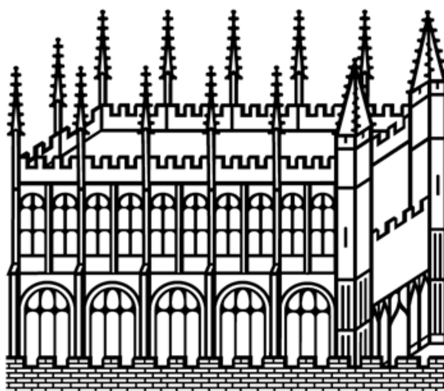

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In the service of love

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IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BEETLE: A MYSTERY
THE MARQUIS OF PUTNEY
A DUEL
THE TWICKENHAM PEERAGE
A METAMORPHOSIS
GARNERED
BOTH SIDES OF THE VEIL
THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN
MARVELS AND MYSTERIES
A SPOILER OF MEN
THE GARDEN OF MYSTERY
THE GODDESS: A DEMON
THE JOSS: A REVERSION

IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE

BY

RICHARD MARSH

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published in 1906

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IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE

CHAPTER I

GILBERT HAYTER GOES IN SEARCH OF ADVENTURE

ON the morning of May 3 Gilbert Hayter landed at Southampton after a sojourn in Africa of nearly seventeen years. Going straight up to London he engaged a bedroom at the Metropolitan Hotel at Charing Cross. He lunched in the hotel. In the afternoon he went out for a walk, looking about him with the curious eyes of a man who has come back to the city which he knew when the world was younger. He walked along the Strand, right through the City. Much that he saw was strange, still more was familiar. The blending of the new and the old had on him an odd effect; he began to be conscious that he was passing through the streets like a man in a dream. On his homeward way he found himself on the Embankment. Nearly everything here, to all outward seeming, was just as it had been. He lingered, to permit of new impressions being made by well-known pictures of the past. He was not a sentimental man. It was with a sensation of grim amusement that he realised that he was regarding everything with a feeling of affection; even the most unromantic things, the barges on the river, the factory chimneys on the opposite shore; as if they were dear and well-tried friends.

The weather was fine. Gilbert Hayter was not the only loiterer by the river-side. Many of those who lounged on the seats, or took their ease against the wall, were obviously persons who were there because they had nowhere else to go; specimens of the London professional loafer. These Hayter eyed with interest, as persons whom he had seen "long since, yet lost awhile." But there were others whose classification was not so evident. In particular there was one,—a girl. He noticed her in front of the Embankment Gardens. She was leaning against the wall, looking over it at the river rushing beneath; looking at it with a fixed intentness which presently began to strike Hayter as singular. She was plainly dressed; apparently quite a young girl; but she kept her face turned towards the water with such persistence that, though he was only distant from her a few yards, it was not easy for him to determine what she looked like. By degrees the peculiarity of her attitude impressed him more and more. For nearly fifteen minutes by his watch she had not removed her glance from the hurrying waters; he had stayed so long on purpose to observe her. She, seemingly, was unconscious of his observation; of everything, except the muddy stream. What did she see in it? What fascination did it have for her, that it so held her as with a spell? Some instinct drew him closer to her and closer. Suddenly she looked up, when he was already nearly at her side. She saw him; and he saw her;—a young girl, hardly more than a child, with something on her white face, in her wide-open eyes, which hurt him. She, on her part, seemed to see in him that which affected her with an extraordinary degree of agitation. He could see that she was trembling. All at once, turning, she ran across the street, passing in at one gate of the gardens, and out by another, and so out of sight, like some wild thing. While he was wondering what he could have done to cause her such alarm, someone addressed him from behind.

"She'd have been over in half a second; just in time you were."

The speaker was an undersized individual, in a long frock-coat; an old cloth cap; his hands in the pockets of his ancient trousers; unwashed, unshaven; a well-established example of the unemployed. Hayter replied, mechanically, his eyes still turned towards where the girl had vanished.

"Over?—into the river, do you mean?—do you think so?"

"Of course she would. She was bringing herself up to the point, that's what she was doing; I know them women. I tell you, you was just in time. I say, guvnor, you haven't got the price of half a pint about you, have you? You'd feel like making a hole in the water if you'd been without a drop as long as I have."

Gilbert Hayter looked at the speaker, with a whimsical smile; this was the first time—for how many years?—that a white man had begged money from him. Giving him half a crown he walked off without waiting for thanks; which, indeed, the recipient seemed too surprised to offer.

Thinking of jumping into the river, was she? That girl! that child! Hayter was conscious of something tightening about the region of his chest. How long ago was it since he would have been quite willing to have done the same?

Returning to the hotel he saw a notice hung up in the hall that tea was being served in the drawing-room. He went to the drawing-room and had some tea. Near to him were three American girls, with an older person, who was perhaps their mother. One of them asked him at what hour the Royal Academy closed. He explained that he was perhaps more of a stranger in town than they were, and could not tell them. He dined at a restaurant in the Strand, which, in the old days, he had looked upon as almost the last word in luxury; it was with a queer sense of being born again that he realised that it was

filled with the same cosmopolitan crowd which had been its prevailing note of yore. The food was decent ; but, somehow, it was not quite so good as he had thought it was. Probably they had changed their cook ; or perhaps it was he who had changed.

Afterwards he went to a music-hall ; the one to which, when he had had the wherewithal, he had used to go. It had been rebuilt since then ; he looked all about him, with amusement, at its gilded splendour.

After the show was over he felt indisposed to return to the hotel. On the night of the day on which a man had come home after an absence of more than seventeen years, it was yet too early to think of going to bed. He ought to do something to celebrate the occasion ; he felt that strongly, something unusual, surprising. But, a stranger, friendless, alone, what could he do ? He hung about the streets, watching the crowds of vehicles and pedestrians ; dropped into one or two bars,—for the sake of something to do rather than for something to drink. All at once it was half-past twelve ; he was being turned into the street. Apparently there was nothing else but the hotel. Still wide awake, thither he returned, hoping to find a sympathetic soul, in perhaps his own mood, with whom he might be able to chat. He was disappointed. The hotel had retired to rest ; the smoking-room was in darkness ; all the public rooms shut up ; the hall was practically the only part of the huge building in which there was even a light. The porter in the office asked if he wanted his bedroom key. He did not ; he emphatically did not. Glancing up at the clock he perceived that it was close on one. He did not care if it was two ; or three ; or even four ; he would not go to bed till something had occurred which would commemorate—relatively ; if not adequately—the night of his coming home. How often, on the veldt, lying awake, in the open, looking up at the stars, he had promised himself that, when he did go home, the night of his

home-coming should be a night; a hot night; he would make things hum,—if for that night only. Was he, now that that night had come, to go to bed, lamely, tamely, to lie awake, tossing between the sheets, as if it was a night of no importance?

He answered his own question in his own manner. Telling the porter that he did not want his bedroom key, he strode to the hall door, and, through it, out into the streets, in search of adventures. It was true that he did not know where to look for them; had no notion, even, what shapes he would rather those adventures should take. He felt, as he stood at the foot of the steps, looking up and down the deserted street, that there was not what could be called much promise in the look of things. Which way should he go? On his right was the river and the Embankment; on his left, Trafalgar Square and all that lay about it. Not towards the river. He thought of the young girl, who, the thirsty stranger had assured him, was on the point of precipitating herself into the stream. He did not want his adventures to be concerned with suicides, male or female, potential or otherwise. It was something more cheerful he desired. So he went in search of it.

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF THE ADVENTURE WHICH HE FOUND

ACROSS Trafalgar Square, along Pall Mall, up St. James' Street, into Piccadilly. So far there had been signs of life in the streets. Now, turning round a corner into a narrow road with which he was unfamiliar, he presently found himself in a region which, with the exception of an occasional cab or carriage, was like a city of the dead. Here and there were lights in the windows, but, for the most part, the houses stood about him on either side with nothing to show that there was life within. Where he was he did not know. Aforetime his knowledge of the residential quarters of West End London was of the slightest; after the passage of the years it was as though he moved in an unknown country. A curious place in which to look for adventure; although the fact that he was there at all, at that hour, was, perhaps, after a fashion, an adventure in itself.

All at once he came into a big square, on the opposite side of which was a great house, all ablaze with lights. He had come upon life at last. The wide roadway which ran round the square was crowded with vehicles, of all sorts and kinds,—carriages, hansoms, four-wheelers, motor broughams. Apparently there were gay doings at the great house across the way, which made it stand out all the more because so many of its neighbours were in darkness. He wondered whose house it was; what was the nature of the function; was half disposed

to go across and make inquiries. Then, changing his mind, turned into a street on his right. As he strolled, someone approached from behind, who moved more quickly than he. Presently a tall man came past, in evening dress, carrying his overcoat over his arm. There was a gas-lamp. By its light Gilbert Hayter could see that he was middle-aged, and had an iron-grey moustache. He noticed something else as the man went by,—that he walked unevenly, sometimes stepping off the pavement into the roadway.

"If he's come from the great house across the way," decided Gilbert, "they've been doing some of their guests too well. The gentleman's as nearly drunk as is convenient; he all but cannoned into me."

The stranger was still only a few yards ahead, perhaps less than twenty, when there came out of the darkened doorway of a house which he had just passed, a woman in a hurry. She dashed after the man who was just in front of her, and struck at the back of his head with something which she had in her hand, with such hearty goodwill that she knocked him flat into the road. It was so suddenly done, and was so unexpected, that Hayter, at the back, stood still, staring in amazement. It was a second or two before it dawned on him that he had been the witness of something very like a crime; a tolerably audacious one, to boot. Then he realised two things; one was that the stranger was still lying, motionless, in the road; the other that the woman was rushing off, as if flying for her life. His resolution was taken on the instant,—to catch her. At the top of his speed he ran after her. He had only gone a very short distance when he understood that she was running as fast as he was. She had reached the corner, and had turned it, without his having gained on her a yard; if anything, she had gained on him. When, in his turn, he reached the corner, she was already out of sight. Glancing to the left, in the direction she had turned, he saw, or thought he saw, a glimpse of what might

have been a skirt vanishing into a doorway on the other side of the road, perhaps twenty houses down. So fleeting was the glimpse he caught that it was quite possible—he acknowledged it even in his haste—that the thing had been but an optical delusion. But, as the street was long, and not a creature was in sight, since she must have found refuge somewhere, somehow, and it was certain she could not have gone very far, it was conceivable that he had been right, and it was her skirt which he had seen. Anyhow it was the only clue to her disappearance which he had. Dashing across the road he made for the house in question; presently to find that he was not altogether clear which it was. It might have been one of three or four. He paused, to stare from one to the other with a sense of irritated confusion. Was it this one? or that? or the next? From where he had been standing the glimpse—if it was one—had been so transitory that it was impossible to make sure.

Suddenly he perceived what, for an instant, had escaped his attention; the door of one of the houses was open;—still open, though so little that the fact would probably have eluded him altogether had it not been for a pencil of light which gleamed through the interstice from within. No doubt, pulling the door to after her as she had rushed in, in her haste, and possible terror, she had failed to notice that the hasp had not gone quite home. In her anxiety to escape the pursuit of which she had been conscious she had omitted the one thing necessary to make her safe. Gilbert Hayter, placing his hand against the panel of the door, found it yielded to his touch; he found himself standing in the hall of the house into which he believed that the woman had fled.

The point was, what was he next to do? The place seemed all in darkness; with the exception of a light in a room at the other end of the hall; which, no doubt, was the light which had guided him from without. The door of this room was ajar; just wide enough open to make plain the fact that there was a

light within. Mr. Hayter crossed to it; hesitating, for a moment, on the threshold as to whether he should knock to announce his coming. Then, without any warning, thrusting the door wide open, he went inside.

What he had expected to find he did not know, but it was not what he did find;—for one thing he had not expected to find the room unoccupied, and it was. It was an apartment of some size; was possibly used as a study;—certainly it was a man's room. The state of confusion would have been sufficient to suggest that; the universal presence of pipes and cigars made the thing quite sure. Even in that first quick agitated moment Gilbert Hayter was vaguely conscious that, outside a tobacconist's shop, he had never seen so many pipes and cigars together in one place before;—there must have been hundreds of pipes, dozens of boxes of cigars, of all sorts, and shapes, and sizes. But what struck him most was a table which stood about the middle of the room; a large, old-fashioned writing-table of black oak. On it stood an electric reading-lamp, alight; the one light the room contained. It gleamed on what looked like a heap of sovereigns; no common heap, such as one sometimes sees on a bank counter, but a huge heap; more than large enough to fill a peck measure. They looked like sovereigns, yet—there were so many of them—it seemed incredible that they could be real ones. There were certainly very many thousands; Hayter had not the vaguest notion how many; a colossal number. The sight of them so filled him with amazement; so riveted his attention; that, for the moment, he was oblivious of all else,—of what had brought him there.

He moved nearer to the table, impelled by an irresistible desire to ascertain if the yellow discs were counterfeits. He picked up one; it was a real sovereign, if he was a judge, and he ought to be. Another, that also was real; three or four more, they were real; a fist full, he could detect no spurious imitations; he would have been glad enough to give nineteen

shillings for every one of them. He plunged his hand into the glittering mass; there were myriads of them. How they gleamed as they closed above his flesh.

The thing was most amazing; beyond belief. To what eccentric millionaire could they belong? Who had left them loose, unguarded, in a heap upon that table? It was possible that even the owner was not quite certain how many there were there. Hayter—anyone!—might take away a handful and no one be the wiser. What difference would one handful make to that great heap? None whatever! What curious creature had left such a temptation—carelessly, as if it were a thing of no account—in the first comer's way?

Some such reflections were passing through Mr. Hayter's mind when someone spoke to him.

"Well, sir! excuse my asking you, but what might you happen to be doing here? and who the devil are you anyhow?"

He looked round, still with his hand plunged into the centre of the golden heap, and saw, standing in the doorway, hatless, the man who had passed him with his overcoat on his arm; whom he had seen the woman strike on the back of his head; whom he had left lying in the roadway.

CHAPTER III

IN HIS CHAIR

BEYOND doubt this was the man in pursuit of whose assailant Gilbert Hayter had entered the house; was where he was. Although he had had a clear sight of him only for a moment or two, the recognition was complete. Before replying he observed him with inquiring eyes, in order that he might learn what manner of man this was with whom he was about to deal. Tall; slightly built; big nosed; large eyes, slightly protruding; scanty black hair, sprinkled with grey; an iron-grey moustache, not sufficiently large to conceal a weak mouth, with flabby, pendulous lips. Not a good-looking man, yet a man who was probably someone; there was about him that indefinable air of the person who is used to command. His appearance was not improved by the traces of the roadway which he bore on his face and on his clothing. He had fallen face forward; signs of which fact were plain to see.

Gilbert Hayter was so long before he answered that the other spoke again. Although his language was sufficiently colloquial his tone was that of a gentleman.

"Upon my word, sir, you're a cool one. You stare at me as if I were the intruder. May I ask, for the second time, what you're doing here?"

"*I* came in search of the woman who knocked you down into the road."

The stranger raised his eyebrows, in a fashion which lent to

his countenance an expression of peculiar vacancy; he lurched a step forward into the room. Hayter saw that he was not yet sober.

"And how do you know that a woman knocked me down into the road?"

"I was behind you at the time; I saw her do it."

"And what business was it of yours if she did?"

Hayter smiled. The speaker's condition seemed to explain the futility of his words.

"I was afraid that she had injured you more seriously than she appears to have done. So, when she made off I ran after her;—she came into this house."

"Into this house?—this house?—It's a lie!"

Hayter smiled again; the speaker's manner was so obviously that of one who had drunk too much.

"When I reached the corner I saw her disappearing into the doorway of this house. I found the door was open; apparently, in her haste, she had omitted to close it. So I came in—after her."

"That's a very pretty story,—very pretty. Unfortunately it's a lie, because I happen to have the only key which will open the door of this house in my pocket."

"Then, in that case, how did I come in?"

"That's what I want to know,—that's what I'm asking you. You're a robber, I expect,—something of that sort. What are you doing with my property,—my money? What do you mean by breaking open my safe, and taking out my money?"

Glancing round, Mr. Hayter perceived a large safe in a corner of the room, the door of which was open. In an indiscriminate pile on the floor were a number of leather boxes.

"I found this money when I came in, exactly as it is. I wondered who could have left so large a sum lying loose, at the mercy of the first comer."

"That's a pretty story,—very pretty story." Moving-

forward, the stranger, stumbling into a chair behind the writing-table, putting up his hand to remove his hat, suddenly discovered that his head was bare. "Lost my hat;—that's what I've done, lost my hat.—Damn that woman!—Saw her strike me, did you? —saw her knock me down?—devil of a woman!—Sit down; I want to talk to you.—You know who I am?"

"I have not that pleasure."

"I'm Lord Sabin, that's who I am; and though I've heaps of money, and that sort of thing—there's enough money on the table at this moment to pay the national debt—I'm the most unfortunate man on earth—the most unfortunate—absolutely. There isn't a creature in this house, except me, and you."

"How is that?"

"I don't know what business it is of yours, but I don't mind telling you. I sent 'em all away this afternoon, with a month's wages,—every servant in the place, every dam servant; I'd had enough of 'em, cook, housemaids, butler, valet, every dam one. Consequence is I'm the most unfortunate man on earth—absolutely. Whiskey's on side there; help yourself, help me." Hayter did as the other suggested. His lordship raised his tumbler in a tremulous hand. "Your health, sir, though you're a damned thief for all I know. Most unfortunate man on earth to have to drink with dam thief.—What's this?"

He was holding out his hand in front of him.

"It looks like blood."

"Looks like blood?—it is blood;—my blood;—that's what it is. That woman split my head;—that's what she did. I'm bleeding now; look at that." He put his hand up to the back of his head. When he held it out again it was all wet and drabbled. "Don't stand there, and let me bleed to death like a pig."

"If you will let me look at it I will see what I can do; I have seen a good many broken heads in my time."

"I don't want you to see mine. I want you to go upstairs

to my dressing-room, first floor, room at the back. On the dressing-table you'll see my medicine chest. Bring it down; I'll put a plaster on myself,—I know what to do with my own head."

When Mr. Hayter hesitated his lordship raised his voice several tones.

"Do you hear what I tell you?—go and fetch my medicine chest!—do you want to see me bleed to death?—on dressing-table in my room."

Realising that argument would be wasted, Gilbert Hayter began to do the other's bidding. As he passed from the room into the hall he caught a sound which startled him,—the rustling of a woman's skirt. While he listened his lordship's voice called to him from within the room.

"Come back!—put whiskey on the table!—don't you think I want to help myself?" Once more Hayter did as he was requested. His lordship poured a liberal allowance of the spirit out into his tumbler. "Now you can fetch the medicine chest;—and don't let me bleed to death before you come."

Again Mr. Hayter started on his quest. He had said nothing of the sound which he had heard. Out in the hall he stood and listened. This time all was still. That before he had heard something—someone—go swishing up the stairs he was convinced.

"She was listening outside the door, and made a bolt when she knew that I was coming,—just in time. I should have liked to have caught her. It would have been amusing to have confronted her with my fuddled friend, who orders me about as if I were his lackey. I wonder who she is; and what she is to him. I also wonder where, just now, she's hiding. I don't want to stumble on her unawares. She might—scratch." He had gained the first floor; to discover that his lordship's instructions had been extremely elementary. "'First floor, room at the back,' he said. As there appear to be at least four doors at what I imagine may be described as the back,—to say

nothing of what may be along that passage,—all of which, I presume, open into the rooms, it would have been as well if he had informed me which particular room at the back he was referring to. Here goes to discover by way of experiment." He turned the handle of one of the doors. "Hollo!—this seems to be some sort of—by Jove, it's dark! Where's that wretched electric light? So far as can be seen in this gloom it seems to be some sort of a reception room; it certainly is no dressing-room. Let's try this door;—this darkness is absurd;—where is that light?" He fumbled against the wall with his hand. Coming on what he sought, all at once the room was brightly lighted. "That's better; now we can see where we are, and what we're doing. This, I take it, is my lord's bedroom—he says he's a lord—and, possibly, that door leads into his dressing-room. Not a bad sleeping apartment for a single gentleman. Evidently the servants put everything in apple-pie order before they did go,—if they have gone. Perhaps he saw to that; though he doesn't strike me as being the sort of individual to see to anything." He passed through the door which was on the opposite side of the room, switching on the light as he entered. "The dressing-room, as I guessed; a very well equipped dressing-room too,—my lord should be very comfortable here. That door, I take it, should lead into the bathroom. All that the physical man could desire just ready to his hand. After what I've been used to this sort of thing makes one—consider." He looked about him. "Which, among these various belongings, happens to be what he called his medicine chest? He said that it was on his dressing-table; but, so far as I am able to judge, of dressing-tables there are more than one. Which is that one to which he particularly alluded?" He opened several cases—none of them were locked—till he came to one which contained a number of small bottles in compartments above, and drawers below. "This looks like the article in question. It is; here's plaster—

apparently all sorts of plasters—enough for many broken heads. Fancy keeping a medicine chest on this scale in one's dressing-room! I'll bear it to my lord downstairs." He went off with the case beneath his arm; purposely leaving the light on both in the bedroom and the dressing-room. He said, laughingly, as he re-entered the room which he had lately quitted, "Here's your chest for you, with plaster for your head. I'm afraid I've been a trifle long, but, considering my ignorance of the country, your instructions were a trifle vague——" He paused; to stare.

"What—what's happened?"

