of physical force would persuade that driver. Situated as they were it was not easy to see how they could resort to that method of convincing him of the error of his ways. Mrs. Lamb told him, with the lucidity of which under such circumstances she was past mistress, what she thought of him, and what treatment she would have accorded him if the conditions had only been a little different. In a tongue fight the man proved to be her match; he could pack at least as many disagreeable allusions into a sentence as she could. For ten minutes or a quarter of an hour they wrangled, then the driver delivered himself of an ultimatum.

"I'm not going to stay here all night listening to you. If you won't get down I'll drive you back. Now which is it to be? I'm off!"

"Off! Yes, you are off, as I'll soon show you."

She showed him there and then. Whirling round on her seat, she gave the driver a sudden push; over he went on to the road. Snatching the reins in one hand, the whip in the other, before he quite knew what had happened, she was urging the horse to pursue its onward career.

"Stop! stop!" he yelled. "I'm under the wheel! You're driving over me!"

"Then if you don't want me to drive over you, you'll get from under the wheel; I'm going on."

"Are you? I'll teach you, you----!"

The fellow's language was full-blooded. Scrambling up as best he could, he made a vigorous attempt to board the vehicle and expel her from the seat she had usurped. She was not disposed to yield. Down came the whip upon his head and shoulders. There ensued a lively few moments.

"When you two have quite finished your little conversation perhaps you'll let me know," groaned Mr. Luker from the rear.

The "little conversation" came to a rapid, and, perhaps on the whole, not surprising termination. The quadruped between the shafts, an animal apparently of the cart-horse kind, was, also apparently, a creature of an extremely patient disposition. But even the most enduring patience has its limits; that horse reached the end of his. Mrs. Lamb and the driver were, between them, tugging at the reins in a fashion to which he was, no doubt, entirely unaccustomed, while the whip-lash, when it missed the driver, occasionally alighted on the animal's flanks. Probably wholly at a loss to understand what was happening, not unreasonably the creature finally made up his mind that he had had enough of it, whatever it was. Suddenly the vehicle was set in motion; both parties persisting in sticking to the reins, and also, in a

sense, to each other, the course steered was of the most erratic kind. Before the horse had gone very far there was a lurch which was more ominous than any which had gone before, and they had been pregnant with meaning; the cart was turned clean over; the three persons concerned were thrown out of it. Mr. Luker was the first to give expression to his feelings. Clinging to the side as the thing went over, he had alighted with comparative gentleness on the ground.

"I'm alive," he announced. "I don't know if any one else is."

It seemed that the lady was in the same, so far as it went, satisfactory condition.

"There's not much the matter with me. I'm a bit shaken, and my clothes are all anyhow; my hat's torn right off my head--but that doesn't matter."

"Where's the driver? Driver, where are you?" There was no answer. "That extremely civil gentleman seems disposed to be a little more silent than he was just now. Driver!"

"It'll serve him right if he's killed. Hollo, I've just stepped on him; he's lying on the road. Driver!" Still no answer. "Stunned; lost his senses or something--not that he'd many senses to lose--cantankerous brute!"

"It's to be hoped that he hasn't lost them for ever, It'll be awkward for us if he has--especially for you. Your popularity in this neighbourhood does not appear to be so great that you can afford to throw any of it away."

"Confound my popularity! What do I care if I'm popular? If that brute is killed he brought it on himself; if I'd wrung his neck for him it'd have been no more than he deserved. I've got a lantern in my bag. I knew what sort of a hole, and what sort of beasts, I was coming to, and guessed that I'd better be prepared for the worst. If it isn't smashed to splinters I'll light it and have a look at him--you can see nothing in this darkness."

The lantern was not broken. Presently its rays were illuminating the surrounding gloom. She turned them on to the recumbent figure, not showing too much sympathy as she did so.

"Now then--move yourself! Don't pretend you're dead--I know better." Possibly by way of exhibiting her superior knowledge, she shook him by the shoulder. He groaned; she chose to interpret the sound as having a favourable significance. "He's not dead; he's all right. Broken a bone, or put his shoulder out, or something. He won't hurt if we leave him here; we could do nothing for him if we wanted to. Let's see what's happened to the cart."