Seemingly a good deal had happened since his going and returning. The man he had left behind was sitting bolt upright in his chair. His head was lying right over the back of it, the face turned up to the ceiling; and that for a very good reason,—he had been nearly decapitated. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. Where the throat should have been a ghastly gulf stared Gilbert Hayter in the face. The man's white shirt front was soaked and dyed with his blood.

CHAPTER IV

GONE

GILBERT HAYTER moved quickly towards the dreadful figure in the chair; his first impulse being to learn if there was still some remnant of life left in him. Not a trace. Closer inspection made it clear that it was impossible there could be. No human being could live a second lacerated as he was; death must have been instantaneous. Was it a case of suicide? But the briefest reflection was needed to show that it could not be. No man could have inflicted such a wound upon himself; he must have been dead before the weapon which had been used had finished its work. Probably he had been taken by surprise; attacked unawares, from behind; the deed done before he had a chance even to struggle. The fingers of his outstretched left hand still clutched the edge of the table, as if he had gripped it in his death agony; the fingers of his right hand, which hung down beside his chair, were closed tightly about an empty tumbler. Obviously—even if the thing were possible—he had no hand in his own undoing. Gilbert Hayter glanced at the table. To all seeming the great heap of sovereigns remained exactly as it had been; certainly no appreciable part of it had been disturbed. If robbery had been the object—and what else could have been?—the murderer had had no time to snatch his gains.

Hayter reflected. There certainly had not been much more than five minutes between his going and returning; if there

had been as much as five minutes. He had not heard a sound; except of the swishing as of a woman's skirts as he had left the room. But that had been going up the stairs, not down. He had heard nothing pass the bedroom door, nothing descend the stairs, as he had been looking for the chest. Yet she had descended without his hearing her; she must have done. He did not doubt that the woman who had felled the stranger in the street; whom he had followed into the house; had done this thing. Better acquainted with the ins and outs of the establishment than he was, she had given him the slip, and taken advantage of his back being turned to do what from the first she had meant to do. Evidently she was a person of much determination; not to be turned aside from a purpose when it had once been formed. Had she effected her escape? or was she still in the house? Perhaps she was still in that very room; he had heard no one go either in or out.

As he turned to look for a possible hiding-place he trod upon something which was on the floor; some solid object. He glanced down to see what it was. On the carpet, by his foot, was a ring. He picked it up; it was a woman's ring,—a half-hoop of brilliants. Here was proof positive; the owner of that ring had been in the room since he had left it, and—had done what had been done. So close was he upon her that she had not even had time to retrieve her ring;—if that was the case then, certainly, she might be in it still.

As he stood eyeing the ring again there was that sound which he had heard already, the swishing of a woman's skirts; it came from just outside the door. In an instant he was in the hall. No one was in sight, but the swishing went up the stairs; so close, so audible, was the sound, that the wearer of the skirts could hardly be farther from him than the landing above. He went after her at headlong speed.

"Stop!—stop, you devil!" he cried. It seemed that she was playing tricks with him; it really was too much. He

shouted after her. "You wait!—I'll get you in a moment!" But she did not wait; nor did he get her.

On the first floor the bedroom door was still open, as he had left it. The light streamed out on to the landing. But there was nothing and no one to be seen; the swishing was above. On the next staircase there was no light; he was mounting into Egyptian darkness. It occurred to him, as he raced up, that if a trap had been set—or was being set—for him, he was rushing into it, blindfold, like a fool. But he did not hesitate on that account. His blood was heated. He would have stopped at nothing to lay his hand upon the woman inside those skirts; even for a chance to see her face, so that, when the time came, he might witness against her.

Suddenly he was brought up short against what seemed to be a wall; so sharply that, for the moment, he was confused by the unexpected shock. Then, since he apparently could go no farther, he stood to listen. There was not a glimmer of light. The rustling of the skirts had ceased. Then she should be somewhere close to him. But he could feel nothing; and there was not a sound.

Taking a box of matches out of his pocket he struck one, expecting to discover her by its light. Indeed, he instinctively shielded it with his hand, to prevent her blowing it out. He need not have done so; there was no one to be seen.

It seemed that he was at the top of the house; on the uppermost floor. About him were five closed doors. Through which of them had the woman in the rustling skirts effected her retreat? It was true that he had heard no door either opened or shut. Still, she must have gone through one of them;—or where had she gone? He decided that he would try each of those doors, and learn—if he could—what was beyond.

The match had almost burnt out. Before he tried the first door he struck another; it would be impossible to investigate to any purpose in the darkness. He would not have been sur-

prised to find that the door was locked; a little to his surprise it yielded to the first touch. He threw it wide open, lest anyone should be waiting behind it ready to rush out. But no one came;—he glanced through the open doorway with his flickering match;—apparently because there was no one there. Close to his hand, just inside the door, was the switch for the electric light. He switched it on. The room was brightly illuminated. It was a bedroom, plainly, yet comfortably, furnished; probably intended to be used by one of the servants. It was empty; he stepped inside to make certain; even glancing beneath the bed; throwing open the wardrobe. Then the woman in the rustling skirts had passed through one of the other four doors.

If so she had concealed herself in some hiding-place which was beyond his finding out. He opened all four, experiencing no difficulty in doing so; they were there for anyone to open. In each case he switched on the electric light,—to discover an empty servant's bedroom. It appeared that what the man downstairs had said was true; that he was alone in that great house; that he had got rid of his domestic staff. Each of the rooms was neat and clean; in each of them the bed was made; but each of them was without an occupant; nor was anything to show that recently there had been any. As for concealed hiding-places; if he could trust his eyes—and he believed he could—there was nothing of the sort.

The result was, he was not only puzzled; he was exasperated. He had a constitutional disrelish for mystification. When anything seemed mysterious he suspected a trick; he objected, strongly, to being made the victim of a trickster. Either he had heard a woman's skirts rushing up the stairs, or he had not. He had heard them, he was convinced of that; she was in front of him all the time; he had heard her—distinctly—rushing up the very last flight. Then, in that case, what had become of her? That was where the mystification, the trick,

came in; she had duped him somehow. He wandered in and out of those five rooms; and the more he wandered the more the puzzle grew.

It occurred to him, at last, not only that he was beaten—"clean done" as he phrased it to himself—but, also, that he was wasting valuable time; time which ought to be spent in sounding the alarm; in letting the world know that murder had been done. He had left the dead man with all that heap of money lying loose on the table in front of him. For all that he could tell someone was walking off with it while he was playing the fool up there. When that reflection did come to him, leaving all the bedroom doors wide open, with the electric light flaming in each, he retraced his footsteps, and went down the several flights of stairs almost as rapidly as he had come up.

Outside the study he paused for an instant to look about him, and to listen. But there was nothing to be heard; nothing to be seen. He entered the room; and, as he did so, started, and stood still upon the threshold, to stare. The dead man was gone;—the seat which he had occupied was empty. Gilbert Hayter looked round him bewildered. Probably the corpse had fallen out of the chair, and lay upon the ground. No; there was nothing on the floor. If the corpse had fallen it had vanished in the falling. There was not a trace of it in any part of the room; so far as he could see not a hint that it ever had been there. In the first flush of his surprise the thing seemed incredible; inconceivable. As he considered he began to understand that to the seeming mystery there was quite possibly a simple explanation. He had been tricked even more completely than he had suspected. The woman whose rustling skirts he had followed up the stairs, after all, played but a subsidiary part in the drama which had been enacted. She had served as a lure to draw him away from the scene while the principal performer—or performers—occupied the stage. Prettily he had been fooled. When he had mounted

to the first floor the man had been killed; while, on the second occasion, he had rushed at headlong speed to the top of the house, not only had the corpse been carried off, but all traces of the crime had been removed. More; suddenly remembering what he had left upon the table, he glanced at it;—the heap of sovereigns had vanished; there was not a coin left on it. Obviously, they had taken full advantage of the opportunities he had given them. They must have worked with singular rapidity. At the most, he could have been absent but a very few minutes. It must have taken a minute or two to bear away the dead man's body; to have destroyed all signs that it ever had been there. To have packed and carried away those multitudinous coins could not have been the affair of a second or two. And it had all been done in such silence. In the stillness of the night, in that empty house, one would have thought that one would have caught the faintest sound. Yet not the slightest suggestion of any movement had reached his ear. Yet they must have made some noise.

Where had these clever people vanished? where borne their victim and their booty? Was it not possible that they were still somewhere in that house? That, for instance, there were more ways out of the room in which he was than one? peculiarities about its furniture, its construction, to which he was strange? He decided that he would at least overhaul that particular apartment; learn what was behind those curtains;—and was just starting to put this decision into practice when—a sound was audible. Turning, he saw that a woman was standing at the door.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL

THE door was only slightly open. Only her face was visible, peeping in. If this was the face of the woman the rustle of whose skirts had led him like a will-o'-the-wisp, it was not at all the kind of one he had expected it would have been. Surely this was not the countenance of the woman who had struck down the man in the street. He had not seen her features; but, even in that first moment, he doubted it. This was a girl; a white-cheeked child; with frightened eyes, trembling lips; a picture of terror. In silence she stared at him, and he at her; as if each was surprised into speechlessness by what the other saw. Then—

"Who are you?" he asked.

He had meant that his tone should be hard, stern; to give her to understand, by the mere inflection of his voice, that he knew what kind of character she was. But he failed; something in his manner seemed to reassure her, though never so slightly.

"I—I beg your pardon, but I—I thought I saw somebody I knew."

Her words seemed to come from her with difficulty; as though it were painful to her to have to speak at all.

"What do you mean by you thought you saw somebody you knew? Who are you? where do you come from?"

"From the street."

"From the street?"

"I thought I saw my father's wife standing at the door."

"Your father's wife!—what do you mean?"

"My—my stepmother. So, as the door was open, I came in.—Oh, sir, is she here?"

"How can I tell?—since I have no idea to whom it is you are alluding. You will have to explain.—What is the matter?"

Something was the matter. She put up her hand, as if to seek the support of the door; as she touched it it gave way. Her legs seemed to double up beneath her; she dropped in a heap on to the floor. She had not fainted; but looked at him as he bent down, speaking in a whisper, which had in it a quality which moved him strangely.

"I—I'm starving. I haven't had anything to eat for more than three days."

He found it difficult to credit what she said; although her voice, her face, her manner, were eloquent.

"Do you mean it?"

She nodded; as if speech was beyond her. Then, shutting her eyes, she was still. Putting his arms about her, lifting her up, he was amazed to find how light she was, as if there was nothing of her. Depositing her in an easy-chair she sank back in it as if invertebrate; but, for a moment, she opened her eyes; and, perhaps, she smiled. The whiskey was on the table, where he had left it, and, though the decanter was all but empty, there remained a few drops at the bottom. Pouring them out into the glass he himself had used, he held it to her lips. Putting both her hands about it she sipped at the contents; when she found what they were she broke into a fit of coughing. Had he not retained his hold of it the tumbler would have fallen.

"I—I can't drink that. Eat;—something to eat."

He was not without a grim humour of his own; the situation struck him as being, in its way, comical. He had sought adventures, and had found them; though they were of a kind for which he had no taste, and were crowding on him in a

fashion which promised inconvenience. What on earth was he to do with this girl? who had dropped on him, it seemed out of nowhere; at the most inconvenient moment she could possibly have chosen;—when his hands were already over-full with other things. He had seen enough of the effects of hunger to appreciate the fact that she had probably reached that point of exhaustion at which life must either be reinforced or else give way to death. Plainly, she was little else than skin and bone; nature, unaided, could do no more. Yet how was he to find her food? at that hour? in a house of which he knew nothing, except that in it murder had been done; and worse? He looked round, to see if there was anything which suggested food. There was nothing; there were bottles here and there; cigars everywhere; no cupboard, nor sideboard, which might contain a private store. He looked at her again. The drop or two of spirit which she had swallowed, had, to some extent, revived her. Her eyes were fixed on him with something in their expression which struck, in him, a chord of memory. It flashed on him that he had seen her before; and where; and when. She was the girl who had been on the Embankment that afternoon, leaning over the wall, looking down at the water; who had fled when he approached; and who the thirsty loafer had declared would have thrown herself into the river if he had not moved towards her in the nick of time. So odd seemed the coincidence that he should meet her again, under such circumstances, in that place, that it bewildered him more than all that had gone before. Whether she recognised him he could not tell;—it was the piteousness of the appeal in her eyes, and on her face, which brought him back to a realisation of her position. While he stared, she starved.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "but—do you know this house?"

She did reply; but in accents which could scarcely have been fainter.

"How should I?—Isn't it yours?"

"Mine?—I know nothing of it. Like you, I only came in because the door was open." As if his words were to her the symbols of despair her eyelids dropped again. Something in her attitude moved him to fresh concern. "If you'll pull yourself together a moment, and try another drop of that whiskey, just to keep you going, I'll set out on a voyage of discovery. There is a larder somewhere, I presume, and there should be something in it. I'll find that larder, and I'll bring you samples of whatever it contains; only—I must insist upon your trying another taste of whiskey; it will keep you going till I return."

She spoke; but she did not open her eyes.

"No whiskey; I can't—drink it. I'll be—all right—till you come back."

He observed her, to ascertain if he should insist on her swallowing what remained in the tumbler which he was holding. Something in her face caused him to set it down, and hurry from the room without another word.

Turning to the right, he at once found himself in darkness. Striking a match, holding it above his head, he perceived that against the wall in front of him was a switchboard, on which a number of switches were arranged in rows, row after row. Moving to it he began to switch them on, indiscriminately. Each one he touched brought a visible response. Lights began to gleam all over the house; up the stairs; in the hall behind him; overhead; in front. By their aid he began to understand the plan of the house; where he was; in what direction he would have to go in search of what he needed. Evidently the servants' quarters were in the basement, below. The staircase, which he saw before him, on the left, doubtless descended to the kitchens; it was there he would find the pantry. One of those switches had given light to the lower regions; the stairway was brightly illuminated.

He commenced to hasten down it. As he reached the foot the brightness passed; all the lights went out; he found himself in darkness which could be almost felt. Startled; he stood still. What had happened? or was about to happen? Who had touched those switches, and plunged him into blackness? He listened; more affected by the sudden passage from the light to the dark than—even to himself—he would have cared to admit. What was that? Plainly someone was moving in the hall from which he had just descended; moving hurriedly;—someone in skirts which rustled. Without a moment's hesitation, swinging round, he made what haste he could up the staircase he had just come down. As he gained the top, and turned into the hall, he saw a figure going through the open front door out into the street; the figure of a woman. He rushed after it. The moment he was through the door it was shut behind him. He found himself standing on the step with the woman he had followed clinging to the railings, on his left.

It was the girl he had left in the arm-chair; for whose sake he had set out in search of the larder. When he realised that it was she, and that there was no one else in sight, he was moved to angry suspicion.

"So it's you!—and you've joined with them to trick me! I might have guessed it from the first." He declined to allow himself to be moved by the pathos of her attitude. "What devil's game is this you're up to? And what kind of associates are those of yours inside who think they've bested me? Why don't you speak? Do you think I'm to be taken in any longer by your clever acting? You give me credit for too much simplicity. And don't imagine that because—with your assistance—your friends have got me outside that door that therefore they are rid of me. You—and they—will find I'm not that kind of man."

The girl turned, and looked at him, still clinging to the railings; and again, even in the uncertain light, he saw some-

thing on her face which moved him to curious emotion. And she said, in tones which—though they were both faint and tremulous—were perfectly clear—

"My father's wife came into the room and—I went after her; but—she was gone."

What she meant he did not know. She swayed; seemed to lose her hold of the railings; had he not caught her she would have fallen. She lay limp in his arms. Beyond a doubt she was unconscious; it was equally sure that no amount of what he had called "acting" could have brought that look upon her face. He admitted that, despite his irritation.

"Whether she's a partner in the game or not, she's as near done as is good for her. Now what the devil am I to do? I seem to be getting it all ways." At that moment, as he deemed it, fortunately for him, a hansom came along the street. He hailed the driver. "Here, cabman!—here's a young woman who is starving; where's the nearest place I can get something for her to eat?"

"There's a coffee-stall not a quarter of a mile away, you can get something there."

"Take us to it, as quickly as you can."

Carrying the girl in his arms to the cab, he placed her in it. The driver asked a question; and made a statement.

"Hasn't she been having a drop too much already? They will do it, you know."

"I know when a woman's drunk. She has fainted from exhaustion. Get us to that coffee-stall as quickly as you can."

As Gilbert Hayter took his place in the cab beside the unconscious girl he realised, grimly, that he was having adventures; and to spare.

CHAPTER VI

NO. 616

WHEN they reached the stall Gilbert Hayter, jumping out of the cab, demanded from the man in charge a cup of coffee.

"What have you to eat?" he asked.

"Bread-and-butter, cake, buns, cold sausages, hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches."

"Cut up a couple of eggs and spread them on some bread-and-butter." He took the coffee to the cab. "Here!—try to rouse yourself!—drink this!"

He advanced the coffee almost to the girl's lips. Possibly the smell of it revived her. She opened her eyes. Seeing what it was she took the cup in her hands, and drank. Although it had seemed to Hayter to be almost boiling hot, she gulped it down in great mouthfuls. He brought her some bread-and-butter on which hard-boiled eggs had been placed in thin slices.

"Thank—you;—you are very good;—this coffee is beautiful." She began to eat;—three thick slices. When she had eaten them he asked if she would have some more. She shook her head. "No, thank you;—I've feasted;—but—I think I'll have some more coffee. It is so good." He brought her another cup; which she drank. Then, as she handed back to him the empty cup, she smiled. He thought that already she looked a new creature. "That's the best meal I ever had;—how shall I thank you?"

"By saying no more about it. Now will you permit me to see you safely home;—what address shall I give the driver?"

"Address?—home?—I—I have no home." She looked about her with a startled air; as if only just realising where it was that she was sitting. "This is a cab;—I must get out, please."

She rose; he prevented her. Aware that the loafers about the stall were observing the scene, and listening with all their ears; and that the driver overhead was all attention, he was careful that his words should be audible to her alone.

"Do you really mean that you have no home?"

"No;—none."

"But where have you been living? You must have been living somewhere."

"Living?—In the streets."

"But—at night—where have you slept?"

"Nowhere;—anywhere;—last night I tried to sleep under an arch, near the river."

For some reason her words made him shiver. Not that he thought anything of sleeping out in the open; his African experiences had made him familiar with the sky as a roof. But that young girl!—in the great city!—under an arch near the river! He had a sensation of actual physical pain. He had resolved in a moment.

"Then I'll tell you what;—they shall give you a room at my hotel; a good night's rest will do you good,—though it's but little of the night that's left;—and in the morning we will talk things over."

She seemed to shrink farther away from him.

"But—I can't do that. Let me out;—please let me get out."

"I shall do nothing of the kind; I assure you that you're not going to spend the remainder of this night under an arch;—you are going to have a room at my hotel."

"But—I've no money!—to pay for it!"

"Leave that part of the business to me; this is an occasion on which you will have to do as you're told." As he returned into the cab he said to the driver, "Metropolitan Hotel." They drove off.

During the remainder of the drive not a word was exchanged. He had a feeling that the girl, who kept herself as far from him as possible in the opposite corner, was trembling with fright; which her physical weakness accentuated. So weak was she that she was even unable to show that she was afraid. The situation could hardly be improved by speech; if only because he was quite unable to find words which seemed to fit it. He realised that he was playing the part of Quixote; on lines which quite possibly were eminently foolish. He had not intended, on his first night at home, to associate himself with a girl who, in the afternoon, had been contemplating suicide, and, at night, had been on the verge of starvation, for whom a hospital would have been the proper place. For all he knew, she might be the worst of characters. His experience of women, especially in England, was slightest; a pretty fool she might, even at that moment, be proposing to make of him. He had heard of the kind of females a returned "colonial" was only too likely to run against in London. Her explanation of her sudden appearance in the room in which that hideous tragedy had been enacted was—to put it gently—"thin."

But, the truth was, that the whole business would not bear thinking of by a level-headed man of the world. There the girl was. He had said that she should have a room in his hotel; and she should have a room. In the morning he would give her a few shillings, and say good-day to her, and there, so far as she was concerned, would be an end of it. There had been no harm done; and, certainly, she had been hungry. What was likely to cause him more than enough bother was the part he had played as an unintentional witness. He wished to goodness that he had left the man lying in the road, and made no effort

to prevent the woman who had assailed him getting off scot free.

The cab drew up at the hotel. For the first time the girl spoke;—as Gilbert Hayter held out his hand to assist her to descend.

"Please let me go;—I would much rather you would let me go;—I have no money;—I shall never be able to pay you;—I owe you so much already."

Her voice faltered, as if tears were in her eyes. In return he snubbed her; his manner could hardly have been more brusque.

"I have already told you that for to-night you shall have a room in my hotel. This is my hotel. If you don't mind I would rather not stand here arguing. Up those steps, please." She ascended the steps as meekly, and as mutely, as some timid child. When the porter responded to his ringing, he led the way into the great hall. "I am Mr. Hayter. I have a room in the hotel—No. 221. I want a second bedroom for this lady."

The porter observed his companion, askance. Possibly he was not prepossessed by her appearance; nor by the hour which she had chosen for her arrival. He was looking up and down a list which lay on the counter in the office.

"You want another bedroom, do you, sir? I'm afraid there isn't one to-night; we're very full."

"Then, in that case, the lady can have my bedroom, and I will get another one elsewhere."

The girl broke out, pleadingly.

"No!—no!—don't do that!—let me go!—I shall be all right!—indeed I shall!"

Hayter addressed her, curtly.

"You will not go; you will stay here." He said to the man in the office, "If you are quite sure that you have not a vacant room let the lady be taken up to No. 221, at once."

"Well, sir, it seems that there is one room empty,—No. 616; it's only a small one, and it's right at the top of the building. I don't know if that will do."

"That will do, for to-night. Let the lady be taken up to No. 616."

The official in the office spoke to another who stood in front of the open lift.

"Take the lady up to No. 616."

Mr. Hayter turned to her.

"Good-night; I hope that you will sleep well, and that in the morning you will feel rested. I will let you know when it is time for you to get up;—don't get up until I send to you."

It was with difficulty that she could command her voice sufficiently to enable her to stammer a few words in reply; her eyes were filled with tears.

"Good-night; you—you are very good."

She did not hold out her hand; nor did he offer his. So they parted. When the lift had borne her out of sight the man in the office asked—

"Has the lady any luggage?"

"None."

"What is the lady's name?"

"Book the room to me; in my name,—to Gilbert Hayter.—Which is the nearest police-station?"

The man looked up startled.

"The nearest police-station?—Well, we're in the Bow Street district, but I should say that Vine Street was actually the nearest station;—there's not much in it, but I should say that Vine Street was the nearest."

"Thank you. I am going out again; it may possibly be some time before I return. Let the lady in No. 616 have anything she wants;—let everything be done to make her comfortable;—I will see that it is made right." He handed the official two half-crowns.

"Thank you, sir;—don't you worry, sir;—I'll take care that the lady has everything she wants;—that'll be right." He followed Mr. Hayter to the great glass doors; saying as he went, "Yes, I should think that Vine Street was perhaps a bit the nearest; hope you haven't been having any bother, sir?"

Mr. Hayter did not directly reply; on the doorstep he said—

"You understand, the lady is to have everything she wants."

When the man returned to the office his colleague, who had taken the girl up in the lift, had reappeared. The other said to him—

"Queer start; that chap's gone off to Vine Street police-station, at this hour of the morning;—I heard him tell the cabman to drive him there. I rather fancy there's something funny about him. What about No. 616?"

"She's a bit of all-right, she is; regular trollop, I should say. Looks as if she hadn't washed for months; hasn't five shillings' worth of clothes on her. I wonder you ever let her have a room."

"How was I to help it? He'd have given her his if I hadn't. He's paying."

"What's her name?"

"No name;—the room's to be booked in his name;—she's a mystery."

"And no luggage?"

"And no luggage; let's hope he's got enough for the two. You might go up and have a look."

"I did have a look as I came down;—there's a goodish lot. He's come from Durban;—everything's labelled."

"I see from the register that his last address was South Africa."

"What's she to him?"

"What is she? You never can tell. I'll tell you one thing, it's not safe to jump to conclusions. If he's just back from Africa she may be some long-lost relative; or the relative of

some old friend of his, who's gone a bit wrong,—anything. One thing I should say they weren't, and that is—sweethearts. Very short and sharp he spoke to her, it seemed to me;—quite huffily."

"There's wasn't much tenderness about his manner, that's certain. Nor yet about hers."

"Nor yet about hers. More than half afraid of him, she seemed to me to be. And did you notice that they didn't shake hands, or anything of that sort?"

"Yes;—and she wasn't feeling cheerful either. She was crying all the way up in the lift; and when I shut the door of her room I could hear that she was crying more than ever on the other side."

"Ah!—perhaps she's got something to cry for!—though there's plenty of women who'll cry for nothing.—You see some queer things in a place like this; and some queer people.—But what I should like to know is,—what's taken him to Vine Street police-station at this hour of the morning?"

CHAPTER VII

LORD SABIN

AT Vine Street, after some parley, Gilbert Hayter was shown into a room, at a table in which a police officer was seated in front of a large open ledger, in which he made occasional entries; while another, apparently his superior, asked occasional questions. To these two Mr. Hayter told his story. And, as he told it, he perceived, with an uncomfortable sense of shock, what a remarkable story it really was; so remarkable that he did not find it easy to tell it with sufficient clearness to lend it that air of plausibility of which he was conscious that it stood in need. The officers listened with complete imperturbability; as if he were reeling off the merest trivialities. But, when he had finished, one of them asked a few questions which did not tend to put him in better humour with himself.

"And how long ago, Mr. Hayter, is it since these things happened?"

"Perhaps half an hour; maybe a little more, or a little less."

"And you see a man murdered—or you practically see him murdered, and afterwards robbed of what sounds like an astoundingly large sum of money; and yet you allow half an hour, a little more or a little less, to elapse, before you take any steps whatever to acquaint the police."

Mr. Hayter explained the cause of the delay, a little lamely; so lamely, indeed, that the officer smiled.

"You appear to have had a night of many adventures, Mr. Hayter.—What is the address of the house in which these things took place?"

"That's just it, I cannot tell you. I did not notice the number, nor the name of the street; and in that locality I am a complete stranger. I might be able to guide you to it again, but I doubt it. All I know is the man who was murdered told me that his name was Sabin,—Lord Sabin."

"Lord Sabin?" The two officers exchanged glances. "You are sure that he said Lord Sabin?"

"Quite sure."

"Describe him." Mr. Hayter did as he was bid. "That certainly sounds like Lord Sabin. His lordship is a well-known personage in London, Mr. Hayter." Going to the door the officer spoke to someone without. "Let me have two hansoms, and a couple of men to follow me in one of them." He whispered something to the officer at the table. Then, going into an adjoining room, presently returned with his cap on. "Now, Mr. Hayter, if you please." He started off with Mr. Hayter in one hansom; two policemen following in another. "I may tell you that my name is Innes,—Inspector Innes. If this unfortunate man you saw with his throat cut was Lord Sabin it is a very serious matter."

"I can only tell you that he said he was Lord Sabin."

"And from your description I think it possible he was. His lordship's personality is very familiar to us, for various reasons." Now and then the Inspector stopped the cab to enable him to say something in an undertone to policemen whom they passed. Shortly the vehicle came to a final stop. "Be so good, Mr. Hayter, as to point out the house to which you have referred."

Alighting, Gilbert Hayter looked about him.

"I believe this is the street; and—yes—this is the house."

"How do you know?"

"By the knocker. I did not notice the number; but, as I entered, the curious shape of the bright, brass knocker caught my eyes."

"This house is Lord Sabin's. It begins to look as if there were something in your story, Mr. Hayter." The Inspector knocked and rang, twice; without any visible result. "If, the third time, there is no answer, we shall have to make our own way in."

But there was. Scarcely had the Inspector's fingers quitted the knocker than a sound was audible on the other side of the door; of unbolting, and unbarring.

"That sounds as if the house was not so empty as you supposed, Mr. Hayter; unless someone has come in since you left."

Gilbert Hayter was listening to the noise which was being made on the other side of the door with a feeling of surprise; by him it was unlooked-for. He had expected that the police would have had to force an entrance; indeed he had hinted as much to the Inspector. Presently, the door being opened a foot or so, a figure in a dressing-gown looked out into the street.

"What's the meaning of this clatter at this hour of the morning? Who the deuce are you?" Apparently it was because he realised that he was being confronted by a police officer that he held the door wider open. "Is it a constable? Don't tell me that you've been kicking up this shindy because there's a window left unfastened. I'd rather have a burglar in every room in the house than be dragged out of my bed at this hour of the morning. Dashed officious nonsense!"

It was a second or two before the Inspector answered; he was eying the speaker with an intentness which suggested that he was making quite sure who it was that he was looking at. When he did reply it seemed to Hayter that in his tone there was more than a touch of dryness.

"I have to apologise to your lordship for disturbing you,

but the cause is not an unfastened window; it is another and rather more serious matter.—Here is Lord Sabin." This he said to Hayter, with significant emphasis. Mr. Hayter had been staring at the man in the dressing-gown with sensations which he would have found it difficult to diagnose.

"It would seem," he remarked, with what he meant for biting irony, "as if your lordship had been making me the subject of some grim, and elaborate, practical joke."

In his turn the man in the dressing-gown stared at Mr. Hayter.

"What's this? what's he say? is he talking to me? what's he mean?"

"If your lordship will allow me to enter for a minute or two we shall be able more conveniently to explain."

This was the Inspector. The man in the dressing-gown showed himself quite ready to act on his suggestion.

"Come in! come in! I don't know what the explanation's going to be about, but that makes no difference."

He led the way into the room on the right which Gilbert Hayter already knew so well;—which fact Mr. Hayter at once announced.

"This is the room," he said.

"What room?" interposed the man in the dressing-gown.

"And this is the table."

"What table?"

"The one on which there was a great heap of sovereigns."

"Sovereigns?—on this table?—what's he mean?"

"And this is the chair on which you sat."

"Chair on which I sat? Of course it's the chair on which I sat; I've sat upon it thousands of times. Who is this man? and what's he talking about?"

"Yes; but the last time I saw you on that chair your throat was cut; your head was almost severed from your shoulders."

The man in the dressing-gown was gazing at him with a

show of amazement which it was difficult to credit was not genuine.

"Good God Almighty! is the fellow a raving lunatic?—what's he mean?"

"That's an inquiry which I am almost disposed to put to myself;—it's a problem which I shall have to hand you, Inspector Innes, to solve. If I had any doubt on the matter it would be easier; but I haven't. Less than an hour ago I saw this—gentleman, or his living image, sitting in this chair, with his throat cut from ear to ear; he was as dead as mutton. How, under these circumstances, he comes to be standing here now, apparently alive and hearty, is what I must leave you to ascertain."

"Is the fellow a stark, staring madman? What does he mean?"

The man in the dressing-gown, seemingly in a state of considerable excitement, raised his voice almost to a scream. The Inspector was silent; as if for the present he preferred to observe the pair in front of him. Mr. Hayter began to question the man in the dressing-gown.

"You have seen me before, to-night?"

Before answering the other kept his eyes fixed on his questioner's face, as if searching for something on it which might be familiar.

"Not that I'm aware of either to-night or ever."

"You say that seriously?"

"I may have seen you; I've seen thousands of people; but, if so, I'm not aware of it."

"You were knocked down in the street by a woman."

"Knocked down!—in the street!—I was?—Officer, who is this lunatic you have brought here at this hour of the morning?"

"Do you deny that you were knocked down in the street?"

"Officer, do I look as if I had been knocked down, in the street or anywhere else?"

"You were knocked down by a woman who came out of a doorway. She ran away; I ran after her. She entered this house. I followed,—into this room. On the table was a huge pile of sovereigns,—many thousands. As I stared at it you came in. You were not quite sober."

"Upon my word of honour! And I had been to the Duchess' party."

"In the square round the corner."

"Precisely,—as you put it, in the square round the corner. In other words, at Datchet House."

"I guessed you were coming from there. You were in evening dress, and had your overcoat over your arm. But, at the same time, I repeat, when I saw you you were not quite sober. The blow on your head may have had something to do with it."

"What blow?"

"The blow the woman gave you when she knocked you down. You asked me to hand you a decanter of whiskey which stood on the side here. I did. You drank some. Then you said your head was bleeding, and asked me to fetch your medicine chest from your dressing-room. I fetched it. When I returned, you—or someone exactly like you—were propped up in this chair, with your head as nearly as possible severed from your body. Hearing the sound of the rustling of a skirt outside the door, I went to see who was there, and chased a woman up to the top of the house."

"What woman?"

"I never saw her. Although I tried my best to catch her she moved faster than I did. When I came back to this room you were gone."

"Oh, I was gone, was I,—with my head nearly severed from my body?—Officer, may I ask, once more, why you have disturbed me at this hour of the morning?"

"Because this person came to the station and said you had been murdered. He told, in effect, the story you have just heard."

"He did, did he? Then this person is an imaginative person. His story is, so far as I am concerned, the fabric of his fancy. As you can see for yourself, I have not been murdered; nor, so far as I am aware, has anything unusual occurred in this house to-night of any sort or kind. — I think I hear my servant in the hall. Is that you, Crowden?"

A slightly-built, dark-haired man came into the room, who nodded to Inspector Innes;—a fact which the person in the dressing-gown observed.

"Officer, you know my valet?"

The Inspector admitted that he did.

"Mr. Crowden and I have met before."

"Crowden, where did you go when I was at Datchet House?"

"I went nowhere, my lord. I never left the house."

"You are sure?"

"Quite, my lord."

"Not for a minute?"

"I never went outside the door, my lord."

"Then did you see this gentleman when he came in?"

"This gentleman?" The valet favoured Gilbert Hayter with an impassive stare. "This gentleman did not come into this house to-night, my lord. I do not remember to have ever seen him before."

"You are sure he did not come into the house without your knowledge, owing to the door having been left open?"

"He could not have come into the house without my knowledge; it is impossible. The door was not opened till your lordship returned."

"Certain?"

"Quite, my lord."

"You hear, officer? This gentleman's story may amuse you, but as it is wholly without interest to me, will you be so good as to take him somewhere where you can talk it over together,—and let me go to bed?"

"I am sorry to have disturbed your lordship.—Have you anything else to say, Mr. Hayter?"

Gilbert Hayter drew a long breath.

"Only this,—that I have not been dreaming."

The man in the dressing-gown laughed.

"Then let us hope you will be soon,—pleasant dreams, sir. May I offer you anything before you go?—or you, officer?"

Both declined. When they were out again in the street the Inspector said to Mr. Hayter with, in his tone and manner, something more than a flavour of asperity—

"A nice cock-and-bull story you've been concocting. Do you know you've placed yourself in a serious position?"

"As how?"

"By laying false information. Do you think a man can come to a police-station and tell the sort of tale you told with complete impunity?"

"I told you nothing but the truth."

"You still adhere to that? Then all I can say is that you're a remarkable man,—if you're right in the head. Where are you going now?"

"To my hotel."

"I'll come with you."

"Uninvited?"

"Certainly,—uninvited. You may think yourself lucky that I don't take you back with me to the station, and detain you for inquiries. I am coming with you to the Metropolitan Hotel to learn if any part of your story is true, and if anything is known of you there."

"You are perfectly welcome, Inspector Innes."

"Welcome or not I'm coming."

They drove together in silence to the hotel; Gilbert Hayter being conscious all the way of a not unnatural inclination to throw the Inspector out into the road. As they were alighting the Inspector said—

"You will have to pay the cabman."

"Isn't that an entirely gratuitous remark? Do you suppose I was going to leave you to pay him?"

"I don't know what you are going to do, after what you have done already. I simply tell you that you will have to pay the fare."

Gilbert Hayter paid the cabman;—over-paid him. While the porter was opening the door the Inspector observed—

"You can go in when he opens. I can make my inquiries after you have gone. I don't wish to make matters unnecessarily disagreeable for you."

"That's very kind of you. Good-night, Inspector Innes. I shall probably look you up again when I have had time to think things over. In the meanwhile I may remark that when next I witness a murder, my inclination will be to say nothing about it to the police."

When Gilbert Hayter had entered the building the Inspector asked the porter who admitted him—

"What's that gentleman's name?"

The porter told him.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Nothing except that he's got a room in the hotel. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of.—Good-night." Inspector Innes said to himself, as he walked away, after making these very cursory inquiries into Gilbert Hayter's bona-fides, "He doesn't strike one as being insane; and he certainly isn't drunk;—and he gives one the idea that he himself is under

the impression that he's speaking the truth ;—in which case, knowing Lord Sabin as I do, it is at least possible that his lordship has been up to some more of his little games. It is no fresh discovery that there are occasions on which he is more fitted to a lunatic asylum than anything else."

CHAPTER VIII

THE GIRL BREAKFASTS

IT was nearly nine o'clock when Gilbert Hayter sent up to tell the occupant of room No. 616 that he was waiting for her for breakfast. He had engaged a private sitting-room; it was there he waited.

He would have been content to learn that she was up already and had left the building. He was not in the best of tempers. The adventures of the night had not been by any means of the kind he had gone in search of; or relished when found. Every time he thought of them he was filled with a sense of irritation; and worse. The less he thought of them the better; he preferred not to think of them at all. If this girl had gone the link which connected him with them would have vanished; he would put them entirely out of his mind. He would leave London that very day; although he had been absent from it for so many years he had had more than enough of it already. He hoped the girl had gone.

It appeared, however, that she had not been so obliging. The waiter returned to say that the lady would come presently.

"Confound her!" muttered her host, directly the waiter's back was turned. Recollecting himself he called the man back. "You had better serve breakfast, I suppose."

When the meal was on the table there ensued an interval of waiting. Mr. Hayter opened a couple of newspapers; glanced at them; threw them aside. Going to the window he enjoyed

the very limited view which could be obtained of the street. Having marched three or four times round the room he was making up his mind as to whether, after all, he had not better eat alone, and leave her to eat at her leisure, when there was a discreet tapping at the panel of the door, and, in answer to his invitation, the girl came in.

Which of the twain was less at ease it would have needed a skilful judge to determine. Little accustomed to feminine society it needed that he should only take one quick glance at her to find himself overwhelmed with confusion. She was so much younger than he had supposed; and, also, so much shabbier. Daylight is a cruel critic of the defects in a woman's apparel; it throws them into such prominence. And not only was this girl shabby; her clothes were dirty and ill-fitting. One felt that she was wearing garments which had once been worn by someone else.

"Good-morning," he said.

"Good-morning," she replied.

Then the stock of conversation possessed by both parties seemed to have been exhausted. She stood, a pathetic figure, just inside the door, apparently unconsciously opening and closing her hands. After an interval it seemed to occur to him that unless he invited her to come farther in she would remain where she was.

"Won't you—won't you come and sit down?" he stammered.

"Thank you, I—I think I'd better go."

"Not before you've had breakfast. You must have something to eat.—Sit down. Will you take the head of the table?"

"No, thank you, I—I can't."

"Then I will; come and sit here."

She moved to the chair he offered with an eager, fluttering motion, which reminded him of some wild thing which would have flown if it could. He told himself, grimly, that it would be as well that he should make as little of a fool of himself as

he conveniently could, and talk sensibly to this trembling child. So he began, while he served her with coffee, and bacon, and eggs—

"I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, thank you."

"No dreams?"

"No,—thank you." He glanced at her sharply, as he passed her a plate. "Your rest doesn't seem to have done you so much good as I should like it to have done."

He could not help but notice that her face was white as the tablecloth; and that her eyes, sunk in cavernous hollows, spoke of pain both of mind and body. His words set her trembling afresh. She looked up at him as if he had accused her of some crime.

"I—I am very sorry;—it has done me good; I did sleep well."

"It strikes me that what you want is a month's sleep right straight off."

She smiled; a smile which, wan though it was, lit up her face in a way which startled him; and, when it passed, there came in its place a look of curious longing which, if anything, startled him still more;—he was amazed to find that she was pretty. She sat, silent, apparently oblivious of the food in front of her, as if staring at a vision which he had conjured up.

"Eat your breakfast," he said to her.

She fell to eating; as a soldier, at the word of command, falls to marching. Between his own mouthfuls, he observed her, furtively. He noticed that she ate like a lady; that there was nothing strange to her in the refinements of the table;—more; that despite her soiled, unsightly, ill-fitting garments, she bore herself like a lady. As he realised, more and more clearly, her youth; her helplessness; her weakness; her timidity; his courage returned. It was obviously absurd that he, a grown

man, who had seen strange things in strange places, should be anything but at his ease in the presence of a mere girl like this; the idea that her sex should make her formidable was the height of the ridiculous. So he plunged into a conversation which proceeded on somewhat singular lines.

"It strikes me," he began, "that you and I are about equally friendless."

She glanced up at him, in unmistakable surprise.

"Are you—friendless?"

"About as friendless as a man could very well be."

"And—live here?"

He laughed.

"If I did wouldn't that in itself be a pretty clear proof of loneliness? People don't live in an hotel if they can help it; since it's as bad a substitute for a home as you could find. But, as it happens, I don't live here. I came back to England yesterday after being in Africa more than seventeen years, and dropped in here for a night or two; till I've had a chance of looking round. I haven't left many what you might call friends behind me in Africa; but in England, so far as I know, there isn't a creature who cares a row of pins whether I'm alive or dead.—Is it as bad with you?"

"Oh, quite."

"It must be worse for a girl to be friendless than for a man."

"It is; much worse. It's—awful."

There was a solemnity about the way in which she said this which moved him oddly.

"I suppose it is pretty awful. I'm forty-two; and there are times when I feel as if I were a hundred and forty-two. I hope that a man who has reached that patriarchal age may ask, without offence, how old you are."

"I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen?—eighteen?" He repeated the word twice over;

as if he found about it something which gave him furiously to think. "By the look of you I shouldn't have been surprised to have been told that you were younger."

"No, I'm eighteen."

"That's a pretty bad age for a girl to be friendless. Especially when she's a lady; as you are."

She closed her eyes; as if to shut out some unpleasant sight.

"I'm not a lady; not now."

"What do you mean by not now? Once a lady always a lady."

"No; not always."

"What's to rob you of your birthright? Nature makes you a lady; you don't make yourself. Money makes no difference. Wasn't your father a gentleman?"

"Yes."

"And your mother a lady?"

"Yes."

"Then, if you are born of gentlefolks, why aren't you a lady?"

"I'm not."

Something about her manner struck him. He continued his breakfast. It was some seconds before he spoke again. Then his tone was curter perhaps than he supposed.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Nothing;—I wish I could do something;—I wish someone would give me something to do."

"What can you do?"

"Nothing;—that's it. That's—that's what makes it so awful. I can do nothing; I am so useless. Why should anyone give me something when I can do nothing?"

"But how have you got money? I suppose you have had money, or you wouldn't be alive."

She shook her head.

"I have had no money."

This girl puzzled him more and more.

"Then how have you got food?"

"I have had no food, since——"

She stopped; he prompted her.

"Since—since last Saturday;—until you gave me some last night."