It was not difficult to do that; the explanation of what had occurred was almost painfully simple. The horse, influenced by such eccentric guidance, had conducted the vehicle into a ditch. The jolt of the sudden descent had loosened one of the wheels; it lay in one direction, the cart in another. The question as to whether they were or were not to drive in it up to the house was finally settled. The horse, seemingly none the worse for his little experience, making no attempt to get up, reclined at his ease between the shafts, apparently under the not erroneous impression that he was as comfortable there as anywhere else. Mrs. Lamb recognised that, so far as any more riding was concerned, the fates were against her.

"We shall have to walk," she observed. "It's not so very far from here, along the avenue. Here's the gate."

She went to the gate, revealing its whereabouts by the light of her lantern. Mr. Luker moving towards her, spoke in lowered tones.

"Without wishing to alarm you unnecessarily, or endorsing your coachman's remarks about Mr. Cuthbert Grahame's singular habits, I may tell you that my impression is that if he isn't walking about among the trees, somebody is."

"Luker, don't talk like that! Don't be a fool."

"If I weren't a fool I doubt if I should be here with you now; but, apart from that, I can only inform you that for some time I have had a suspicion that our movements were being observed by some one among the trees, who can see us better than we could see him, and who was taking a lively interest in all that was occurring."

"Luker, how do you know? How could you tell?"

"By the sense of sound; I wasn't so absorbed in fighting the driver. That some one, or something, has been moving among the trees, keeping pace with us as we went, I'll swear, and I don't think it was an animal."

"Speak plainly; what do you mean?"

"I think it possible that you and I are the objects of a conspiracy--especially you. Every step you take you are walking farther and farther into the trap which Miss Margaret Wallace has set for you."

"Don't talk rubbish! Have you got that old bee in your bonnet again? I'm not afraid of Miss Margaret Wallace."

"Aren't you? Then that's all right, because I fancy that her agents are about you on every side."

"Her agents? What do you mean by her agents?"

"I imagine that Miss Margaret Wallace is more popular in this part of the world than you are. I can put two and two together. From what I've seen, and heard, since our arrival, I shouldn't be surprised to learn that she has nobbled every creature in the neighbourhood. The station-master has received a hint from her--that explains the peculiarity of his manner; nothing else could. That poor wretch lying on the ground has been acting on her instructions. Don't you make any mistake; I'm sure of it. I'm equally sure that other friends of hers are waiting for you in there."

He pointed over the gate, along the avenue. His words, far from causing her alarm, seemed to act as a fillip.

"Friends of hers upon my property!--if they dare! Do you think that I'm afraid of what you call her friends?--of any number of them?--of the tricks they've set themselves to play? I'd like to see them; I'd like to meet them. This is my property--mine!--every stick and stone on it! Neither Margaret Wallace nor any one else has a right to set foot upon it without my sanction. If I do find any trespassers I promise you that it won't be me who'll come off worst. Are you coming? You understand, if you're to earn that thousand pounds you're to stick to me through thick and thin--to the end! If you show the white feather, the bond is cancelled."

"Are you going to accept the invitation of the spider to the fly? You intend to walk into the trap?"

"Trap! Do you think that any trap was ever set that could catch me? I believe you're talking the purest piffle; but if there is a trap, and I do walk into it, it'll be to smash it all to pieces. Once more, are you coming?"

"Oh, I'm coming. I'll do my best to earn the thousand, though I'm beginning to perceive that it wants more earning than I supposed. Lead on; where you lead I'll not only follow, I'll keep as close to your side as circumstances permit."

She threw the gate wide open. It swung back on its rusty hinges with a harsh, creaking sound. Then they entered the avenue, the lantern swinging in her hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AT THE DOOR

Between the trees the darkness was as if you might have cut it. Where the lantern looked there were momentary revelations as they strode along. Its rays seemed to cut pieces out of the surrounding gloom. But the pieces were small. Its penetrating power was slight; where its penetration ceased the darkness was blacker than before. The silence which prevailed had its own peculiar property; it served to exaggerate the slightest disturbance. Their very footsteps were differentiated with an almost morbid clearness. The firm, resolute descent of the woman's foot, the loose, indeterminate shuffle of the man's; the sounds seemed to set themselves against each other and to ring through the trees. They gradually became conscious of the movements of unseen creatures among the grasses and the herbage, disturbed by their approach. Once she observed, as she swung the lantern to one side--

"That's a rabbit. There used to be thousands of them when I was here. I expect there are more now. I daresay the whole place is overrun with them."