That was Wednesday. He stuck to his point.

"After all, last Saturday is not so very long ago;—how did you get food before last Saturday?"

"They—they gave it me."

"They?—Who?—Where?"

"In—in prison."

Her face dropped forward, so that it was hidden by the table.

CHAPTER IX

DORIS OSBORNE

HE was still. Had she struck him a violent blow with some heavy instrument she could not have produced a more stunning effect. She had taken him wholly by surprise. His thoughts had been travelling in an altogether different direction; as men's thoughts will travel when they are confronted by the problem of how a penniless woman, who confessedly does no work, earns the right to live. He was so astonished that, for the moment, he was bereft even of the capacity to think. It was only after an interval that he perceived how he had dragged the admission from her inch by inch; by the application, as it were, of the thumbscrew. He felt ashamed of himself; as if, playing the part of Peeping Tom, he had forced himself into a place which he had no right to enter. Because he had expended on her, perhaps, a shilling or two, was he entitled to compel this girl to bare her soul to him?

Presently, as if construing his silence in her own fashion, the girl, raising her head from the table, stood up.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"To leave you;—to thank you; and to say good-day."

Her voice was firmer than it had hitherto been; her bearing more decided. He too stood up; impelled by some motive which he did not altogether understand.

"Excuse me, you must not go just yet; you must stay a little longer. If I seem to have behaved to you like a brute,

you must give me an opportunity of showing that it was unintentional."

For the first time she looked him steadily in the face; as if to her also courage had come at last.

"I do not know what you mean. Why will you not let me go?—If you had only let me go last night!"

"Are you sorry that I didn't?—I am not."

The directness of his statement seemed to stagger her. Her voice became tremulous again.

"You don't understand."

"No; but I'm going to. And you're going to understand. We're going to understand each other;—we two friendless people. So, that we may take things in their proper order, we'll begin with the ceremony of introduction. What's your name? Mine is Gilbert Hayter."

She looked about her, vaguely, yet anxiously, as if seeking for some avenue of escape; some means of evading his insistent questions.

"What does it matter what my name is?—to you?—or to anyone? I have no name,—now."

"Haven't you? Then I shall have to coin one. Yet, somehow, I don't feel as if I could address you as Miss Smith; you don't look as if your name was Smith."

"It isn't."

"Nor should I feel that I was fitting you by calling you Miss Jones. I don't know why; but there it is. Please come to my assistance and suggest something by which you may appropriately be called."

"My name is Osborne,—Doris Osborne." She announced the name with upraised head, as if she were uttering a challenge; she looked at him with defiance in her eyes. "Now do you know me?"

"But slightly, Miss Osborne. I trust to know you better before very long."

"Don't laugh at me."

"I am not laughing. I am giving expression to a sincere wish."

"Doesn't my name convey something to you? Don't you—associate it with something?"

"To my knowledge, I have not heard it before."

"That's because you are only just back from Africa. Everybody in England knows what it means; I see it staring at me on their faces."

"Is it not possible that you exaggerate?"

"I wish I did;—but you don't understand." She made a rapid movement towards the door; he intercepted her;—which she resented. "Let me go!—will you let me go?"

"No; I will not,—until I do understand. And—I tell you frankly—I think it probable that, when I do understand, I shall be less disposed than ever to let you go."

"You have no right to keep me!—no right!—I have done nothing to you!"

"Nor, as yet, have I done anything to—or for—you; but I hope to be able to do something which will entitle me to call myself your friend, Miss Osborne."

"Don't call me by that name!—don't! All these months it has been staring at me in letters of flame;—I can't get away from it;—I never shall. God's finger will keep pointing at it till I die. Don't look at me as if you were wondering if I am mad; I am not. They wanted me to plead madness at the trial, but I'm as sane as you, and I wouldn't;—if only because I knew it would be no use. Besides, to have been sent to a lunatic asylum! where—where there were others who had done what I had!——If you want to understand, you shall. I may as well tell you,—you have only to ask the first woman you meet outside the door, and she'll tell you. I'm the Doris Osborne who was found guilty of attempted murder."

"You proclaim the fact as if you expected to see me shrivel

up in front of you; or something of the kind. I am not conscious even of feeling shocked. You see I come from a part of the world in which human life is held but of little account. I have seen too many people—black and white—sent to sudden death to be easily moved by a mere attempt to murder. Besides, do not suppose that I can credit for an instant that you are of the stuff of which what I understand by a murderer's fashioned;—or a criminal either."

"But I was guilty;—I did mean to do it;—I never attempted to deny it."

"In that case your intention was probably justified. Of one thing I am sure, that there are occasions on which it is justifiable to kill; and to mean to kill. They are rare, thank God, but they occur. In France even the law admits it; in England, on some points, the law is still an ass. I can't believe, and I don't believe, that you are the sort of person who would intentionally of malice prepense, do the thing which you know to be evil. I don't know much about women, I admit; but I believe I know enough to feel sure that you are not a woman of that sort."

The girl made no reply. Something which she saw on his face, rather than gathered from his words, seemed to dry up her tongue at its roots. She moved tremblingly away from him; until, sinking on to a chair, she let her face drop again on to the table, amid the plates and dishes, and began to cry so violently that it seemed as if the mere vehemence of her sobs might rend her to pieces.

Just at that moment someone tapped at the door, and, without allowing time for an answer, a waiter entered.

"Shall I take away the breakfast things, sir?"

"Take yourself away," replied Mr. Hayter, shortly. And the waiter took himself away, even more briskly than he had come.

When the man had gone, Mr. Hayter, crossing to the window, stood looking out into the street; of which he probably

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anything further for her till I know her story; and, as you see by that letter, she would rather I should learn it from you. If you will tell me it as fully as you can I shall be obliged; and, as I'm conscious that telling it will occupy time, and that your time is valuable, I am prepared to pay any fee you may charge."

"Are you a married man, Mr. Hayter?"

"No, Mr. Burnett, I am not."

"When did you first encounter this young lady?"

"Three days ago; first, in the afternoon, on the Thames Embankment, and, again, at night."

"I see that this letter is addressed from Worthing."

"She is in rooms in a house belonging to an old servant of my mother. As you perceive, she is unwilling to remain there under what she calls false pretences; being apparently under the impression that if the landlady knew who she is she would refuse to allow her to continue under her roof."

"I think that that is at least possible.—Do you know nothing about her, Mr. Hayter?"

"Except what she herself has told me;—that she has been in prison; that she came out last Saturday; that she was sent there for attempted murder."

"For most men, to know that would be sufficient."

"It is sufficient for me. It is she who wishes me to know more. And I perceive that, if we are to understand each other, it is just as well that I should know more."

"If you are to understand each other?—in what sense?"

Mr. Hayter looked the lawyer very straight in the face before he answered.

"In any, and every sense, Mr. Burnett. You will excuse my saying that I came here in the expectation of receiving information, rather than giving it."

The lawyer smiled.

"But I must first ascertain exactly what information it is that you require; and then what use you propose to make of it.

You see, you are a complete stranger to me, and I have Miss Osborne's interests to consider."

"You don't appear to have considered them to any very great extent just lately, or she would hardly have been in the state in which I found her."

"I was present at the prison gates last Saturday at the usual hour at which prisoners are discharged, hoping to meet Miss Osborne, and to prove to her that she was not friendless. Nor was I the only person there for that purpose. There were delegates from various public bodies, of a charitable and religious character; there were individuals who, I suppose, would have called themselves private sympathisers; there were representatives of the press; at least one of whom was the bearer of a commission offering her a substantial sum if she would write for his paper what he termed her life-story. Miss Osborne, however, had forestalled us all. She had made a special application to the governor for permission to leave the gaol at an unusually early hour; which he had granted. When we arrived she had already gone; where no one had the faintest notion. So your suggestion that I was in the remotest degree responsible for the bad condition in which you found Miss Osborne is not borne out by the facts."

"I can easily believe that she had good and sufficient reasons for wishing to avoid the somewhat motley crowd of which you formed one, Mr. Burnett."

"Possibly; still the fact remains that, for the plight in which you found her, the lady was, herself, primarily responsible. I only say this in order to make it clear that I am using no empty form of words when I state that I am desirous to consider her interests.—Mr. Hayter, do you mean to say that the name, Osborne, is one which is wholly unfamiliar to you?"

"It is, so far as I am aware."

"Don't you ever read the newspapers?"

"When I get the opportunity. I am just come from a con-

siderable stay in a part of Africa in which a newspaper, especially an English one, is about as rare an object as an elephant is in the streets of London."

"Now I understand; now I begin to see why you come to me to be told a story which, not so long ago, was as familiar in the mouths of English men and women as household words.—I am free to admit that I am still reluctant to do what you desire, and what, apparently, Miss Osborne desires me to do; and that—for various reasons. But, at the same time, I am still more unwilling to stand in the way of your doing the young lady a real service; and as, anyhow, I shall only tell you what, in all essentials, is to be found in any file of newspapers you may choose to consult, I shall not lay myself open to a charge of violating professional confidence."

Mr. Burnett drew Miss Osborne's letter to and fro between his fingers, while he kept his eyes fixed on his visitor's face. Gilbert Hayter wondered if he was resolving the knotty point as to how little it would be possible for him to tell. However, when he did begin, he was more communicative than, at first, it had seemed likely he would be.

"In what I am about to tell you, Mr. Hayter, you will please to understand that, as we lawyers say, I am speaking without prejudice, and that, for any statement made, I can accept no responsibility.—To begin then.—Miss Osborne's father and I were friends. We were of about the same age; were at school together; and afterwards, for some years, we were close companions. Later, we drifted apart. He was fairly well-to-do; I wasn't. He passed his time in playing games; as, nowadays, is the fashion with many of our young men who are free from the necessity of earning their own livelihood. He made various branches of sport the serious business of his life. In course of time he married,—Miss Osborne's mother. The only difference I could see that marriage made in his life was that he exchanged cricket for golf. It is no secret that his

marriage was not altogether a success. By degrees he took to going off, all alone by himself, to different parts of Great Britain and of Europe, for the purpose, as he asserted, of playing golf; and he would stay there for considerable periods of time. Even as a young man he had drunk as much as was good for him; as he grew older he drank more. Under these circumstances you will perceive that his wife was not without legitimate causes of complaint. It is not easy for an outsider to play the part of critic between husband and wife. There is usually something, often a good deal, which he does not know. Within my own experience, the person who has been shown, by the facts which have been made public, to be the injured party, has usually been the most to blame. I have often known that to be the case; I have suspected that to be the case oftener still.

"I impute nothing to Mrs. Osborne;—she was an unhappy lady; but she was not the wisest woman in the world; and she had a difficult man to deal with. There were violent quarrels. There was only one child—Doris; and, as she grew up, as not seldom, unfortunately, happens, she was made a party to the quarrels. She was a girl of a singularly passionate nature."

"She has not struck me like that."

The interposition came from Mr. Hayter.

"No, perhaps not; you have not yet seen her under conditions in which that fact was likely to strike you.—As was only natural, she was passionately attached to her mother. Instigated, I fear, to some extent, by her mother, although she was still only a child, she intervened, on her behalf, in some of the unfortunate scenes which took place, with a degree of violence which not only startled her father, but, also, impressed her mother. She realised that in such an environment the girl was being ruined. Some three years since, when Doris was about sixteen, she let her go with some friends on a prolonged visit to India.

"After she had gone matters at home grew worse. Osborne's conduct passed all bounds. He was more often drunk than sober. Finally he crowned his misdeeds by bringing home with him, to the house in which his wife was living, a notorious woman. Of course Mrs. Osborne left the house, and, very shortly afterwards, was dead,—from an overdose of morphia. The coroner's jury brought in a verdict to the effect that it had been taken by inadvertence. Before she died she wrote to Doris what was, no doubt, an extraordinary letter, telling her the whole story, from her point of view. The story was bad enough, unadorned; I have reason to know that, emphatically, it lost nothing by the way in which she told it.

"The people with whom Doris was were travelling about. The letter only reached her after various delays. At the time she was at a remote spot in one of the North-West provinces. Her mother's story produced on her a most remarkable effect."

"No wonder!"

"Exactly; yet I venture to think that few young women of her age would have been affected quite as she was. Although she was practically penniless she proclaimed her intention to return at once; and even informed her host and hostess, when they hesitated, that if they did not provide her with the necessary funds to enable her to do so, she would take them."

"Quite right. Why did they hesitate? Couldn't they realise that, at such a crisis, nothing should be allowed to keep the child from her mother?"

"You must put yourself in their place, Mr. Hayter."

"I put myself in her place, Mr. Burnett. What she had to do was to get to her mother at the earliest possible moment. Nothing else counted."

"But consider. Matters, at that time, were in such a situation that neither her host nor hostess could accompany her on even the initiatory stages of her journey; and no other white person was available. And this was a place remote from

civilisation, from which it was three days' journey to the next white man."

"Well, she went alone. God guided her. I've been in places from which it was a good deal farther than three days' journey to the next white man; so, maybe, I have a dim sort of notion of what that place was like."

"But you're a man."

"And she was only a girl-child; that's what gets over me. They ought to have given her the Victoria Cross."

"They haven't, as yet. I won't enter into the details of how she went——"

"You needn't; the thing is that she went."

"That must have been an extraordinary journey of hers."

"It must have been."

"She met with almost innumerable delays."

"With the consciousness possessing her of what her mother was enduring each of those delays must have been to her like another taste of hell."

"And, when she did reach England, it was to learn that her mother was dead; and that not only had her father married that notorious woman, on the day after the conclusion of the coroner's inquest, but that he was also dead. In a fit of drunken delirium he had thrown himself out of an upper floor window, and been killed on the spot."

"And was this girl left alone in the world?"

"Absolutely. Neither her father nor her mother has a single living relative. She went to the house which had been her home, and saw the new Mrs. Osborne. There was a terrible scene."

"There would have been a still more terrible scene for the woman if she had had her deserts. Those kind of women ought to be sown up in sacks and drowned. They know how to treat them in some parts of the world in which I've been."

"Three days afterwards, when the second Mrs. Osborne

was walking along Piccadilly, the girl jumped out of a passing omnibus, and, in the broad daylight, attacked her with a dagger which she had brought with her from India,—striking her with it again and again. Had it not been for the passers-by, who interfered, she would have killed her; it was a pretty near thing as it was. Fortunately for her, however, the woman recovered. She was charged with attempted murder; tried; found guilty; and sentenced to twelve months' hard labour."

CHAPTER XIV

FORTY THOUSAND SOVEREIGNS

GILBERT HAYTER looked at Mr. Burnett for several seconds before he spoke again; not as if he found anything in him interesting to look at, but as if his eyes, and thoughts, were fixed on something which he saw beyond. Rising from his chair, crossing the room, he looked out through a window which stood very much in need of being cleaned. And, with his back to the lawyer, he said—

"I should have liked to have had a word with the judge who tried her. His sentence was a scandal."

"There were many who thought so. Some people—and even some newspapers—were of opinion that she ought to have been sent to penal servitude for life."

Gilbert Hayter turned sharply towards the lawyer again.

"Burnett!"

"You must remember that this is not a country in which people may take the law into their own hands, to avenge private wrongs, whether real or imaginary; I trust that it may never be such a country. The girl meant murder. She had done her best to injure the woman on the occasion of their first meeting; and had told her that when next she saw her she would kill her. The intention to kill was clearly proved."

"Wasn't it justified?"

"I think not; from the point of view of the law of course it could not be justified."

"The law's an ass."

"Don't you be so sure of it. On the contrary, the general body, and spirit, and letter, of the law, as we have it in England, is, in many respects, the concentrated expression of the highest human wisdom. Its fault is that, in common with all things human, it is not omniscient; and, we being human, we shall never make it omniscient, strive how we may.—In the case of Doris Osborne there were two points to be considered, and urged by those who undertook her defence. First, her youth,—she was only seventeen; second, the provocation she imagined herself to have received."

"Imagined!"

"I got a smart man to appear for her at the trial; and it was largely owing to the way in which he pressed these two points that we obtained such a lenient sentence. We, for the defence, regarded it as a triumph;—I had anticipated penal servitude. It was after the trial by law was over that the other began;—the trial by newspaper and by public opinion. I do not remember a case which so stirred the public imagination. The air was full of it; distressingly full. People quarrelled about it among themselves, in private, in public, at public meetings, which were called for the express purpose, so far as I was able to learn, of providing them with facilities to quarrel, of which they generally took the fullest advantage; above all, in the columns of the newspaper press. You talk about the law being an ass. You should have seen some of the stuff which appeared in ostensibly respectable newspapers."

"Newspapers!"

"The consequence is that the whole affair received a gigantic advertisement, which is still fresh in the public memory; so that I think that it is quite possible that if that woman at Worthing were aware that the Doris Osborne is an inmate of her house, she would at once show her the door."

After an interval of silence Mr. Hayter asked a question,—in

a tone which suggested that he was dismissing the subject from his mind.

"Is that the whole story?"

"So far as I know it."

"There is one point on which you might throw light. You said that the man Osborne had money. Did he leave any of it behind him?"

"I don't fancy he left much. You may imagine that a man of his stamp was not likely to be an economist. And what there was he left to the second Mrs. Osborne, absolutely."

"Yet you say that that girl was not justified in what she did?" For answer Mr. Burnett shrugged his shoulders. Presently Hayter went on. "However, although our points of view may differ, I thank you for the information you have given me; which I assure you I appreciate. And it occurs to me that, since I am in the presence of a man of law, there is another matter, which concerns myself, on which I should like your opinion and advice." As Mr. Burnett remained watchfully silent Hayter proceeded. "It is with reference to something which occurred to me on Tuesday night; the night of the day on which I landed in England."

Then he told, briefly and succinctly, the story with which we are already familiar; and, when he had finished, Mr. Burnett said exactly what had been said to him at Vine Street.

"That is a very remarkable story of yours, Mr. Hayter." Then he added, "I have seen nothing about it in the papers. Didn't you communicate with the police?"

"I did."

And Mr. Hayter related the sequel; which the lawyer heard with something which very nearly approached to amusement.

"Are you certain that you had not been celebrating the occasion of your return to your native land after an absence of many years?"

"I confess that in the case of another man that is exactly

the idea which would have occurred to me; but—I know I hadn't. I am prepared to go into a witness-box and swear that what I have told you I saw I did see."

"Yet you yourself admit that all the facts are against you. How can a man whom you saw dead, with his head nearly severed from his body, be alive again, and wholly uninjured, a few minutes afterwards?"

"I admit it's a puzzle. That's why I want the advice of a man like you;—perhaps you may help me to a solution."

"I am afraid that there is not much chance of my being able to do that; it seems to me that yours is hardly a case for a lawyer. Where do you say this house was?"

"In Mount Street. I found that out afterwards;—Lord Sabin's house in Mount Street."

"Lord——" Mr. Burnett stopped, on the threshold of the name. His interest seemed to be suddenly quickened. "What name did you mention, Mr. Hayter?"

"Lord Sabin. I was under the impression that the man I saw murdered was Lord Sabin; it seems, however, that there I must have been wrong."

"Are you jesting, Mr. Hayter?"

"Jesting?—why should you suppose it? That—that's a new suggestion."

"You are aware that we act for the next heir to the Sabin estate, Mr. Beaumont Fortescue; indeed, with the exception of the present peer, practically for the whole family."

"I was aware of nothing of the kind. How could I be? I didn't know you existed till I saw your name in Miss Osborne's letter."

The lawyer regarded Gilbert Hayter fixedly; as if he was endeavouring to make up his mind as to the sort of man he really was, and how much reliance could be placed upon what he said.

"If that is so then the coincidence is still more curious;

especially as, after a fashion, I can offer what amounts to corroboration of at least a portion of your story; enough to show that it is at least possible that you did not dream it all."

"I dreamt none of it, Mr. Burnett; any more than I am now dreaming that I am looking at you."

"You say that on the table in the room of which you have been telling me were a large number of sovereigns. Have you any idea how many?"

"No definite idea. There were a larger number than I ever saw gathered together before. I should say many thousands."

"That is the point on which I am able to suggest something which may amount to corroboration." Mr. Burnett seemed to be considering how much it would be advisable to say. "The facts which I am about to mention to you will shortly be made public; but, although I am only going to anticipate their publication by a few days, I must ask you to promise that you will regard them as given to you in the strictest confidence." Mr. Hayter gave the required assurance. "Lord Sabin is, as you are possibly aware, an eccentric nobleman. He is unmarried. His next heir is his nephew, Mr. Beaumont Fortescue, whom we represent. There is no reason why he should not be on good terms with Mr. Fortescue, but he thinks otherwise; and even goes out of his way to show the animus he has against him. For instance, it has come to our knowledge within the last few days that he has sold certain valuables which he has no right whatever to dispose of, they being family heirlooms, and therefore an inalienable part of the estate. He can hardly have done it for want of money; as there are, and have been for some time, large sums standing idle, to his credit. He obtained for them the sum of £40,000. The amount was paid in to his account in the ordinary course; but it appears that on Tuesday last he drew, in person, not a little to the surprise of the bank officials, the whole amount out across the counter, in sovereigns. That was on the afternoon of the day of which you have been

speaking. The inference is that he took it with him to Mount Street; and that may have been the money which you saw upon the table.—Do you think there were forty thousand sovereigns?"

"Quite probably. I can only repeat that there were an immense number."

"But you say that they were on the table when you first passed through the door into the then empty room." Hayter nodded. "I thought that that was what I gathered. Sabin is eccentric; but surely not mad enough to leave such a sum lying loosely about without any sort of protection.—And yet I am not sure. I have always held that that man is capable of anything. —When he came in, did he seem surprised when he saw the money lying there?"