"It may be a rabbit, though, with due deference to your superior woodcraft, I doubt if there are many rabbits abroad at this hour of the night----But that's not!"

"What? Where?"

"Are there deer about the place as well?"

"Deer? I don't think so. I don't remember seeing any."

"Then give me the lantern!"

Mrs. Lamb was holding the lantern out in front of her. Snatching it, he swung it slightly round. As he did so it went out.

"Luker!" she exclaimed. "How did you manage that? What a clumsy fool you are!"

There was a new intonation in his voice.

"Some one blew it out. Hollo, where are you coming to? Who the devil, sir, are you? Confound the man, where's he gone?"

"Luker, what's the matter?"

"Some one was walking behind us--didn't you hear him? I not only heard but I felt him; he was as close as that. When I swung the lantern round I almost dashed it against his face. He blew it out. He tried to snatch it from me; I felt his fingers. Can you hear him?"

"Is that a footstep?"

"He stepped upon a twig. There's more than one. I tell you they're all round us. The lantern serves as a beacon; they can see us though we can't see them."

They were speaking in whispers.

"Is that another footstep?"

"Curse the fellow, I believe he's still within three or four feet of us. I believe I heard him breathe. I've a revolver in my pocket; I've half a mind----"

"I also have a revolver, and I've a whole mind. Look out! I'm going to fire!"

There was a flash; a report which seemed to wake the echoes of the forest for miles and miles; then a scream which rose high above the echoes, and seemed to hang quivering in, and rending, the silent air. The stillness which again ensued was rendered the more striking by its contrast with the previous turmoil.

"You've shot some one."

"Not I!--that wasn't a man. I shouldn't be surprised if it was some kind of a bird. There are birds in these woods which make noises at night which go right through you. Where's your friend?"

"I'll strike a match and try to get a light again. You cover me while I'm doing it."

The instant the match flickered into flame there was a crashing sound among the bushes as of a heavy object in headlong flight.

"There he is! He's making off! I'll have another pop at him!"

Again a revolver clamoured, but this time there was no answering sound, only stillness followed. Luker had succeeded in lighting the lantern. He held it well out. Together they peered into the cave of light which it hollowed out in front of them. It was broken by trees, by bushes, by bracken, but, so far as they could see, by nothing else. Luker spoke in a whisper.

"He's gone. They're too much for us, and too many. For all we can tell there's some one behind each of those trees; they're all of them big enough to shelter a man. This kind of thing's a new experience to me--altogether out of my usual line. It's a job for which I have no sort of stomach. What the game is I don't know, but it's one in which all the odds are against us--I do know that. I wish to the devil I'd stayed in town!"

"You didn't; you've come down into the country with me, and in the country for the present you've got to stay. Give me that lantern, and don't you snatch at it again. Whoever blows it out while I've got hold of it will be clever. Pretend to be a man, even if you aren't one. As for that game about which you're talking, if there is one on, I promise you that whoever scores in it, I shall."

They continued their progress, the lady again holding the lantern, moving onwards with her long, regular strides, swinging it a little as she walked. Mr. Luker, shuffling alongside, seemed to be unwilling to drop behind, and to find it difficult to keep up with her. As he went he glanced continually from side to

side, and over his shoulder at the darkness which followed them. There was no attempt on either side at conversation, they simply went straight on.

They had gone some distance without anything happening to occasion them further concern, when the lady came to a sudden stop.

"Here we are!" she exclaimed. "That's the house in front of us." She held out the lantern, so that its farthest rays just touched a building which loomed mysteriously in the blackness. There was a note of triumph in her voice as she went on. "Luker, you're nearer to that thousand pounds than you perhaps think, and in a very few minutes I'll be within reach of that quarter of a million. Then I'll show them!--all the lot of them!"

Quite what she meant by that last vague threat she only knew. Before she had a chance to offer an explanation, if it was her intention to offer one, she was interrupted by Mr. Luker, who seemed destined that night to act as a harbinger of coming evil.

"What's that?" he cried. "Who--my God!--who is this coming along the path?"

He was not only shrinking as close to her as he could get, he was gripping her arm with convulsive fingers, which she could feel were trembling. He was looking in one direction, she in another. She turned to see what he was staring at; when she saw, it is possible that she began to be in a less exultant mood.