"That is what I have been asking myself. You see, he was drunk."

"Very drunk?"

"Drunk enough. And then that blow on his head could not have tended to clear his muddled faculties. Altogether I should say that he was not in a condition in which one could judge what his attitude, or his behaviour, might have been, had he been sober."

"That is a diplomatic answer, Mr. Hayter."

"You see, my theory was that thieves had been at work before I went through that door, and that my appearance disturbed their operations. I took it that Sabin's entrance added to their disturbance; and when I saw that he had been murdered I was sure of it."

"But the point is that he wasn't murdered. He is as much alive, at the present moment, as you and I are."

"Mr Burnett, someone was murdered;—I swear it. Can't I make an affidavit before a magistrate, and so obtain from him a search warrant, which would enable us to search that house from garret to basement?"

"What for?"

"For the corpse of the man whom I saw murdered."

"But, Mr. Hayter, don't you perceive how, with almost farcical force, all the facts are against you? You go to your supposititious magistrate and you swear that Brown is dead;—Brown himself swears he isn't;—who is the magistrate to believe? You may go on to say that, since Brown is not dead, you are now prepared to swear that he had a hand in killing someone who was marvellously like Brown;—won't the magistrate be justified in hinting to the police that you stand in need of medical attention? Your present position would seem to be that, since Lord Sabin is alive, he had a hand in murdering somebody else, since there is no other way out of the impasse; and that I refuse for a moment to believe: I would rather doubt your sanity.—No, Mr. Hayter; there would seem to be some substratum of truth in your very singular story;—I am not accusing you of conscious misrepresentation."

"That is very good of you."

"There are points in it which I shall place before my partners, and possibly, also, before Mr. Beaumont Fortescue. It is probable that you will hear from me again upon the matter. But of one thing I am certain;—Lord Sabin never had any part in, or cognisance of, any act of murder."

"I never said he did."

"Then what do you say?"

"I say that there's a puzzle; and, I believe, Lord Sabin has the key."

"Then in that case you'll never get it. His lordship is not a person from whom it is easy to get anything."

"Shan't I get it?—We shall see."

CHAPTER XV

THE QUESTION

THE impression left upon his mind by his interview with Mr. Burnett, Gilbert Hayter would have found it difficult to diagnose. But little light had been thrown upon the events of that memorable Tuesday night; if anything the mystery had grown more. Those events were becoming to him a sort of obsession; encompassing him round about; pressing themselves continually upon him. That he had seen what he had seen he was more and more assured; yet he had to admit his inability to accept the evidence of his own senses. As the lawyer had put it, it was no use swearing that Brown was dead if Brown himself swore that he wasn't. Since Lord Sabin was alive it was certain that he never could have seen his corpse;—which simply meant that he had been made the victim of some hideous, and elaborate, piece of trickery. Why? What conceivable purpose could a sane person have had in playing such a trick on him? or on anyone? And what was the nature of the trick which had been played? Was that—as the man at Vine Street had hinted—a dummy which he had seen sitting on the chair? He would swear that it was not; at least—— The more he thought of it the more puzzled he became. If it was not Lord Sabin, and it evidently was not, what could it have been?

Well, he had plenty of time upon his hands. He would occupy part of it by seeing this thing through. That he would

see it through he was resolved;—and, when he had, he would make it warm for that ingenious trickster.

Then his thoughts passed to Doris Osborne. Her story had not been at all what he had expected; whether it was better or worse he could not determine. She had his sincerest sympathy. His standards were primitive; in what she had done he held her justified; still—he wished she had not done it. It tangled matters up so. If she was such a notoriety as Burnett asserted, then—it might be extremely inconvenient. He was not sure that it was not his duty to tell Miss Bryant the truth; in which case he thought it quite likely, from what he had seen of her the other night, that she would decline to give Miss Osborne shelter. Then what was he to do? He could hardly repeat the process of foisting her upon another unconscious landlady; while, on the other hand, it would be most disagreeable to have to go about telling perfect strangers who she was. Suppose he left the girl to her own devices; giving her a small, but regular, allowance till such time as she was able to stand on her own feet;—how would that answer?

It might answer if she would accept the allowance; but he was sure that she would not. He had only to drop the vaguest hint that she was an occasion to him of even the slightest inconvenience,—she would vanish into space upon the instant; of that he was certain. He had but to tell her, however diplomatically, that he thought it not unlikely that respectable people might refuse to be associated with her, however remotely, —and there and then, she would put a period to her connection with him; of that he was assured.

Why should he not let her? The girl was nothing to him; never would be. If she was such a fool as to turn her back upon his disinterested offer of assistance, why should he allow her folly to trouble him? What was there to prevent his allowing her to go, with complete indifference, her own wild way? He told himself, frankly, that there was nothing; yet—he did not

feel disposed to let her. The girl bade fair to be a nuisance; still — there she was. He wished that she had never come across his path;—no, he did not wish that either. The plain truth was, that fate, or its equivalent, had so placed him that, at that moment, she was the only human being in whom he felt the faintest interest. It was, at the same time, a tragic, and a ridiculous, fact.

He had heard Mr. Burnett on her story,—who voiced one view of it; he felt that he would like to hear someone else,—who might voice another. Burnett maintained that it was still fresh in the public memory; that public opinion still ran high. Was it not possible that he overstated the case? That, if the world had not actually forgotten her, it had grown indifferent; and willing to regard her with that tolerance which indifference brings? He did not see why not. He would have liked to put the question to the test, at any rate. He was sitting in the hall of the hotel; others were there beside himself; all sorts and conditions;—he would have liked to have made a confidant of each one separately. When he had heard what each had to say he would know better where he was. Though that idea was scarcely possible he was possessed by a desire to talk to somebody, some neutral third party, about Doris Osborne; more or less consciously, during the remainder of the day, he was looking for someone.

It was not until night had fairly advanced that he found anyone; and then it was not the kind of person he would have chosen. He would have liked to discuss the subject with a woman; preferably one who had seen the world; having the feeling strong upon him that it was the unbiassed judgment of such an one that he desired. The person he did talk to was a man; an unsatisfactory sort of man he proved to be.

Gilbert Hayter went to a theatre. On his return he was sitting in the smoking-room when the man in question came and planted himself on the seat at his side. Mr. Hayter had

noticed him once or twice in the course of the day; he had felt, on each occasion, it was because the man was noticing him. His appearance could not, from the point of view of the lover of any sort of beauty, be called prepossessing. An impartial critic might have set him down as being either a publican or a butcher; or, possibly, something in the book-maker line. He was big, but not tall; bloated, rather than hearty; and, though not in evening dress, was attired with a neatness which, oddly enough, seemed to ill-become him. On the little finger of his right hand was a single-stone diamond ring which Hayter was expert enough to be aware would have been cheap at a hundred pounds. He said, as soon as he sat down—

"Excuse me, but is your name Hayter,—Gilbert Hayter?"

Mr. Hayter looked at him; and at his huge cigar.

"It is; but I think you have the advantage of me."

"Oh, I've never seen you before, and I don't suppose you've ever seen me; but I happened to come across your name in the visitors' book, and as I have a particular friend who's at present in Africa, and who's often mentioned your name in his letters, I thought I'd see if you could tell me how he's getting on."

"What's his name?"

"Burge,—Fred Burge, of Johannesburg; he's on the Stock Exchange there."

"I think there's a mistake; I can hardly be the person of whom he has written. Although I am tolerably familiar with Johannesburg I know nothing of Mr. Burge; nor, to my knowledge, have I ever heard his name."

"Ah,—I expect you're a bigger man than he is; he's only in a very small way.—When did you return from Africa, Mr. Hayter?"

"I landed last Tuesday."

"Tuesday!—Oh;—Tuesday?" The man looked at him

in what seemed to Mr. Hayter to be rather a curious fashion. "Been away long?"

Mr. Hayter told him. The man asked a good many questions; some of them rather inquisitive ones. Presently Mr. Hayter asked one in his turn.

"Have you ever been in Africa?"

"No; never been out of England.—I hope you've been having a good time, Mr. Hayter, since your return."

"Fair;—thank you."

"What have you been doing with yourself?—for instance, what did you do with yourself on Tuesday? It must be a very queer feeling to return to England after such an absence as yours; on the first day in particular you must feel like doing something very special indeed. I should.—Did you do anything very special on Tuesday night?"

"I did." For some reason the curt response appeared to take the stranger aback; but not so much as the inquiry which immediately followed. "Do you remember the case of Doris Osborne?"

It must have seemed to the stranger that the question was asked *à propos de bottes*; and Mr. Hayter might have led up to it more gradually. The fact was that Mr. Hayter had had enough of the man's inquisition; and it suddenly occurred to him that here was a person whose views on a subject which he had in his mind might not be without an interest of their own. He was not in the least prepared for the effect which his entirely innocent question had on the other. The man regarded him with a stare which rapidly became a glare; then, rising from his chair, leant towards him in an attitude which was distinctly threatening.

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

"Mean?—What I say;—do you remember the case of Doris Osborne?"

The stranger continued in his curious attitude; breathing

hard; the blood dyeing his already sufficiently rubicund face a deeper dye.

"What do you know about Doris Osborne?"

"I?—I heard her story for the first time in my life to-day.—What's the matter with you?"

Something, apparently, was the matter. When the man dropped back into his easy-chair, his breathing continued to be stertorous; as if he found it not easy to get the better of his sudden, and inexplicable, excitement. It was some seconds before he regained even a semblance of self-possession.

"The fact is that though I don't know the girl herself, thank goodness, I do know something about her, and every time her name's mentioned—especially unexpectedly, as you did just now—it upsets me."

"You must be easily upset."

"I am, where she's concerned. She's—she's a little devil, that's what she is; a perfect little devil. If they'd hung her she would have been properly served."

"Was she charged with murder?"

"It wasn't her fault that she wasn't; many have been who've done less. Anyhow they ought to have given her penal servitude for life."

Hayter remembered that Mr. Burnett had said there had been people who were of that opinion. One would hardly have expected that the man in front of him would have been one of them. Somehow he did not strike one as a person who would have been hard on offenders against the law. His violence seemed unnatural. He repeated his former inquiry in a slightly different form.

"Are you sure you don't know her?"

"Is it likely,—after an absence of seventeen years?"

"And you don't know anything about her?"

"Except what I heard about her to-day."

"Then what did you ask me what you did for?"

"If I'd known that you had an antipathy to the subject I'd have left it alone. I merely wished to make conversation; being, probably, a little tired of your questions."

The man sat, and stared; and puffed at his cigar. Conversation languished. He did not say that he was ashamed of his outbreak; but that he was conscious that it had made the situation difficult was probable. Shortly, he rose from his seat.

"Well, I'll wish you good-night, Mr. Hayter." When he got upstairs he went straight to the night porter in his office, and began plying him with questions. "You know that Mr. Hayter you pointed out to me;—is he stopping in the house alone?"

"I believe he is now; but he had a young lady with him; —at least he brought one in."

"What was her name?"

"Can't say; because no name was given; as I happen to know, being here when he brought her in."

"Perhaps it was his daughter."

"His daughter!—when he brought her in at two o'clock in the morning?—without any luggage? And a nice sight she looked; she hadn't five shillings' worth of clothes on her."

"That was funny."

"It's not for me to make remarks."

"Did you notice her?—what was she like?"

It seemed that the porter had noticed her; he gave a vivid, and, on the whole, an accurate description. The stranger listened with flattering attention.

"And when do you say he brought this girl here?"

"On Tuesday night; or, rather, early on Wednesday morning."

The stranger, on quitting the porter's office, went out into the street. Something seemed to be occasioning him concern.

"I believe that girl was her. If she was, and he took her

there—about two on Wednesday morning—which must have been afterwards—what the devil does it mean?"

Gilbert Hayter, still on the seat in the smoking-room, was wondering what there was about the question he had asked which could have caused the stranger such disturbance.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BROWN TWEEDS

MR HAYTER was going down to Worthing. He had despatched a telegram to advise Miss Osborne he was coming; and, directly he had sent it, was half disposed to wish that he had not. He had such confused notions what he was to say to her; so confused that he could hardly be said to have any at all. He had, at first, told himself he would write; it would be easier; simpler; so much less difficult, in the seclusion of his own sitting-room, to express exactly, calmly, in suitable language, what he had to say. He continued to be of that opinion until he found himself, pen in hand, in front of a blank sheet of paper. Then he changed his mind. Letter writing never had been his forte; when he came to the point he realised that to compose such a letter as he had, mistily, before the eye of his brain, would tax, to their utmost capacity, all the powers of a past master of the epistolary art. Such a task was beyond him altogether. He would make a frightful botch of it; he groaned, as he thought of what a botch that botch would be. No; better go and see her; much better. He would be able to tell her in half a dozen sentences what he would require a ream of paper to set down in black and white.

So he sent that telegram; and caught the train for Worthing. And, so soon as the train had started, he began to be concerned about two things. In the first place, what was he

going to say to her? Perhaps, after all, it would have been wiser to have written; because, when he put himself into the witness-box, and asked himself the question, he was obliged to admit that he had no notion. He ought, certainly, to have a clear, and definite, idea of the position he proposed to take up, and stick to; but he had nothing of the kind. The only subject on which he was prepared to talk to her, without feeling that he might be committing himself in some direction in which he did not wish to commit himself, was that of the weather; she would not be satisfied if he even attempted to confine his conversational efforts to that topic.

Then, in the second place, what was that man doing in the Worthing train? that friend of the sociable stranger who had thrust himself on him in the smoking-room the night before? Gilbert Hayter had good eyes. It was probably owing to the sort of life he had led, that, in some directions, his faculty of observation was almost preternaturally keen. When he came down into the hall of the hotel he at once noticed the stranger seated on the arm of an easy-chair. He paid no attention to him. It was one of those days which are commonplaces in the English May, on which the east wind was very easterly. He had on an overcoat; and turned to a mirror which was let into the wall to button it up. As he did so, although his back was towards him, he had a good view of the stranger on the arm of the easy-chair; a fact of which the man himself was probably unconscious. Raising his walking-stick he pointed it towards Hayter; as if he took it for granted that, since his back was to him, what he did would be unnoticed. It was but the action of a moment; but it was significant;—and, at the same instant, as the stranger did it, he perceived what its signification was,—with the aid of the mirror. Standing at some little distance from the person on the arm-chair, as if he had no connection with him whatever, was a lean, thin-faced, clean-shaven man, in a tight-fitting suit of dark brown

tweeds. That movement of the walking-stick was intended for him. Following its direction, he glanced sharply towards Hayter; then, with an almost imperceptible inclination of his head towards the stranger, wheeled right round, and strolled away. Gilbert Hayter realised that, for some reason of his own, the stranger had pointed him out to the man in the dark brown tweeds. As he got into a cab at the hotel door that person was standing on the steps, looking listlessly about him, as if he proposed to remain there for the rest of the day. Yet, at Victoria Station, as he was leaning out of the window of his carriage to buy a newspaper, that same person came sauntering along the platform, and entered a compartment which was close to his own.

What, was the question he put to himself when they had started, was the stranger's friend doing in the Worthing train? Of course, he might be bound on a simple pleasure trip. He might be in it for any of a thousand reasons. Indeed, it was possible that he was not going to Worthing at all, but that it was his intention to alight at one of the intervening stations. Still, it struck Hayter that his presence there was an odd coincidence, after what he had seen in the mirror.

The brown tweed suit did not alight at either of the intervening stations, as Mr. Hayter was careful to observe. It did not even get out at Worthing. When the train stopped, finally, at West Worthing Station, Mr. Hayter, retiring into the farther corner of the compartment, sat still. The brown tweed suit came rapidly past; its wearer glanced within. Mr. Hayter commented to himself—

"Wondering if you had missed me, were you;—if, by any chance I had got out, unnoticed, on the road? You've seen now that I'm still in clear sight; but it won't be my fault if I am for very long."

When he got outside the station the brown tweed suit was standing on the kerb; as if—not being pressed for time—considering which way to go. Hayter, paying not the slightest

heed, strolled in the direction of the sea. He had not gone far before he became aware that the brown tweed suit was at some little distance behind him, on the other side of the way. It was possible that its wearer, being on pleasure bent, was wending his way to the sea without having the slightest intention of following anyone. Mr. Hayter admitted it. So he turned abruptly to the right; then to the left; then to the right again. Each time the brown tweed suit was not very far behind. That, certainly, was not the shortest route to the sea; nor to anywhere else, so far as Mr. Hayter knew. However, he still strolled on, pursuing a corkscrew course, until at last, finding himself on the front, rather by chance than by intention, he turned to the left, and stopped; and waited. Presently round the corner came the man in the brown tweed suit; to whom, without ceremony, Mr. Hayter addressed himself.

"May I ask, sir, if you know Worthing well?"

The man in the brown tweeds, seeming surprised at being accosted, but perfectly self-possessed, smiled.

"Not in the least; I was never here before."

"Then may I further ask which way you are going?"

The other laughed, outright.

"To tell you the truth, I was following you. I wanted to get to the sea, and as you seemed to have an air of knowing the place, I thought that I might get there by sticking to your heels;—but it seems to me that you've taken a confounded lot of turnings."

"I have,—a confounded lot. Still, I've brought you to the sea. Allow me to point it out to you. You perceive it? This is the front; and along there is the pier."

"Thank you; so I see. I've pretty good eyesight."

"So I should imagine." They regarded each other eye to eye. The man in the brown tweed suit smiled; but Mr. Hayter did not move a muscle. "And now, sir, since I have a perhaps unreasonable objection to feeling that I am being

followed, will you allow me to assure you that it is a pleasant promenade in the direction of the pier?"

"That's very good of you; I feel sure you're right;—I'll try it. I'm awfully sorry if I've annoyed you; but now, if you like, you're quite at liberty to follow me."

The stranger moved off, towards the pier. Crossing the road, leaning against the railing, Hayter watched him. He went straight on, without once looking back. At last he also crossed the road; and, as he did so, accosted a passing cabman; apparently it was only to ask a question, because he immediately pursued his way pierwards; and the cabman his. When he was almost out of sight, and certainly out of pursuing distance, Hayter, re-crossing the road, moved towards Myrtle Cottage. Being, however, still suspicious, instead of going the shortest way; or, at least, ascertaining which it was, he turned and twisted almost at random, pausing at each corner to wait, and watch; and listen. Nothing, however, was to be seen, or heard, of the man in the brown tweed suit. And, at last, again rather by accident than by design, finding himself in front of Myrtle Cottage, walking up the tiled pathway, he rang the bell. As he did so a cab went hurrying past. It was empty; but it flashed upon him, with a gleam of sudden intuition, that it was the one he had seen the man in the brown tweed suit accosting. In that case he had been followed after all. He hurried back to the gate; to find that the vehicle was already out of sight. The driver must have urged his horse to a most unusual speed.

While he hesitated, the door of the house being opened, it seemed to him that he had no option but to enter.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RING

HE found Miss Osborne; and saw her for the first time in her indoor costume, without her hat on. It was surprising what a difference it made,—the absence of the hat. He had no idea that she had such pretty hair; and such a mass of it. He was struck by her air of daintiness;—perhaps it was because she was so dainty that she looked so young, so like a graceful child. She seemed in better health already. There was a touch of colour in her cheeks; and—it might have been his fancy—but they seemed a little plumper; the position of the cheek-bones was not so plainly marked. Her eyes were not quite so cavernous; they were brighter. Decidedly she was pretty; much prettier than he had fancied; so pretty, indeed, that he was oddly conscious of wondering at himself because of the responsibility he had so lightly assumed. Here —one had only to glance at her to be sure of it—was a young lady of birth and breeding; with the promise of exceptional beauty. And he had given her twenty pounds with which to provide herself with clothes.

Possibly it was the knowledge of the singularity of the relations which existed between them which caused their greeting to wear such an air of constraint. If he intended to offer her his hand there was that in her bearing which stayed him; a frigidity; an aloofness; a mingling of pride and apprehension. She was standing on the other side of the table, very straight,

very rigid; when he entered the room she did not move, or speak; as if waiting for the first words to come from him. When he did speak it was awkwardly enough.

"Well, you see, I haven't been long in coming to see you again."

Although externally self-possessed, her manner, as she replied with a question, was almost painfully suggestive of nervous tension.

"Have you seen Mr. Burnett?"

"Oh dear, yes; saw him yesterday."

"Then you know—all?"

"Every bit;—if anything a little over."

He was trying, ponderously enough, to jest. She was serious.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do?—Why, have a talk with you. I needn't ask how you are, because I can see you're looking better. Evidently the air of Worthing agrees with you. And do they make you comfortable here?"

"Thank you; quite. All the same Miss Bryant will turn me out into the street when she knows who I am."

"You're morbid."

"As you know, there are other lodgers; an elderly clergyman and his wife, who have been here ever so long; who know ever so many people in the place, and of whom Miss Bryant is proud. Do you think they would remain in a house which harboured me? You should see them; and hear them. Do you think that Miss Bryant would keep me, and let them go?"

"Why shouldn't she? What difference would it make? If I gave her what they are paying?"

"And do you imagine that I would remain on such conditions, in a house in which I was not wanted?"

He turned away; perceiving that the conversation was already shaping itself on uncomfortable lines.

"We'll talk about these things later on. In the meantime I'm glad you've got a fire. The almanac may call it May, but it seems to me that May in England twenty years ago was warmer. May I take off my overcoat?"

"Of course."

He was standing with his hands in the pockets of his coat. Suddenly he took one out, with an exclamation.

"Hollo!—what's this?—Why—what the dickens!—it looks like a lady's ring. How on earth did that get here,—into my overcoat pocket? Just look at this."

He was holding out something on the palm of his hand. She moved towards him, doubtfully; almost as if she suspected him of some ulterior intention. But when she saw what he was holding her doubts seemed to be forgotten; her interest seemed to heighten. She took the ring with eager fingers; staring at it with eyes which seemed to flame.

"Why!—it's my mother's ring!—Mr. Hayter!"

"Your—what's that you say?"

"It's my mother's ring. See,—here's her name; and a date. It's the ring which my father gave my mother when they were first engaged;—it's her engagement ring."

"You—you must be dreaming."

"Look for yourself; isn't that her name,—'Dorothy Osborne'?—they called me Doris so that our names shouldn't clash." He looked and saw. There, sure enough, was the name—"Dorothy Osborne"—engraved in tiny, yet still clear, letters, inside the hoop; and a date. In the girl's voice there seemed to be almost an accusatory tone. "Mr. Hayter, where did you get my mother's engagement ring? Did Mr. Burnett give it you?"

"Mr. Burnett?—goodness no!—I perceive the name; but there may be other Dorothy Osbornes in the world. What reasons have you, apart from the name, for believing this to be your mother's ring?"

"I have the best of reasons for remembering it; and, since you are already acquainted with so much of my family history I don't suppose it matters if I tell you what they are. Once, when my father had behaved very badly to my mother, she took it off her finger, and gave it me, and said, 'Doris, that is the engagement ring which your father gave me, once upon a time. Since all that it represents is at an end will you please give it him again?' So I gave it him; and she took me out of the room with her; and left my father with the ring." She paused, as if to consider; and then went on. "But—I thought, from what she told me in her letter that—that woman had it. She said she saw it on her finger."

"What woman?"

"That woman."

The words, as she uttered them, were sufficiently significant; he understood. As he looked into the girl's eager, agitated face, his thoughts travelled backwards; and—he remembered:—the ring which he had trodden on, in that unforgettable room; which he had picked up from the floor, just as he heard the rustling of a woman's skirts without. In his eagerness to see who that woman was, he must, unwittingly, have dropped the ring into his overcoat pocket. He had not worn the coat since, until that day; so that there it had lain, overlooked, till now.

"Of all the extraordinary things!"

"Where did you get it?"

He looked about him, almost apprehensively.

"I suppose there is no likelihood of our being overheard?"

"Why should there be? Miss Bryant is out; she has gone into the town;—and why should the servant listen?"

"The fact is, that, of all the queer things which have happened to me since my return to my native land, this is about the queerest."

"That you should have my mother's ring?"

"That it should be her ring!"

"Where did you get it?"

"You remember the night I saw you first, in that house—in Mount Street?"

"Was the house in Mount Street? I remember."

"I picked it up off the floor of the room in which you found me."

"Then—then it was her;—and she dropped it."

"She?—Who?"

"Whom I saw;—I have wondered."

"As I have done nothing else but wonder lately, I should like to do something else for a change. Will you be so good as to explain;—and to make your explanation perfectly clear?"

"I will try to." The girl pressed her hand to her eyes; as if they ached. Then, sitting down, resting her hands and arms upon the table, she looked steadily in front of her, as if at something which she saw with her mental eye. When she spoke it was to ask a question for which Gilbert Hayter was unprepared. "Do you believe in being haunted?"

"How do you mean,—haunted?"

"Because I've been haunted, ever since I did—what Mr. Burnett told you I did, by that woman. I kept seeing her, when I was in prison, always, day and night. Wherever I looked, she was there. I saw her even when my eyes were closed. It was not nice. I thought that I should go mad. And, when I came out, it was worse. She continually followed me."

She shut her eyes; as if to banish some unpleasant vision. Moved by her evident distress, Mr. Hayter tried to dismiss her fancies lightly.

"In other words, being badly run down, you were the victim of delusions."

"Was I? Wait till I have finished. You asked me to

explain; I am trying to. That night I don't know how I came to be where I was. You know I had had nothing to eat all day, and—she had haunted me more than ever. The policemen would not let me rest; I was dreadfully afraid that, if I was not careful, they would lock me up. So I kept moving—moving—moving, till I found myself in what you say was Mount Street,—somehow. As I was creeping along by the railings I saw, at the doorway of one of the houses, that woman. I had been seeing her all the time; but, then, she was different. I saw her—plainly; and she saw me; and, when she saw me, she was frightened. She moved back quickly into the house, and I went blundering after her. I blundered into that room; and when I found you, and not her, I couldn't make it out. And I haven't been able to since. I have kept wondering if my senses were still playing me a trick; or, if that time, it was really her."

"I imagine that it was, that time."

"Did you see her?"

"That is a point on which I am as much in the dark as you are. I saw a woman, out in the street; and I heard one, in the house."

"I don't understand."

"Frankly, I don't either."

"You are very mysterious."

"I am; because I cannot help it. I have been, and still am, the subject of a very singular mystification."

"What do you mean? Is there anything you don't wish to tell me?"

"It's this way. That night I went out in search of adventures; and I had a most unpleasant one."

"Was I part of it?"

"You were the only pleasant part of it."

"Thank you. Then I am sorry for the rest." She was regarding him shrewdly; as if endeavouring to read his thoughts.

"What could she have been doing in that house,—that woman? Whose house was it?"

"The house is Lord Sabin's, who, I am given to understand, is a very eccentric personage. What she could have been doing in it, if she was there, is a point I should very much like to solve. —You might do me a favour; tell me what she looks like;—describe her."

"I can't do that. I can hardly bear to speak of her; but—I'll draw her for you." Taking a drawing-block and some pencils out of a drawer in a little table which stood before the window, she began to sketch something on it, with a rapidity, and an assurance, which he observed with surprise. Her fingers never paused, either to alter or consider, but went straight on, towards what was evidently a definite goal. In a space of time which seemed to him to be almost incredibly short she handed him the block on which she had been working. "That is her; have you seen that woman before?"

He gazed at it in amazement. On it was what appeared to him to be a finished sketch of a woman. She was drawn full length; in walking costume—she, indeed, was walking. There was about it an irresistible effect of life, which was not only excellently done, but which was also intensely characteristic; you could not doubt that it had been done from a living subject. The figure was drawn from the side, but the face was turned to the beholder. Hayter was struck by the suggestion of impudence, and something more than impudence, which the whole thing presented. The woman was taller than the average; and, also, bigger; what some men euphoniously call a fine woman. She was not so much over-dressed, as elaborately dressed; it was wonderful how the girl had brought out her own consciousness of the fact that she was well dressed. She strutted, rather than walked. Impudence was in her face; her devil-may-care bearing. On her face was the something more than impudence; Hayter would have found it difficult to define

precisely what it was;—it was the something which he would have expected to look at him out of the face of a devil.

"That is the woman as I saw her in Piccadilly, that day."

He understood which day.

"I should say it was wonderfully like."

"It ought to be. I've seen her often enough—in visions. Have you ever seen her?"

"No, I think not. But I don't know if you are aware that you've drawn a representation of a type."

"You mean that there are other women not unlike her? Then I'm sorry that I'm a woman. But that I always have been."

"Why? You need not be. All women are not like her."

"As if I did not know it."

He knew that she was thinking of her mother.

"One thing this shows plainly—that you're an artist."

"I hoped that I should be once."

"Once. You are now. I don't pretend to be a judge of that kind of thing, but I'm sure you could get money for drawings like this, and plenty of it."

"I have had money for my sketches."

"And you'll have it again. You give me some of them, and I'll take them up with me to town, and you'll see how much money I get."

"Thank you; you are very good. And if you get none you'll buy them yourself. I know. I prefer to do my own hawking. I have already sent some sketches up to town; I was working at them all yesterday, until late last night; they went this morning. And, although I am speaking of my own work, I know that they are good ones, of their kind; I seemed to have a sort of inspiration. And, as you say, I can draw, after a fashion. I always could, even when I was a tiny tot. If I sell them, and get the money, I hope to be able to relieve you of the burden of my support before the month is out."

Hayter was silent for some moments, looking at her drawings. Then he said, in softer tones than he had hitherto used—

"You don't speak very kindly;—I don't feel it a burden."

"But I do. And if you were dependent on the charity of a perfect stranger for the food you eat, and the clothes that you stood up in, you'd feel it a burden."

"Even if I did I trust I shouldn't necessarily regard that perfect stranger as my enemy."

"I'm not so sure; I believe you would; I believe you're just that sort of man."

"I am?"

"You are. I believe that if you were in my position, and I in yours, you'd—you'd feel like hating me."

"Then do you feel like hating me?"

"What does it matter what I feel?"

"It does matter; I think it matters.—Seriously; what do you wish me to do? Walk right out of the house, and drop out of your life, as if I'd never been?"

She was standing, with her back to him, looking out of the window; very erect, very rigid; as she had stood when he entered the room. For some time neither spoke. Then she turned.

"I'll tell you, as exactly as I can, what I do feel. I feel as if I want to, as if I must, earn my own living,—at once, now; the money for my food; for my clothes; for my lodging; and then—then I feel that I should like to have you as a friend."

"And until then?"

"Don't you understand?"

"What?"

"Don't you understand that, until then, I must have you as a friend? that I have no option?"

Hayter stood looking down, in silence, at the drawing which he was holding in his hand. Presently she continued, in a gentler voice—

"Please don't think that I am horrid; I don't mean to be; or that I am unconscious of all that you have done; how—how you kept the breath in my wretched little body, and are keeping it still, and how you gave me these pretty clothes to wear. I'm too conscious;—that's it! There may be girls who are looking out for benefactors;—I had almost said anonymous benefactors, because you really were anonymous at first; and who are willing to behave very nicely to them, and to keep on behaving very nicely, in return for such material assistance as you are rendering me; but I'm not one. I'm not fashioned like that,—somehow. I—I want my pennies to be my own pennies; and I shan't be happy till they are."

He looked up, at the eager, excited, almost tremulous figure; and he smiled.

"You're perfectly right. The only mistake you make is that you treat small things as if they were great;—too seriously."

"Do I?—Consider what my experience of life has been."

"That's so.—You remember that you told me that you could do nothing worth doing?"

"I was afraid I had forgotten how to draw."

"Well,—you haven't; here's the actual proof. Make tons of pennies. I shall be happy to receive back the trifling sum I invested in you; you know I told you it was an investment; and I've never had a moment's doubt about it's being a good one."

She smiled; and sighed.

"I only hope I shall be able to give it you back, before very long; it—it will make me nearly happy."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WOMAN IN RESIDENCE

EARLY in the week following Gilbert Hayter favoured Mr. Burnett with another call. When he was shown into the lawyer's room he found that, beside Mr. Burnett, it contained two other occupants. One, a short, cobby-built, grey-haired, parchment-faced gentleman he was told was "Mr. Hart, my partner." The other, a tall, rather leggy, elaborately dressed young man, was introduced as, "Mr. Beaumont Fortescue, of whom I spoke to you the other day,—Lord Sabin's next heir. Mr. Fortescue, this is Mr. Hayter, who saw what was not improbably that ill-gotten forty thousand pounds upon Lord Sabin's table."

The young man was disposed to be friendly.

"Very glad to meet you, Mr. Hayter; heard about your adventure in Mount Street the other night; seems to have been rather sporting."

Mr. Hayter's rejoinder was grim.

"Distinctly sporting."

"Must have been rummy seeing a chap sitting in his chair with his throat cut; and then to find him all-alive-oh! directly afterwards. Fancy they were rotting you,—eh?"

"They were certainly doing something, Mr. Fortescue."

"Queer card, my uncle; sort of joker; turns up in every hand and always does you.—So you saw a few sovereigns on his table?"

"About a peck."

"My aunt! About half a pint would do for me to get along with."

"It is only too likely, Mr. Hayter, that that money you saw was the proceeds of nothing more nor less than sheer robbery. Proceedings have been commenced against him, but he puts every obstacle in our way. He not only pays no heed to our communications; but, apparently, he pays no heed to his own lawyer either. He is a really remarkable man. In the meantime forty thousand pounds, to which he has not a vestige of right, is quite probably vanishing into air."

This was Mr. Hart, the senior partner. Mr. Fortescue spoke with the light-heartedness of youth.

"If he'd only hand me half I'd compound the felony,—rather! For twenty thou. what wouldn't I do? But he wouldn't give me sixpence to buy an ounce of 'bacca;—he's a dear man."

Mr. Burnett asked a question.

"Didn't I understand you to say, Mr. Hayter, that that night you suspected the presence of a woman in the house?"

"Suspected is a mild way of phrasing it, Mr. Burnett."

"It's an odd coincidence that a woman does seem to have been in almost constant residence ever since. Who she is nobody seems to know, but we are given to understand that she is a very singular looking person. The scandal bids fair to be great; all his lordship's acquaintance are avoiding the house. Lord Sabin's conduct has always been sufficiently notorious; but he has not hitherto gone to the length of installing a person of that class on his own premises."

"So long as he doesn't marry her——" began young Fortescue.

His lawyer cut him short.

"Marry her!—pray don't let us contemplate anything so monstrous."

His client laughed.

"Let's hope that he won't contemplate it either. Good-bye, Mr. Hayter; glad to have met you;—hope to have a chat with you some day about that lark you had in Mount Street."

The young gentleman went; when he had gone Mr. Burnett offered what was possibly meant for an explanation.

"Having told Mr. Fortescue what you told me, Mr. Hayter, he was extremely anxious to make your acquaintance; so when I heard of your arrival I asked them to bring you in at once, that you might have an opportunity of meeting. Mr. Beaumont Fortescue has a very fine natural disposition, but—he is still young."

"Isn't that rather an advantage than otherwise?"

"If you were in our position you would be inclined to wish that all young men of large expectations could be born about forty years old; at forty one may be expected to have at least the elements of common-sense."

"How about Lord Sabin?—isn't he more than forty?—has wisdom come to him with advancing years?"

"Lord Sabin is— I will content myself with saying that Lord Sabin is an exception to every rule."

The senior partner remarked—

"Entirely between ourselves, Mr. Hayter, one inclines to the opinion that it would have been a good thing for everyone concerned—including his lordship himself—if he had been as dead as you supposed."

"Has either of you," asked Hayter, "seen anything of the lady who you say is at present in residence in Mount Street?" It appeared that neither partner had. "Do you know who that is?"

He handed Mr. Burnett the sketch which Doris Osborne had drawn for him. The lawyer observed it shrewdly.

"There is something about it which is reminiscent; and yet— Is it a portrait?"

"I have been given to understand that it is a portrait."

His partner, taking it from him, detected the original at once.

"It is the second Mrs. Osborne. So far as I know I only saw her on a single occasion; but then it was under circumstances which impressed her personality on me; the picture I carried away with me was just this. It is excellently done. Who is the artist?"

"Miss Osborne."

"You are still in communication with that young lady?"

"I am."

"And how are things going with her?"

"These are still early days to give a definite answer; as the doctors put it, as well as can be expected.—I have reason to believe that the original of that drawing was in Lord Sabin's house on the night I was; and, from what you say, I shouldn't be surprised if she's in it still."

His words seemed to affect both partners disagreeably. Mr. Burnett spoke.

"That would be worse even than our worst fears, Mr. Hayter. May I ask what reason you have for suggesting such an unpleasant possibility?"

"I am not disposed to go into them at length just now; but—they exist. Tell me, what sort of person is this woman?"

"Unspeakable;—not only notorious, but infamous. If a fraction of the tales which are told of her are true, in the most nefarious sense, a dangerous woman; a creature who, to gain her end, would stick—literally—at nothing."

"Then was it not unfortunate that Miss Osborne did not entirely accomplish her purpose? would she not have been rendering the world a service?"

"Hush, Mr. Hayter; such sentiments must not be uttered here. It is no excuse for crime that its objective is a criminal;

you are not entitled, either in law or equity, to rob a thief. We can only hope that you are wrong in hinting that this woman is at present an inmate of Lord Sabin's house. If such, most unfortunately, were the case, then—" the partners exchanged glances—"then anything might happen."

"I wonder," said Gilbert Hayter to himself, as he wended his way from the precincts of Lincoln's Inn Fields, "if that woman, for the sake of a little variety, were to marry Lord Sabin, what the world would say if Mr. Beaumont Fortescue, in his turn, were to try to kill her."

CHAPTER XIX

A PILGRIMAGE

GILBERT HAYTER sat in his sitting-room at the hotel. On the table in front of him was a small leather box; which had seen much service. He had bought it, for the sum of five shillings, perhaps more than five-and-twenty years ago. He was then but a boy; five shillings was five shillings; why he had expended so considerable an amount on such an article he could not recollect. It had probably been in one of his rasher moments. Yet the speculation, however it had looked at the time, had not turned out a bad one. The box had been in his possession ever since; whatever else had gone by the board, and, at various times, a good deal had, he had stuck to that. He could not have explained exactly why; but he had.

And now he had it on the table, and was examining its contents. He knew well enough what they were; they were the bridge by means of which, whenever the mood was on him, he returned to the past. He told himself he was not an imaginative man; yet, each time he opened the box, there seemed to issue from it faint airs from the land of the ghosts. Had he been a less lonely man those airs might not have been so obvious. As it was they whispered to him of the only two women who had ever had part or parcel in his life.

Their portraits were on the table; five of them;—two of his mother; the other three were of the other woman. One represented his mother soon after she was married; when she

was still young; nearly fifty years ago. She had been married nearly eight years when he was born, her only child. It was an old-fashioned miniature, indifferently done; but the woman's face looked out from it, up at her grizzled son, pleased with herself, and happy. The second portrait had been taken perhaps twenty years later; he had been in the world about twelve of them. She still looked as if the world went very well with her. And so it did, till her husband died; and her son left her to go across the sea. She had died while he was in Africa; had been in her grave more than two years before he even knew that she was dead. And, when he did know, he was not the owner of sufficient money to buy a postage-stamp. The world had seemed to him pretty grey just then.

Mary Carman was the name of the other woman. She had been his one romance;—a somewhat drab romance his only one had been. Nothing amazed him afterwards so much as the reflection that he ever could have loved her. He knew now, and had known for years, that they had had nothing in common. She was not even pretty; there were her portraits to prove it. She was a homely, practical, careful-minded young woman; an admitted member of the local Baptist Church. And yet because she refused to marry him on an early date which he himself had named, he had realised his little capital, at a sacrifice, and rushed off with it, post-haste, to far-off regions to which civilisation had not yet come. What a fool he must have been! It seemed incredible that he could have been quite such a fool, and yet the most amazing part of it was that it was ludicrously true.

After all, how much he owed her! If it had not been for her—for her plain common-sense as opposed to his romantic folly!—he might have been her husband; the father of her children; and—Heaven only knew what else beside. At least he had escaped from that. Providence had been better to him than he deserved. He thought of a pair of grey eyes

which he had lately seen set deep in a girl's head; and—was thankful.

Possibly it was because he had so little else to occupy him, that, during the last day or two, those grey eyes had been in his thoughts so much; and the girl who had them. In what was euphoniously called the hotel library he had found a bound volume of an illustrated paper. It contained an account of Doris Osborne's offence; and of her subsequent trial; together with a large number of pictures illustrating the various phases of the story. He realised, for the first time, how largely the whole affair must have bulked in the public eye;—it was the principal topic of interest in several numbers of the paper. In the large proportion of the pictures the girl herself was portrayed. In some illustrations of the trial there was what purported to be a portrait, "drawn by our own artist," of "the prisoner as she appeared in the dock." He was unpleasantly impressed by its verisimilitude. The artist, with a deft hand and a quick eye, had caught her in what he himself had already learnt was a characteristic pose; very straight; her head a little raised; with that expression on her countenance as of one who dared to look the whole world in the face;—and, withal, such a child. His blood grew hot as he thought of the obloquy which was cast upon her by this hideous publicity. He realised, with a tightening of the heart, that what the presses had printed they had printed; and that it would remain, for ever, for dry-as-dusts of the future to print and print again;—an indelible record.—He would have given a great deal for a sponge to wipe it all out. Had a genie of the fairy tales proffered him a boon, he would have chosen the power to erase, and the privilege of using that power once;—that episode would have vanished out of Doris Osborne's life as if it had never been.

He returned the portraits of his mother to the little leather box; together with the pictures of the blameless Mary Carman; and on the morrow he went on a pilgrimage to his native place.

In his time it had been a tiny sea-coast Essex village; now it had become a popular watering-place. In the summer cheap trains took down crowds of excursionists by land; a fleet of steamboats conveyed other crowds by sea. He was astounded at the change. Already the coming hosts had cast their shadow before; obviously the one ambition of the place was to gratify their well-known tastes. All the familiar landmarks had vanished. Everything was brand-new; and jerry-built. His mother's house had gone; and the rambling cottage in which Mary Carman had lived with her parents. He was not even able to identify the spots on which they once had stood, and that not so long ago; he thought it was thereabouts, but was not quite sure. In the churchyard he found the only positive proof that this was indeed the place which he once had known; it took the shape of two gravestones. On one there was this inscription—

IN MEMORY
OF
GILBERT HAYTER
WHO DIED NOVEMBER 13, 18—
AGED 59 YEARS.

It was with something of a shock that the present Gilbert Hayter saw his name cut there in the stone; and realised that it was his father's. The second half of the inscription brought the sudden tears into his eyes.

ALSO OF
ELIZABETH HAYTER
THE BELOVED WIFE OF THE ABOVE
WHO FELL ASLEEP MAY 28, 18—
"IN DEATH THEY ARE NOT DIVIDED."

It would seem as if those last words were true. And what could a man want better than to lie at last in the same grave with the woman he had loved; that woman to whom he had been the one man in the world.

It hurt their son to know that he had had no hand in placing that stone where it was. He would have liked to think that they knew that he was standing by their resting-place.