Some one, something, was moving along the avenue and coming towards them. It was not easy to determine what it was; it came and went. It was rendered visible by a light which seemed to emanate from its own body, as if it were a kind of phosphorescence. When the light gleamed it was there plainly, if dimly, to be seen; when the light ceased to gleam, it--the something!--seemed to go with it; there was nothing but the black darkness. This continued, this coming and going, for perhaps thirty seconds. Then, suddenly, the light not only grew brighter, it remained. They could see what the something was--it was a man. But what a man! A huge, unwieldy, bloated, shapeless creature, covered from head to foot with some white garment which was swathed round him like a sheet. He seemed to be floating, rather than walking. They could see no movement of his limbs, and yet he came steadily towards them until he was within five or six feet of where they were standing, when the light faded as suddenly as it had come, and there was nothing but darkness there.

For some instants they remained motionless, both being probably under the impression that though the figure was no longer visible it still was advancing towards them. While they waited, on the alert to discover what was next about to happen, the silence was broken by a curious noise, as by a series of quick, broken gasps, as if some one panted, struggled, for breath.

When all again was still, Mr. Luker asked, in a tone of voice in which was what sounded uncommonly like a note of banter--

"Well, my friend, aren't we to see any more of you? Is that the end of the performance? Won't you favour us with another private view?"

In Mrs. Lamb's voice, on the other hand, there was a suggestion of preternatural gravity.

"It was Cuthbert Grahame."

"What?"

"It was Cuthbert Grahame. Didn't you hear him fighting for breath?"

"Cuthbert fiddlesticks! It was some damned trick, and not over well done either. This entertainment has been prepared for our special benefit; it occurs to me that it has been insufficiently rehearsed. We've been treated to the first part up to now; the second part is waiting for us inside the house--if we ever get as far. The prelude's been mere foolery. I imagine that the serious business is to come."

"It was Cuthbert Grahame."

"Nonsense! Where were your eyes, not to speak of your senses? Didn't you notice----"

"He is waiting for us inside the house."

"Mrs. Lamb, if you'll exercise a little common-sense and allow me to finish, I think I shall be able to prove, even to your satisfaction, that what you've just now witnessed----"

"Don't you see him? He beckons to us. Can't you hear how hard he fights for his breath?"

"No; nor you either. Aren't you well? Is this one of those fits of which you were telling me trying to come back, in which you see things? If so, keep it off as long as you conveniently can. So far as I'm concerned it will only need that to put a crown and climax on my night's enjoyment. Listen to me, Isabel---
_"

"Come!" Taking him by the arm, she led him up to the house. When they reached the front door she took a key out of the bag which she still carried. After a momentary hesitation she held it up, as if to call his attention to something that was taking place within. "Listen! Don't you hear? He calls to us! Let us go to him. I've often heard him calling to me like that in the night--often."

During the last few seconds, for some occult reason, a change had taken place in her which had apparently revolutionised the whole woman externally as well as internally; her bearing, her manner, her voice, and especially her face, had changed. The alteration in the latter was nothing short of amazing. Just now its predominating expression was one of boldness, defiance, reckless rage. She had looked as if she feared neither man nor devil; her looks had probably only mirrored her actual feelings. This air of wildness, of careless contempt for the unknown, unseen perils, which, according to her companion, hemmed her in on every side, had been accentuated by the fact that, having lost her hat when the cart was overturned, her thick black hair had broken loose from its fastenings and hung in tangled masses about her face. She had looked what she emphatically was, a dangerous woman in a dangerous frame of mind. Now all that had changed. She looked no longer angry or defiant; all traces of boldness had vanished altogether. Instead, a stolid, fixed expression had come upon her face, one which, as it were, was void of all expression. In her wide-open eyes there was a strained, staring look, which conveyed an uncomfortable impression that she was gazing at something which only she could see, gazing with a fixed intensity of vision as if she was bent on not losing even the minutest details.

As she stood there, with uplifted face, the rays of the lantern lighting up her rigid features, Mr. Luker observed her with an appearance of unmistakable discomfort. The significance of the change which had taken place in her was borne in on him with uncomfortable force. The change in her affected him; he was

obviously becoming each second more uneasy. He seemed to make a desperate attempt to conquer his own increasing apprehension, and to restore her to her former state of mind.