On the other tombstone the legend was as follows :—

BENEATH THIS STONE
LIES
ALL THAT WAS MORTAL OF
MARY CARMAN
SPINSTER
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
JANUARY 8, 189—
AGED THIRTY-FOUR YEARS
IN THE SURE
AND CERTAIN
HOPE
OF A GLORIOUS RESURRECTION.
"HER LIFE WAS A SHINING EXAMPLE, AND IN DEATH SHE HAD
HER CERTAIN REWARD."

Gilbert Hayter thought that was probable ; he only wondered what form that reward had taken.

On his way up to town, shining at him, as it were, through the mists which were born of his pilgrimage, were a pair of grey eyes.

CHAPTER XX

A BALL AT COVENT GARDEN

THAT night Gilbert Hayter went to a fancy-dress ball at Covent Garden Theatre. The transition from the serious occupation of the day to the purposeless frivolity of the night was not so surprising as might at first sight appear. The truth was that the man's solitude was almost tragic. It was a position for which he had not bargained. He had known loneliness in Africa, but it was not loneliness like this; there he had been alone, as the Irishman had it, "by himself"; here he was alone in a crowd. In all the great city there was not one creature who was anything to him but a chance, and transitory, acquaintance. The people about him had friends; or, at least, companions with whom they were in sympathy. He had not one. Already the feeling that this was so was beginning to oppress him; to escape it he went to a Covent Garden Ball.

It was about one o'clock when he got there; just as the people were beginning to arrive in earnest; the boxes to be filled; the floor to be crowded with dancers. The great orchestra was filling the huge building with the strains of a popular waltz. A notion he had had that the word "ball" might be a misnomer, since people might go for any and every purpose except dancing, was instantly dismissed. The magnificent expanse set apart for dancing was crammed; with persons who obviously were dancing for dancing's sake. He

noticed that while the men, generally, were in plain evening dress, most of the women were in some sort of fancy costume. A curious phantasmagoria they presented of contrasting colours and eccentricities of attire. He was tickled by the novelty of the scene; conscious of a sense of fascination as he was content to play the part of a simple spectator of the dance. It was more amusing than anything he had seen upon the stage since his return. The staidness of the formal dance was altogether absent; these people were like so many Bacchanals in their frank enjoyment of the opportunities which the waltz presented.

The music ceased; the dance was over. The floor became a pandemonium of chattering and laughing people. Hayter made the best of his way round the outer promenade. He told himself that it at least was an amusing scene; worth the guinea which he had paid at the door. Apparently all sorts of folk were represented; certainly all ages. There were beardless boys and ancient men; girls in their teens, and women into the tale of whose years it were wiser not to inquire too closely; and if about them all, men and women alike, there was something which was not quite sweet,—he had not expected to find sweetness at a Covent Garden Ball.

The house was full; people jostled each other good-humouredly, few of the boxes were without occupants; leaning against a pillar he stood to watch the fun. Before long his attention was attracted by a little scene which was taking place in a box directly opposite, on the first tier. The actors, at the moment, were a man and a woman; both were standing up, and both had opera glasses. Beyond the fact that the woman was tall nothing else could be determined; as she not only wore a scarlet domino, the hood of which was drawn over her head, but also a black velvet mask. She was looking through her glasses, and unless Hayter was mistaken, she was looking at him; and, not only so, she was calling her companion's attention to him also. The man wore an ordinary dinner jacket and

a black tie; he had not gone out of his way to attire himself for the occasion. As he stood in the front of the box he seemed unusually tall, with fair hair and moustache, and a weather-beaten face. That the woman was looking at him through her glasses, in a continuous, steady stare Hayter felt sure; though who she was, and why she stared, he had not a notion. Even more singular was the persistence with which she marked him out for her companion's inspection. When the man was apparently at a loss as to which was the particular person to whom she wished him to direct his attention, she pointed straight at Hayter with her outstretched hand. Hayter was amused; and a little intrigued. Thinking it more than likely that it was a case of mistaken identity, and that the lady in the domino was supposing him to be someone else, he remained with his back against the pillar, and let them stare.

The band began to play again; the dancers were hurrying forward to arrange their sets. A girl stopped and said—

"Won't you dance this with me?"

She was brown-haired; of medium height; not bad-looking; in a dress of some pink material, which descended no lower than her knees. She had a fan, with which she tapped the point of her chin.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"I'm with a friend, but she's got a partner. I haven't. You might dance this one with me."

"I'm afraid you'd find me in the way."

"Why?—can't you dance?"

"I'm too old."

"Nonsense!" She had come closer; a good deal closer; and, instead of her chin, was tapping her skirt front with the end of her fan; looking up at him with mischievous eyes. "Too old?—what rubbish!—you!—why, you're only a boy."

"Thank you; is that meant for a compliment?—What are they dancing?"

"Lancers."

"I haven't danced the lancers since I don't know when."

"What's that matter? Here it's go as you please. I'll pull you through; and if you get stuck you can do a step-dance all on your own; we'll do one together. Come and dance!"

"I'm very much flattered, but I'm afraid that I'm not dancing."

"Then what did you come for if you aren't going to dance?"

While he was searching for an answer to this sufficiently blunt inquiry, he became aware that someone had stopped immediately in front of where he was; someone to whom he was an object of interest. Glancing up, to his surprise he found that it was the woman in the scarlet domino, whom he had noticed in the box, and her companion, the fair-haired man. Having planted themselves immediately in front of him, and within a few feet of where he was standing, they were regarding him with an intentness which was sufficiently marked. Of the woman, since she was still hooded and masked, but little could be seen; but he perceived that the man was of about his own age; sparely, yet strongly built; hard-featured; with square jaw, and cold blue eyes. So soon as Hayter looked up the woman said, in a tone of voice which was plainly meant to be audible to all who chose to listen—

"That's the man;—look at him well. Isn't he the kind of creature who you would expect would choose such a companion?"

Hayter looked at her without having the dimmest apprehension of her meaning. The girl with the fan asked—

"Am I the companion she's talking about? If so it's like her cheek. Who's she?"

"I have not a notion;—isn't she a friend of yours?"

The girl glanced at him with sudden suspicion.

"Don't you know her? Are you sure she isn't a friend of yours?"

"Quite sure. I fancy that the lady is labouring under some misapprehension."

The words were heard by the woman in the domino.

"Oh no, I'm not, Gilbert Hayter. But you're quite right in saying that I'm no friend of yours, as you'll soon find."

Without another word, or giving him the chance to utter one, she went off on her companion's arm. Gilbert Hayter followed her with his eyes. When he looked round again the girl with the fan had also gone. Possibly, misinterpreting the situation, she had deemed discretion to be the better part of valour. Puzzled, Gilbert Hayter continued where he was; glancing, now and then, in the direction in which the woman had gone. Who was she? Plainly, if he did not know her, she knew him. She had called him by his name. Yet there was nothing about her which suggested anyone with whom he was familiar; he decided that, if he came across her again, he would ask her, straightforwardly, who she was; and why, in such a place, at such an hour, she had addressed him in such hostile tones.

Wandering round the back of the orchestra, where were the refreshment bar, and the tables which, between the dances, were always crowded, he was addressed by a voice which he felt that he ought to know, and, looking, found that it belonged to Mr. Beaumont Fortescue.

"Good-evening, Mr. Hayter; pretty lively,—eh? All the fun of the fair,—what? Let me introduce you to my friend Sheringham, commonly known as the Bloater, because he's so beastly fishy.—I congratulate you, Mr. Hayter, you're a sportsman. Old Burnett was telling me about what you've done for old Osborne's daughter. I always have said that she had jolly hard lines; and therefore I say that a man who did for her

what you have is a sportsman. What will you have to drink, Mr. Hayter? shall we break into a bottle? I'm pretty drunk already, and so's the Bloater, but don't let that make any difference to you."

"I'm not drunk," said the Bloater. "Speak for yourself."

"Very well, Bloater, I'll speak for myself; and I say,—Hayter, what's it going to be?"

The gentleman addressed saw quite clearly that for Mr. Fortescue and his friend it would be just as well that it should be nothing. Fortescue's entirely unexpected, and wholly uncalled-for, allusion to Doris Osborne was in itself a sufficient indication of his condition. As Hayter was smilingly explaining that he didn't think that he cared for anything in the shape of liquid refreshment, Mr. Fortescue gave what was very like a whoop.

"What ho!—my prophetic soul, my uncle!—the old dear!—fancy his being in a place like this when he ought to have been in bed hours ago;—I'm surprised at him.—I say, Hayter, just look,—there's my uncle!" Mr. Hayter, doing as he was desired, perceived a person with whom, as it seemed to him, he was already too familiar; the chief actor in the strange adventure in Mount Street,—Lord Sabin. He was at some little distance, and was looking about him with the frank curiosity which was the note of the hour. Beside him was an individual whom Gilbert Hayter recognised with a sensation almost of bewilderment;—it was the stranger of plethoric habit, who had thrust himself on him in the smoking-room; and who, having bombarded him with questions, had shown such singular symptoms of agitation at the mention of Doris Osborne. While he was wondering what the juxtaposition of the pair might signify, Mr. Fortescue announced his intention of playing the dutiful nephew. "After all, he is my uncle; I don't think a man ought to be hard upon his uncle. I'll go and ask him what he means by behaving like a dam thief; and then

if he says it's all right, we'll shake hands, and then you'll find that we shall be the best of friends; and then, Mr. Hayter, I shall have much pleasure in introducing you to my uncle. You watch and see."

They watched. As the young gentleman started on his somewhat singular quest, his friend remarked,—and in doing so at once proved himself to be the more sober of the two—

"Beau's an ass. Old Sabin's a beast. If Beau doesn't look out he'll give him one for himself."

Mr. Sheringham proved himself, on that occasion, to be a true prophet; from where they were they could see that something of the sort took place. The sanguine Mr. Fortescue, advancing with outstretched hand, addressed Lord Sabin with what he probably intended for words of kindness. His lordship, however, paying no heed to him, to his hand, or to his words, putting out his arm, thrust him aside as if he were some slight obstruction, and continued, with unruffled countenance, to advance; his nephew, leaning on the table against which he had been brought to anchor, standing staring after him with a somewhat singular visage. On being joined by his friend and Mr. Hayter, it was with some apparent difficulty that he unburdened his soul.

"Most extraordinary thing;—most extraordinary. Do you know he said that he didn't know me;—positively said he didn't know me;—and he looked as if he didn't. Most extraordinary thing;—I'm going to ask him what he means;—I'm not going to be told by my own uncle that he doesn't know me;—most ridiculous."

He was persuaded, however, to remain where he was.

"Have a lemon squash, Mr. Fortescue, and leave Lord Sabin alone;—a lemon squash will do you good."

The young gentleman's bearing was possibly intended to be haughty.

"A lemon squash, sir?—did I understand you to say a

lemon squash? Do you wish, sir, to make me ill? I never take them."

None the less a lemon squash was ordered from the waiter; and presently the young gentleman was seated with a glass in front of him; from which he was sipping, perhaps unconsciously, the obnoxious fluid. Either that, or his encounter with his uncle, seemed to have on him a sobering influence; although he could not get away from the theme of the slight to which he deemed himself to have been subjected.

"You know, it isn't as though he'd only cut me; I wouldn't mind his cutting me; certainly not,—such an old dear as he is; rather flattered than otherwise. But it was his telling me he didn't know me. 'Get out of my way,' he said, just like that. 'I don't know you.' And, mind you, he looked as if he didn't know me. I know how a man looks at a stranger; and he looked at me as if I was a stranger. Next time I see him I'm going to ask him what he means; and I'm going to make him tell me."

An opportunity to do as he said arose almost directly afterwards. As they still sat at the table; and Mr. Fortescue still talked; while the others, for the most part, listened; Lord Sabin reappeared. Hayter was the first to see him; and had it not been for something which startled him into forgetfulness of the young gentleman seated by him, he would have endeavoured to conceal from him the fact of his uncle's proximity, and to get him away before he had himself discovered it. That something was a woman;—the woman in the scarlet domino. When he saw her last her countenance was hidden; now the mask was gone,—he saw her well. She was Lord Sabin's companion. As they advanced together, side by side, his lordship said something to her which induced her to look at him and laugh;—a laugh which, to Gilbert Hayter's perhaps hypercritical fancy, had a very curious quality. Behind them, evidently of the same party, were the man who had been

with her in the box, and the plethoric stranger of the smoking-room. The quartette were quite close before Mr. Fortescue perceived who was approaching. When he did, without giving the others a hint of his intention, he rose from his seat with the rapidity of a jack-in-the-box and hastened towards them; planting himself in front of Lord Sabin with a tolerable appearance of sobriety; which, however, was slightly marred by the question which he asked, and the manner of its asking.

"May I ask what you meant by saying that you didn't know me?"

"What I meant?—what the deuce is the fellow driving at?" The peer fumbled with his eye-glass, which was suspended across his shirt-front on a narrow piece of ribbon. When he had it fixed he looked the young gentleman very straight in the face; with no show of friendliness. "I'll tell you what I meant; I meant what I said. I don't know you because I never saw you in my life before. Officer!" He turned to a policeman, who was standing by;—it had struck Hayter as being one of the most characteristic features of the entertainment that an ample supply of constables was very much in evidence. "Here's a friend of yours;—look after him."

"Poor dear!" said the woman in the domino to Mr. Fortescue, with a laugh. "Try another lemon!"

The four passed on; talking together in the apparent enjoyment of some jest. The constable remarked to the seemingly amazed young gentleman—

"If I were you I should leave strangers alone; some of them don't like it."

"Strangers!" exclaimed Mr. Fortescue. "That's Lord Sabin!"

"I daresay I know that perhaps better than you do."

"But—I'm his nephew."

"Are you? He didn't seem to think so. You'd better

act on the lady's advice,—try another lemon. Only this time let it be a lemon."

The young gentleman returned to his seat at the table with the amazed look still on his face.

"That beats anything!—that does beat anything! Did you hear him say he'd never seen me in his life before?—and, though I'm his nephew, I'm wondering if he has."

Hayter, leaning towards him across the table, said, in lowered tones—

"Do you know who the woman was who was with him?"

"No;—some nice old thing;—he's a dear."

"That's the second Mrs. Osborne."

"The—you don't mean—not the woman Osborne's daughter went for?"

"Unless I'm seriously mistaken she's that woman."

"Great—great Jonah! There really is no accounting for taste but—what the how-d'ye-do is the old dear doing with her?"

"That's what I should rather like to know, for reasons which are probably not the same as yours."

Soon after the three men set off for a stroll; induced, chiefly, by something which Hayter had said. When they reached a point of vantage he directed Mr. Fortescue's attention to the box in which he had first seen the woman in the scarlet domino. Mr. Fortescue uttered an exclamation.

"What ho!—there's dear old Crowden!"

"Lord Sabin's servant!" corroborated Gilbert Hayter.

"He seems to be in sole possession of the entire box."

What the young gentleman said was correct. Mr. Crowden, his lordship's immaculate valet, seated on the edge of the box, was looking about him through a pair of glasses, as much at his ease as if he owned it. Something—perhaps a sudden intuition—caused him to glance towards where the three men were standing. When he saw them, as if recalled

to a consciousness of his position, he withdrew towards the back of the box. As he did so the door was opened, and the quartette entered, evidently just returned from their little promenade. He immediately addressed himself to Lord Sabin and the woman, saying something which caused them to turn sharply towards the house. In reply to what seemed to be a question from the woman Crowden pointed to the three men. Instantly the woman and Lord Sabin uttered what appeared to be simultaneous exclamations of surprise. It seemed as if some warm discussion was taking place. Then, as if actuated by some common impulse, all five persons quitted the box.

"It strikes me," said Mr. Fortescue, "that something queer is taking place up there."

"Something very queer indeed," echoed Gilbert Hayter.

"It almost looks," continued the young gentleman, "as if they'd made a bolt of it."

CHAPTER XXI

ANONYMOUS

MR. HAYTER was still in bed when a telegram was brought to his room. While the page waited to learn if there was an answer, he opened and read it.

"Please will you come at once. I must see you at once to avoid serious unpleasantness, ELLEN BRYANT."

Reading it again to make sure that he was sufficiently in his waking senses to have got its meaning, he took the blank form which the boy was carrying, and scribbled a reply.

"Coming this morning, GILBERT HAYTER."

Then he returned to his pillows for some moments, to consider what the wire might portend. That it should have come from Miss Bryant, and not from the girl, struck him as ominous. Something disagreeable had happened; or was about to happen. While he dressed, and breakfasted; all the way down to Worthing; he kept asking himself what it might be. When he reached Myrtle Cottage he quickly knew.

Miss Bryant herself opened the door to him; plainly in a flutter of trepidation.

"Oh, Mr. Gilbert, I'm so glad you've come; I've been looking for you all the morning; I did hope you'd come by an earlier

train; I'm in such a condition of nerves that I don't know what I should have done if your coming had been delayed,—I really do not know. I have never felt in all my life what I have felt to-day. It has been a terrible strain;—terrible! Especially when you consider my position;—and at my age too."

She led the way into a room at the back which was apparently her own particular sanctum. As soon as he was able he asked a question.

"Is Miss Olive not well?"

"Well?—Oh yes, she's well enough; perfectly well;—so far as I know there's nothing the matter with her health."

"That's good. So long as one has health there isn't very much wrong;—don't you think so?—Is she in?"

"No, she is not in;—fortunately she is not in."

The old lady was rubbing her hands together as if she were polishing the palms; the ribbons in her cap were tremulous. Hayter observed her with growing wonder.

"Why do you say fortunately, Miss Bryant?"

By way of reply she showered questions on him with a violence, and a volubility, which seemed to him to be comical.

"Don't you know why it is fortunately? Is it necessary that you should ask me? Have you yourself no notion? no sense of right? no consideration either for yourself, or for me? Have you treated me fairly, Mr. Gilbert?"

"I trust so."

"I trust so also, Mr. Gilbert; with all my heart I trust it. But I have my doubts; I am sorry to say I have the very gravest doubts. When I consider that I was your dear mother's constant companion for so many years; and what a saint she was; so particular about everything; and with such a strong sense of what was proper and right and wrong; I confess that I ask myself if her son, her only son, whom I held in my arms as a child, though wayward and headstrong,—as you know you

have been, Mr. Gilbert—could ever be so dead to the teachings which she instilled into you when you were young."

"Come, Miss Bryant, what is all this leading up to? You seem to be in a bit of a stew."

"I'll tell you what it's leading up to; I'll tell you very quickly;—and I must ask you not to laugh at me."

"Nothing is farther from my intention than to laugh at you. I only hope that whatever is worrying you is much less serious than you suppose."

"As to that it is you who must decide." The old lady, having put on her spectacles; taken a bunch of keys from a pocket beneath her skirt; unlocked a desk which stood on a shelf; took out from it a large, square envelope, which she handed to Mr. Hayter. "That will show you if it is serious."

He studied the type-written address.

"When did you get this?"

"By the first post this morning. So soon as I had somewhat recovered from the first shock,—I fear I never shall recover altogether,—I telegraphed to you. I felt it would be wiser."

"I see it has the Worthing postmark, and was posted last night."

"So it seems."

"Am I to look at what's inside?"

"Of course;—for what other purpose do you suppose I have given it you?"

He wished she had not given it to him at all; although he did not choose to say so. He was conscious of a curious disinclination to investigate the contents of the envelope. Had he done as he desired, he would have torn what he was holding into shreds, and burnt it, unread. But with Miss Bryant's accusatory eyes glaring at him through her glasses, that was impossible. So he took out the sheet of paper it contained. It was a large sheet; and on it was this type-written communi-

cation. There was neither address; nor date; nor beginning; nor end.

"Is Miss Bryant aware that the girl who calls herself Olive is in reality Doris Osborne, the creature who tried to murder her unfortunate stepmother; and who, because she did not succeed in doing so quite, was sentenced to the totally inadequate term of twelve months' hard labour? The girl was only released from gaol a day or two before she was introduced into Miss Bryant's house as a lodger. What was the man's motive in introducing her Miss Bryant may be left to conjecture; also what was the nature of his interest in the girl. Since it appears possible that Miss Bryant has been made the victim of a conspiracy, this information is given her to enable her to rid her house, without scandal, of such a dangerous character. Should, however, the girl continue to be an inmate of her establishment for another twenty-four hours, Miss Bryant's other lodgers, as well as her innocent neighbours, will be informed who this disreputable young woman really is. The fact that Miss Bryant is harbouring such a notorious criminal will also be published in the local press; since it is obviously desirable, in the interests of the public safety, that the inhabitants should be warned that this bloodthirsty young criminal is in their midst. But as, should it be necessary to take such steps, the consequences will be very serious for Miss Bryant herself, she is advised to eject this female butcher immediately on receipt of this. Care will be taken that the girl does not insinuate herself into any other respectable house in Worthing."

Having read to an end, Mr. Hayter lowered the paper, and stroked his chin. Then he read it again. He told himself that, after all, this was precisely what he might have expected; though the confession came, perhaps, a trifle late. Seeing that he remained silent Miss Bryant spoke.

"Mr. Gilbert, is that true?"

He went to the window, with the paper hanging from his fingers.

"Suppose it were,—what then?"

His curt inquiry served to open the floodgates of the other's eloquence. For a second or two she stared at him—so much of him as could be seen from the back—with parted lips, as if something in his manner had taken away her breath. Then the torrent came. One would hardly have credited the frail-looking old lady with such a capacity for vigorous speech.