"Isabel, you didn't use to be an utter fool. Before you put that key into the lock, before you move another step, rub that look of stark, staring midsummer madness off your face. It doesn't become you, God knows. Listen to what I have to say; try not to be a fool. Don't you understand----"

Before he could explain what was the appeal he was about to make to her understanding, some one, or something, came swirling at them from the side of the house. The light disappeared in the lantern; the lantern itself was snatched from the lady's hands. She made no effort to regain it, nor to ascertain how the thing had happened. She stood in the darkness, motionless. Presently she said--

"Luker! Luker!"

There was no answer. She put out her hand to feel for her companion who, a moment before, had been standing close at her side. He was not there.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TOWARDS JUDGMENT

For possibly a couple of minutes she continued on the doorstep immobile, as if she not only did not understand what had happened, but as if she also still failed to realise that her legal adviser was at least no longer where he was. She repeated his name, at intervals--"Luker! Luker!"--almost as if she was a child who repeated, parrot-like, a meaningless formula. Then, after a while, when still there came no answer, she thrust her hand, as if mechanically, into the bosom of her dress, feeling for something. Presently it emerged, holding a flask. In the same odd, automatic fashion, as if her actions were not the product of her own volition, unscrewing the stopper, she placed the neck between her lips. After a perceptible interval, suddenly slipping between her fingers, it dropped on to the step with a clatter. It had contained ether; she had swallowed its entire contents.

What were the exact physical or mental results of what would have been a poison to an unaccustomed subject, it would be difficult to say. One fact may be baldly stated, it robbed her of her senses. Her capacity of judging between the real and the unreal had been trembling in the balance. When she emptied that flask unreality became all that was real. Not perhaps on the instant, but certainly after the expiration of a very few seconds.

At first she stood trembling, so that one might almost have expected to see her sink to the ground from sheer inability to stand. She stretched out her arms into the darkness, as if seeking for support, and found none. Then, putting her hands up to her face, she began to rub them up and down before her eyes, as if endeavouring to rub away some film which obscured her sight, and she began to cry, softly, beneath her breath. Then, dropping her hands to her sides, she began to see the things which were not, those visions which, in some form, are the inseparable companions of a mind diseased.

"I am coming!--I heard you!--you need not call so loud!"

The words were uttered not loudly, but with such clearness of intonation that, proceeding from her as she stood there all alone in the outer darkness, and addressed apparently to the circumambient air, they might have produced on unintentional listeners not an agreeable effect. She turned, making as if to insert the key which she still held into the lock of the door behind her, to find that the door already stood wide open, and that in the hall beyond there was a faint light which was just sufficient to render objects visible.

In her normal condition the fact that the door had seemingly opened of its own accord would have occasioned her something more than wonder; she would at least have taken it for granted that somewhere in its immediate neighbourhood were helping hands; and she would promptly have set herself to discover to whom they belonged, and just where their owners might be found. In her then state no notion of the kind seemed to enter her brain. That the fact that the door was open occasioned her surprise was obvious; but it was surprise of a singular quality, and it was accompanied by abject terror. The woman seemed all at once to become stunted, to shrink into sheer physical insignificance.

"Cuthbert Grahame," she muttered, "why did you open the door? How did you get out of your bed to open the door?" With a sound which was part wail, part sob, she stumbled across the threshold into the hall. "Where shall I go? Shall I go into the room into which I first went on that first night? Perhaps I'll be safe in there--perhaps I'll be safe. I don't want to go upstairs--not yet--not just yet. I daren't--I daren't. Listen! how he calls to me--how he calls."

She glanced up the staircase, which she approached even while she shrank from it, and she saw, in the dim, mysterious light, leaning over the banister, looking down at her from above, a woman's face--Nannie Foreshaw. She did not stop to ask herself if the appearance might by any chance be real, a creature of warm flesh and blood. It was some moments before she realised who it was that looked at her. When she did, the presence there was so unexpected, so wholly unforeseen, and thrust so deeply at her conscience, that it is not impossible that the mere shock which resulted from the sight was sufficient to disintegrate her few remaining wits. She at once took it for granted that she was gazing at a spectre, a shade returned from the tomb to afflict her before her time. Cowering back against the wall, she broke into screams of agony.

"Nannie! Nannie!--I didn't kill you!--I didn't kill you! Don't look at me like that!--don't! don't! don't!" Covering her face with her hands, she began to sob with such violence that one could see her shaking as she leaned against the wall. When, removing her hands, she again ventured to look up, there was no one there. "She's gone! she's gone!"

The words were uttered with a gasp of relief which it was not pleasant to hear. For a moment it seemed as if she might be restored to something like her proper self. Then, while she seemed to waver, without apparent rhyme or reason, all her tremors returned. Again she broke into shrieks and cries.

"She's waiting for me in his room! in his room! in his room!--she's waiting for me! My God! what am I to do?--help me! help me! I'll have to go to him. Listen how he calls to me!--listen how he calls! I'm coming!--don't call so loud!" She began stumbling up the staircase, blunderingly, blindly, as if she could not see where she was going. Stopping every two or three steps, clutching at the wall, the rails; glancing back, looking as though if she could she would descend. But each time, just as she was about to beat a retreat, there came to her that insistent voice, summoning her to her fate. She gasped out expostulations even as she stumbled upwards. "Don't call so loud! don't call so loud! I'm coming."

And she did come. A singular spectacle she presented as she went. No one would have recognised in that ill-shaped, mouthing, struggling woman--though she alone knew what it was with which she struggled; who seemed unable to stand up straight, and to experience as much difficulty in ascending an ordinary staircase as if it had been the scarred surface of some precipitous cliff which she was forced, very much against her will, to climb--the flamboyant and somewhat overwhelming lady who was known among a certain set in London as the handsome Mrs. Lamb. There were no traces of beauty about her then.

When she had gained the landing her terror seemed, if the thing were possible, to increase. Descending to her knees, clutching the railing with both hands, she crawled, as if drawn by some invisible force, against which all the strength of her resistance was in vain, towards the room, the bedroom, in which Cuthbert Grahame had passed so much of the latter part of his life, and in which, through her action, he had died. And all the while she protested.

"I won't come! I won't come!" For an instant she would cling not only with her hands, but, as it were, with her whole body, to the railings, as if she had finally resolved that nothing should constrain her to advance another inch. Then again she was possessed by a paroxysm of terror. "I will come!--don't call so

loud! I am coming!"

When she was in front of the door of the room she did halt for perhaps more than a minute, crouching in a heap on the floor, covering her face with her hands, overtaken by such a fury of weeping that the violence of her sobs seemed as if it would tear her to pieces. Then, as if actuated by some sudden irresistible impulse, she rose to her feet, and exclaimed, still weeping--

"Cuthbert Grahame, I hear you calling--I am here".

She threw open the dead man's bedroom door.

CHAPTER XXXV

JUDGES

In the room was the same faint, luminous glow which had been noticeable in the hall and on the stairs. There could have been no more eloquent testimony of her condition than the fact that she accepted its presence as a matter of course; that it never seemed to occur to her that there was something about it which required elucidation; still less that a few shrewd, well-directed inquiries might result in a very simple explanation. She stood on the threshold, all dishevelled, bent, weeping; always before her eyes the things which she alone could see, stricken with a mad agony of fear by the horror of the sight.

She came a little farther towards the room, staring towards the bed. When she had taken a step or two it seemed as if her legs refused to uphold her any longer. Down she sank on to her knees again; again she covered her face with her hands, as if by such means she could shut off from herself the hideous imaginings of her haunted brain.

"Don't! don't! don't!" she wailed.

While still she remained in that attitude of humility and penitence there came a voice which called her by what had once been her name.

"Isabel Burney!"

That she heard it there could be no doubt. At the sound of it she shivered more than ever. But it may be that she was in doubt whether it was a material voice, or whether it was a fresh manifestation of those too-well remembered tones, which kept calling to her all the time. For it is possible that a disordered mind may be conscious that there is a difference between the real and the imaginary without being capable of satisfactorily perceiving what it is. She did not answer. It came again, not loud, yet distinct and dominating.

"Isabel Burney."

This time she repeated her former wail, with renewed force of entreaty.

"Don't! don't!"

If it was intended for a cry of appeal to be left alone, it went unheeded. The voice returned, asking what was emphatically a leading question.

"Did you murder Cuthbert Grahame?"

She made not the slightest attempt to shirk the very weighty responsibility which attended the reply to such a question. An affirmative was bursting from her lips almost before it was asked.

"Yes! yes! yes!"

"How did you murder him?"

Again the wail--

"Don't! don't! don't!"

"How did you murder him?"

The wail became hysterical cries.

"Oh! oh! oh!"

But the voice persisted.

"How did you murder him?"

Confused words came stumbling from her lips, as if they were being forcibly extracted.

"The pillows--dragged---from under--he choked."

"You dragged the pillows from under him, so that his head fell down, and he was choked."

"Yes."

"Why did you murder him?"

Here again the answer came rapidly and clearly.

"Because I didn't want him to destroy the will which I had tricked him into signing."

"How did you trick him?"

"He made me draw up a will which left all his property to Margaret Wallace."

"And then?"

"I drew up a will in which he left everything to me."

"And then?"

"I covered it with a sheet of paper, and got him to sign it, thinking that he was signing the other."

"Did he know what you had done?"

"Yes; I killed him before he could tell any one else and have the will destroyed."

The voice was still. There was silence, broken by the sound of some one moving. The room was filled with a bright light. The voice came again.

"Isabel Burney!"

The woman on her knees, dropping her hands, looked round. By a lighted lamp which rested on a writing-table stood Margaret Wallace. Whether Mrs. Lamb realised that she was looking at the girl herself, or supposed that she was confronted by a materialised phantom, has never been certainly known. She stared at her surlily, unblinkingly, affrightedly, as one might stare at some unpleasing object in a dream. The girl repeated the questions which had already been answered. As one listened the last remnants of doubt vanished as to whose was the voice which had already made itself so prominent.

"Did you trick Cuthbert Grahame into signing a will in which he left all that he had to you, when he supposed himself to be signing one in which he left it all to me?"

There was a momentary hesitation, then the answer, spoken sullenly, half beneath her breath, yet plain enough.

"Yes; I did."

"And did you then kill him because you feared discovery of what you had done?"

"Yes; I did."

There was another movement on the other side of the room. When Mrs. Lamb looked round she found herself looking at Dr. Twelves, who put a question to her on his own account.

"So you lied to me when you said those pillows must have slipped--you knew better. As I suspected, you dragged them away--you female fiend!"

His invective went unnoticed; there came the rather monotonous refrain--

"Yes; I did".

There were other movements proceeding from all parts of the room. On one side of her were Andrew McTavish and his partner, Mr. Brown. Mr. McTavish was evidently very angry.

"And you lied to us when you pretended that you suspected us of robbing you! You knew all along that the only robbery you yourself had committed--you impudent swindler!"

He only received the same reply--

"Yes; I did".

Dr. Twelves wagged his finger at her, gruesomely.

"You shall hang for it, Isabel Burney--you shall hang by the neck until you're dead!"

Mr. McTavish cried--

"At any rate, you shall be sent to penal servitude for the fraud you have committed on us!"

She showed no signs of resentment, as only a very short time before she undoubtedly would have done, when her resentment would probably have taken a sufficiently active turn. From her demeanour it was difficult to determine if she comprehended what was being said to her. She gazed stolidly about the room. Near a window stood Nannie Foreshaw, leaning on a stick, holding with one hand the curtain from behind which she had just emerged. At sight of her she shrank backwards, as if she would withdraw herself as far as she could. Before the door, as if he would bar her retreat, was Harry Talfourd. When she saw him she seemed to be moved more than she had been by any of the others; she turned aside, with a low cry, and covered her face. Possibly, in some tangled fashion, she remembered how, so recently, she had played to him the *rôle* of the great lady, the benefactress; how willing she had been to be something more to him than that; and she was vaguely conscious of what a contrast she was exhibiting to him now.

Margaret had been seated at a table writing. Now, rising, she turned to the woman who was still on her knees upon the floor.

"I have set down upon this sheet of paper a short confession of your guilt. If you will sign it you shall not hang; you shall not be sent to prison. You shall receive your only punishment from your own conscience. I think that is to condemn you to the greater punishment. I will read to you what I have written."

She read aloud from the paper which she took in her hand:--

"I confess that Cuthbert Grahame instructed me to draw up a will in which he left all that he had in the world to Margaret Wallace; that, without his knowledge, I substituted for it another form of will, according to which he left his property to me, and that I induced him to sign this fraudulent form by means of a trick. I also confess that I murdered Cuthbert Grahame in order to avoid an exposure of the trick by means of which I had induced him to sign the substituted fraudulent form of will.' If you will attach your name to this confession you shall receive no punishment beyond that which you award yourself--that will be a sufficient one. Come here and sign."

As if automatically, Mrs. Lamb rose to her feet, moved towards the table, seated herself on the chair which Margaret had occupied, accepted the pen which the girl offered, and wrote her name in full on the sheet of paper which was set before her. When she had signed, leaning back, she looked from one to the other. They waited for her to speak, expecting perhaps some burst of tardy anger. Then, on a sudden, without a word or a movement, she slid from the chair on to the floor. When they gathered round her she lay still.

CHAPTER XXXVI

PLEASANT DREAMS!

The duel had been fought to a finish, and Margaret had won.

When Mrs. Gregory Lamb was brought back out of that fit by which she had been overtaken she was lying on Cuthbert Grahame's bed, on which he had lived for so long, and died at her hand; the bed whose image had been borne in upon her phantom-haunted brain with such horrible persistency. Dr. Twelves was bending over her, standing where he had stood many a time to bend over the man she slew. She was little better than a babbling idiot. She is not much more than that now. She is a certified lunatic, under kindly, yet watchful, guardianship, the expense of which is paid by the girl whom she so cruelly wronged.

The physical and mental strain which had been placed upon her during that period of increasing financial pressure had been great; her attempts to relieve it by a resort to ether had made it ten times greater. How much of the spirit she drank has not been exactly ascertained. She must have consumed large quantities. Probably only the natural strength of her constitution enabled her to resist its effects so long as she did. Undoubtedly the habit of ether drinking had increased in her to such an extent that in any case it would ultimately have produced insanity. Her reason was already tottering when she was brought face to face with Margaret Wallace on the night of her reception, and was put to such dire confusion. It is believed that she touched no solid food afterwards, subsisting solely upon ether. Isaac Luker asserted that she carried a large bottle of it in her bag when they journeyed together from London, and was sipping its contents throughout the day.

It was not strange that when the moment came she was ripe to fall a ready victim to Margaret's carefully laid lures. The girl fought her with weapons to which she was incapable of offering resistance.

Cuthbert Grahame's money, which had been searched for so long in vain, was found deposited in the hiding-place the secret of which she had revealed to Mrs. Lamb, intending, by working on her guilty conscience and so extorting from her a confession, which it was certain could never be obtained from her by any other means, to destroy her when she went to seek it. Margaret is now Mrs. Henry Talfourd. She is married to one who loved and loves her, and for the love of whom she was willing to sacrifice all. She is a rich woman. Bearing in mind the singularity of the circumstances under which it has come into her possession, she was desirous of having nothing to do with the dead man's money. But it was pointed out that, excepting herself, there was no possible claimant. She regards herself as an almoner, as a steward of Cuthbert Grahame's great possessions rather than their owner, and employs by far the larger portion of the income they produce in works of beneficence. She still produces pictures in black and white and in colour; there are few women artists who have achieved a more substantial success.

Her husband has not realised his dreams. "The Gordian Knot" has never been produced. He burnt the play with his own hands, and has never written another. He alone knows why, though his wife may have a shrewd suspicion. So far he has been content to act as his wife's right-hand man, an occupation which hitherto has kept him fully employed.

Dr. Twelves lives and flourishes. He has been heard to declare that never again will he proffer assistance to any strange woman whom he finds by the wayside. Nannie Foreshaw is dead. Messrs. McTavish & Brown have, if anything, improved their standing as family solicitors of undoubted integrity; Mrs. Talfourd is one of their most valued clients.

Mrs. Talfourd presented Mr. Gregory Lamb with a passage to South Africa, and with a sum of money when he landed. As he has never asked for any more money, and nothing has been heard of him since, the presumption is that he has perished in that grave of many reputations. His wife's solicitor continues to exist, and is still a very well-known gentleman in certain extremely crooked walks of life.

Cuthbert Grahame's home has been turned into a sanatorium and holiday home for children. It could hardly be employed for a better purpose. Boys and girls scamper among the trees; their voices and their laughter ring through the house. They people it with fresh associations; the old ghosts are gone. They find health and happiness in the place where once was neither. And when, at night, they lay their tired heads upon their pillows, they dream only pleasant dreams. When they wake in the morning, whether actually the skies be fair or clouded, to them it is always as if the sun was shining.

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