"What then?—You ask me if it's true, what then?—Mr. Gilbert!—that girl!—in God's eyes, a murderess!—in my house!—brought here by you!—under the pretence that she's your old friend's child, and that you're her guardian! What have I done that you should have done this to me? how have I injured you or yours that you should have forced this creature upon me under cover of such a cloud of lies? I would rather have gone into the workhouse than have allowed her foot to cross my threshold; and to think that she has slept under my roof; sat at my table; been treated as if she were a member of my own family; even introduced to my friends,—I only introduced her yesterday to the vicar's wife!—what will they say, what will they think, when they know who she is? If your mother's son treats me like this, plays me such a trick, takes such advantage of my simplicity,—because that is what you have done; you have traded on the fact of my being—what your own mother was—a simple old countrywoman; oh, Mr. Gilbert, I did not think it of you!—in whom shall I trust, in whom shall I have any confidence?—And you say, if it's true,—what then?"

"You use exaggerated language."

"How can I,—if what that letter says is true?—Is it true?"

"Truth is relative. This screed is compact of lies."

"Truth is truth. I want none of your hair-splitting; answer a plain question;—is the girl you brought into my house that girl?"

"If you'll give me a chance I'll tell you all that it is necessary you should know."

"All that it is necessary that I should know? I'll not trust your judgment of what that is; it is necessary that I should know everything; and I will. Is she the daughter of an old friend of yours?"

"No; that I'm afraid she's not."

He smiled;—Miss Bryant saw the smile, and it did not tend to soothe her.

"Are you her guardian?"

"I am."

He smiled again; which moved her to greater wrath.

"You dare to stand there and tell me so! Shame on you, Gilbert Hayter, shame! Where did you meet her? How long have you known her?—who constituted you her guardian?—you who, according to your own tale, are only just returned to England, and she who is only just out of gaol? Was there no other house, where they welcome such guardians and such wards, that you should have brought the pollution of her presence into mine?"

"Miss Bryant, you allow your tongue too much licence."

"Do I? What did you do when you lied to me? when you brought that woman into my house under the false pretence that she was your old friend's daughter?—did you not allow your tongue too much licence then?"

"I had not supposed you could be so uncharitable."

"We'll talk of charity when you've told the truth. I ask you again to tell me, plainly, yes or no, is the woman you brought into my house the woman spoken of in that letter?"

"Can't you see for yourself what is the spirit which actuates this villainous concoction? the devilish malignancy which inspires every line? how the whole thing is a monstrous exaggeration? You have seen this girl; she has shared your home;—you say she has shared your table. You are a judge of character. Can you not perceive for yourself that she is not the kind of person this screed represents her to be?"

"How can I tell? Nowadays God does not permit the brand of Cain to be visible even on the forehead of a murderess."

"She is not that; as you very well know."

"If she is Doris Osborne she is, in God's eyes, as you know;—because she meant to murder. I read every word of the case—it was a dreadful case!—and I remember perfectly well that that was clearly proved."

"If you read the case then you know how much excuse she had."

"Excuse!—for murder!—Gilbert Hayter!—is it your mother's son who talks of excuse for murder? You make me afraid of you; I don't know what manner of man you can be, to talk of excuse for murder. I—I don't want to have anything more to say to you. Will you please tell me, is she Doris Osborne?"

"I'll tell you who she is, and what she is. She's as good, and true, and pure, and clean, and innocent a woman as you are; and a much more injured one. If, Miss Bryant, you suggest the contrary, it is you who are the sinner, and not she."

"You dare to say that to me!—you dare!" The little old lady broke into a sudden gust of fury. "Gilbert Hayter, if I were a man I'd take you by the shoulders, and I'd run you out into the street, and—and your trollop!"

Hardly had she ceased to scream, for it could scarcely be said that she was speaking, when the door opened, and the girl came into the room.

"Mr. Hayter!—you here!—What—whatever is the matter?"

CHAPTER XXII

SPEEDING THE PARTING GUEST

SHE had her hat on; in one gloved hand was a small parcel, in the other one of those leather hand-bags which some women try to delude themselves into believing are adequate substitutes for pockets. Evidently she had just come from the street; equally plainly the fresh air had done her good. A slight flush was on her cheeks; her eyes sparkled. Worthing breezes — or something else — had worked a miracle, and transformed her already. One would not have supposed that, so short a time ago, she could have presented the spectacle which Gilbert Hayter was not likely to forget.

Apparently, on learning that he was in the house, she had come rushing into the room, full of the desire to greet him. The look of welcome was still in her eyes; but, as she looked from Miss Bryant to him, then back to Miss Bryant, it faded. She recognised that a disturbing element was in the atmosphere.

"Why have you come? What—what is the matter?"

Taken unawares by her appearance, at what seemed to him to be a most inopportune moment, it was a second or two before he answered; then, if he had had time to consider, he would have expressed differently what he did say.

"Nothing's the matter."

The old lady, still quivering with what appeared to him to be insensate rage, demanded.

"Do you always lie?—to everyone?"

He went close up to her.

"Miss Bryant, you told me just now what you would do if you were a man;—if you were you would understand that you would be called to account for every word you uttered; and—you'd think before you spoke. Let me beg you not to take an undue advantage of the fact that you're a woman. You have said your say, with sufficient plainness. Now I understand you. It is unnecessary for you to say anything more." He turned towards the girl; addressing her as if he intended to impress her with the conviction that nothing of consequence was happening. "How are you? I'm afraid I'm an unexpected visitor. Come into your own room; I'll talk to you there."

But the girl would not be persuaded; or deceived. She persisted in her inquiry.

"What is it?—Miss Bryant, what—what is wrong?"

Eluding Mr. Hayter, she came a few steps farther into the room, and nearer the old lady; who at once drew back, with a gesture which was eloquent.

"Don't touch me!—don't come near me!—get away!"

The girl stood still; then drew herself up very straight, that characteristic trick she had; as if in an erect attitude she found strength.

"I understand!—That is it?—So!—You see?"

The last two words, which were addressed to Hayter, were pregnant with a significance which a whole volume could not have expressed more clearly. A slight shrug of the shoulders gave to his words a wider meaning than lay upon the surface.

"What's it matter?—Come into your room; we shall be able to talk better there."

The girl still refused to act upon his hint; she remained stationary,—curiously upright.

"Thank you. I think I'll have a little conversation with Miss Bryant first.—Miss Bryant——"

But the old lady would have none of her; she cut her short.

"Don't talk to me!—don't speak!—go away!"

She had retreated into a corner of the room; where, cowering, she held up her shaking hands in front of her, as if to ward off some dreadful object. The girl observed her with puzzled eyes. She said to Hayter—

"Is it so bad as that?"

"You see!—Better come."

Yet the girl persisted.

"I only wish to thank you for what you have done for me, Miss Bryant; and to say——"

Even more emphatically the old lady declined to listen.

"I wish to hear nothing,—nothing! I—I can't breathe while she is in the room.—Take her away!"

Something in the speaker's words, or in the singularity of her bearing, appealed to the girl's sense of the incongruous. She laughed outright.

"How very odd!"

The old lady raised her hands above her head.

"You—you!"

She seemed to seek for words; in vain. Hayter took the girl by the arm.

"Come!"

He led her from the room. As they went Miss Bryant's voice came screaming after them.

"You understand, she's to leave this house at once,—at once!—or—or I'll send for the police!"

When they were in the sitting-room which the girl had hitherto regarded as her own, for some instants neither spoke. She stood beside the table, he before the fireplace. When the silence was becoming more unendurable than speech he said—

"I am very sorry that this has happened."

She, looking down, was tracing patterns with her finger on the tablecloth.

"Who told her?"

"She had a letter; or, rather, an anonymous communication."

She glanced up at him quickly.

"Is that it which you have in your hand?"

Recognising that he still retained the sheet of paper, folding it, he proceeded to place it in the inside pocket of his coat;—the envelope he had left in the other room. She stopped him.

"Let me look at it."

"It is merely a farrago of senseless misstatements; a tissue of ridiculous exaggerations."

"Please let me look at it. I have a right."

"You will gain nothing. You can guess what it contains; and from whom it comes."

"From whom does it come?"

"I have no doubt that it comes from that woman."

"That woman?—Not——?"

He answered her unspoken question.

"I think it probable. I believe that her agents are spying on my movements; and that one of them followed me from London the last time I came to see you."

"How did she find out you knew me?"

"I fancy she has found out."

"Then she's chasing me?"

"It looks as if she were trying to make herself disagreeable."

"Trying? Apparently her efforts are being crowned with success. Please let me see her letter."

"There's nothing to show that she actually wrote it."

"No; only that she's the source of inspiration. Let me see it, please. It concerns me more than you;—it is necessary that I should know what the probability is of my being hunted out of the next place in which I seek refuge."

He gave her the paper. She scanned it; a smile parting her lips wider as she read on. When she had come to the end she laughed; not gaily.

"I don't wonder Miss Bryant is in a hurry to be rid of me. You see I've been here quite a time and know her better than you do; I don't suppose that a live bomb would have frightened her more than this; she wouldn't be able to think of anything except the imperious necessity, from her point of view, of getting me out of the house at once. And I'm sure that I don't blame her. If I were in her position, and her age, I wouldn't have such a terrible person in my house;—I should be afraid of waking up with my throat cut; and the spoons gone; to say nothing of being banned by all the neighbours as an associate of the worst possible characters." She returned the anonymous letter. "Now I'm off upstairs to put my things together—you'll be surprised at the rapidity with which I do it—and then I'll go; only—where am I to go? The writer of that letter makes it clear that I'm not to be suffered to stop in Worthing."

"The writer of that letter!—as if that counted."

She regarded him steadily, with something whimsical shining out of her eyes.

"Do you know that I've discovered already that you're one of those persons who decline to recognise the inevitable when it's disagreeable; though what you propose to gain by an attitude of persistent non-recognition I don't perceive. Since the inevitable is the inevitable it's just as well to bow to it while there's still a chance of doing so with some slight show of dignity. I can see that the writer of that means to make it impossible for me to stop in Worthing; and—if you can't see it also I'm afraid that I shall think you're rather dull."

"There are other places beside Worthing; and—I'm not dull; only my predominant feeling, at this moment, is a desire to get hold of the writer of that letter, and——"

"Yes;—and what?"

"If it were a man, I'd wring his neck."

"And if it were a woman?"

"It's the devil dealing with a certain sort of woman."

"That's what I discovered."

The patness of her retort seemed to startle him into silence. Then he said, gruffly, "I've understood that all along. It's a defect of civilisation that such women can't be crushed out of existence, like noxious insects."

"It seems they can't. The marvel is that more women don't fashion themselves in their likeness. They seem to flourish exceedingly."

"I don't like to hear you talk like that."

"You shan't.—One thing is certain, that this puts an end to our connection."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say;—and please let me say. In any case that would have been at an end. You remember those sketches I told you I had sent up to London?" He nodded; a little blankly. "You remember the conceited way in which I told you I thought that they were good. That London editor has not been wise enough to lessen my self-esteem. He's not only accepted them, he's sent a cheque. It sounds incredible; but he has. It's not a very large cheque; not large enough to pay you what I owe; but it's large enough to give me a chance of starting on my own;—especially as he says he'd like to have some more of my drawings later on. If you hadn't come I should have written to let you have the good news that you were relieved of the burden of my support; and, at least for the present, I should possibly have stayed in Worthing at my own expense. However, since Miss Bryant's correspondent has made that impossible, I'll 'seek fresh woods and pastures new';—and, Mr. Hayter, I'll say good-bye. Thank you I can't, just yet; but I hope to be able to do so, however inadequately, later on."

"Why need you say good-bye?"

"Because we're parting."

"Does that mean that you're putting me out of your life as if I'd never been?"

"Isn't that rather a grandiose way of putting it? I'm going, I don't quite know where, but probably to London, and I'm going to get myself a room,—for myself, by myself. I've a feeling that they look at a girl askance when a man, who's not a relative, but—only a friend, takes a part, prominent or otherwise, in that little matter of domestic detail. And then, when I'm settled, and have had time to look about me, I'll let you know how I'm going on."

"Which is a civil way of saying that you intend to conceal from me your address until it suits you."

She shook her head.

"I'm going to dree my own weird; and for the present I'm going to do it alone. It's no use talking; I've decided."

There was a sharp rapping at the panel of the door; which it was immediately made obvious proceeded from Miss Bryant.

"Is that girl gone? or am I to send for the police?"

The girl held out her hand.

"Good-bye."

"I'm not going to say good-bye to you here. I'm coming up to town; I'll keep watch and ward over you so far;—then, if you like, we'll part, until it pleases you."

She looked at him, again with that whimsical something in her eyes.

"Very well;—and hadn't you better get a cab?—while I put my things together?"

As she ran upstairs he went out into the hall.

"Miss Bryant!"

The old lady's voice came from the room at the back.

"I want to hear nothing, and I want to say nothing! Take that girl away!"

"I merely want to ask you what is owing, so that I may pay you."

"I don't want your money; I'll not touch a penny of it, —no one shall say I made a profit out of such a creature——"

"You're a foolish old woman, Miss Bryant."

"And you're a wicked man, Gilbert Hayter; I only hope your sainted mother doesn't know how wicked.—Are you going to take that woman out of my house?"

"I'm fetching a cab; by the time it comes Miss Olive will be ready."

"Miss Olive!—don't keep up that lie!—for shame!—The sooner she goes the better; there are people in the street already I don't like the look of."

When he got outside he found that some loafers, of dubious appearance, were hanging about. There were four, in a little group, across the way; and seven this side. All of them were eyeing Myrtle Cottage, as if there was something about it which aroused their curiosity. He would have liked to have told them to go about their business; but aware that he had no right to presume that they were anything but innocent passers-by, he strode on in silence. He had not far to go for a cab; when he returned in it he found that the number of loafers had considerably increased; and that the attention of all of them was fixed on Myrtle Cottage, as if it had for them some singular interest. One particularly disreputable-looking person had planted himself immediately in front of the gate. Of him Hayter endeavoured to make short work.

"Now, my man, get out of this! What do you mean by obstructing the entrance?—Move on!"

The man was not inclined towards obedience.

"Why should I move on? Is this your house? or is it your street? A nice sort you are to talk as if you owned the earth. I know a thing or two about you which will set your ears tingling if you don't take care what you are saying."

Had Hayter followed his impulse there might have been a lively five minutes; but obviously the last thing to be desired

just then was that he should have a scrimmage with an unknown vagabond outside Miss Bryant's very gate. He turned to the driver of the cab.

"There's a box; come and lend a hand with it, will you, please?" Unlike the London Jehu, who would have scorned such a proposition, the driver descended from his seat. Directly Hayter reached the door of the house the girl came out. He tried to draw her back. "If you don't mind we'll wait till the cabman has got your luggage, and is ready to start."

Not understanding the reason which was at the back of his words, and at which he would not have ventured to hint, she refused. Her face was white and set.

"Thank you; but I've waited too long already. Miss Bryant has been telling me a few plain home truths, and—I've no desire that she should tell me any more."

"Has she—been speaking to you while I've been away?"

"She's not been speaking to me, but at me, which is rather worse. Kindly let me go." He suffered her to do as she wished. As she entered the cab she became conscious of the presence of the loafers. "Who are these people?—what do they want?"

As that was the question he was asking himself, and feared to answer, he pretended that her words had not been noticed. The cabman came down the path with her box. As he was settling himself in his seat, and Hayter was about to place himself at the girl's side, a man came striding across the street.

"Driver," he said, in tones which must have been audible at a considerable distance, "do you know who the woman is you have inside your cab? It's Doris Osborne, just out of gaol, who escaped the gallows by the skin of her teeth, because she didn't quite finish the murder she'd begun. Are you going to take her in your cab? You ought to have it disinfected afterwards if you do."

Hayter recognised in the speaker the man in the brown tweeds who had come down with him in the train from town. He gripped his cane a trifle tighter.

"So it's you I have to thank for that letter, is it?"

The man turned on him with an air of supreme contempt.

"How dare you, the associate of such a creature, speak to me?"

"You—you hound!"

For a moment Hayter hesitated; then, perhaps fortunately, a policeman came strolling up; attracted, probably, by the unusual assemblage. The stranger promptly addressed himself to the representative of law and order.

"Officer, I must ask you to protect me from this man. This woman in the cab is the infamous Doris Osborne; with whose name and record you are doubtless familiar; who is just out of gaol, and who, also, has just been ejected from this house. I was just giving the cabman a friendly hint, as to the identity of his fare, when this associate of hers assailed me, like some hired bully."

Of its kind the fellow's effrontery was excellent; a fact which Hayter recognised as, with a grim laugh, he got into the cab.

"The man's a masterpiece. He earns his pay." Then, to the driver, whose attitude suggested that he hardly knew what to make of the situation, "Off you go!"

The girl asked, as, after what seemed a moment of indecision, the vehicle started—

"Who is that man?"

Hayter's answer was an odd one.

"He is an individual with whom, on some occasion in the near future, I trust to have an explanation which will prove mutually satisfactory."

It was perhaps because she suddenly realised that some of the loafers were keeping up with the cab that she ignored the

fact of there being anything singular in his reply. The significance of their conduct startled her into exclamation.

"They're running after me!"

A raucous voice proclaimed—

"Doris Osborne!—here's Doris Osborne in this here cab!"

Another cried, with a wheezy intonation, as if the speaker was a little out of breath—

"Murderess!"

The girl said—

"They're hunting me out of Worthing!"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE TRAIN

AT the station they were greeted by the man in the brown tweeds; evidently he had come in a cab which he had urged to greater speed. Apparently, also, he had brought some of the loafers with him. If not in his actual company, then not very far from him, were certain of the gentlemen who had been in front of Myrtle Cottage. Others had kept pace with them; so, when they drew up, they at once found themselves the centre of quite a little concourse. Unpleasant remarks reached their ears. As the girl got out of the cab one man standing close by asked another what was up.

"What, don't you know? Why, this here's Doris Osborne—you know what she done; just come out of stir, she has;—she ought to be there still, by rights. If you or me had done what she has we'd have been hanged. A —— murderess, that's what I call her."

It was clearly the fellow's intention that his words should be plainly heard. There was that in the way Hayter regarded him which caused the girl to grip him by the arm.

"No, don't; let's—let's get away."

When they entered the booking-office the man in the brown tweeds came towards them; by his side was one of the railway officials.

"So, Doris Osborne, you're trying to escape from Worthing; which is fortunate for Worthing." He turned to the official.

"If you take my advice you'll get her into a carriage as soon as you possibly can, to avoid unpleasantness. If it becomes generally known that she's in the station I shouldn't be surprised if there was trouble."

Hayter brushed the speaker aside, not too gently. The man sprang back at him. Had the official not intervened there would have been "trouble" of the kind he had professed a desire to avoid. The official said something to him which induced him to draw back, exclaiming as he did so—

"This man's the girl's bully!"

Hayter made his way with the girl to the ticket office. When he had her ticket the railway official said to him—he had kept close to his shoulder—

"Now we don't want any fuss. If you're going by the next train I'll see you across to the other platform; keep as near to me as you can." He moved forward, shouting, "Now, keep back!—keep back there!—What are you people crowding for?—Keep back!" Acting on his hint they stuck tight to his heels. In spite of his efforts it was not easy to force a way through the people, who seemed to have taken the platform by storm. The girl, clinging to Hayter's arm, was pushed and hustled; had it not been for his protection worse might have come to her. They were shown into an empty first-class compartment, and the door was locked. "You had better pull the window up," he said, as he turned the key.

Hayter pulled it up. People hung about outside; staring into the carriage; making remarks which it was not nice to hear. The train started. The girl set her hat straight, and arranged her attire; which had been ruffled by her scramble through the crowd;—saying, as she did so—

"You see!—I warned you what would be the consequences of associating yourself with me;—to what contumelious treatment you've been subjected!—as if we were birds of a feather!"

"Do you think I care? It's the feeling of helplessness that

maddens me;—the feeling that I can't tear their tongues out of their throats. And they know that I can do nothing while I'm with you, the cowardly curs!"

"What could you do, in any case? Won't you understand that I'm a notorious character, and that anywhere, at any time, someone has only to announce who I am for something of this sort to happen?"

"That's nonsense. This is a conspiracy. If I'd been prepared for it it wouldn't have succeeded this time; I'll take care it doesn't again."

He had not dared to look at her; yet he was conscious that she smiled; and that in her smile there was more pain than there would have been in tears.

"Mr. Hayter, why will you persist in playing at being blind? It's so—so childish. Not like a man. Really, I'm more of a man than you. I will permit myself to see what it's not the slightest use not seeing. And I can see that in whatever place I may happen to be someone has only to say that I'm Doris Osborne, and all the respectable persons will draw away from me; and all the others will throw stones."

Her tone struck him even more than her words. It was odd how ready he had grown to recognise her troubles as his own. They seemed to hurt him more than they did her. Perhaps it was because she had grown inured. It was the suggestion which, to his thinking, her tone conveyed, of fatalistic acquiescence in the worst that the world could do, which touched some nerve within, so that a wave of anguish, passing through him from head to foot, seemed to hold him rigid. He allowed her words to go unanswered. They dealt with a subject which, always reluctant to discuss, at that moment he was resolute to put away from him; and, also, if the thing were possible, from her. Instead he put a question; in a voice which sounded unusually harsh.

"What are you going to do when we get to town?"

"That depends—doesn't it?—on what they will let me do."

"They?—who?—what do you mean?"

"Don't you know, as well as I do, that that man who made himself so çonspicuous outside Miss Bryant's, and again at the station, is with us on the train, with his friends; and that he will probably give me a reception of a kind which will make it a case of doing what I can do, instead of what I'd like to do?"

"I was considering if it wouldn't be as well to get off on the way."

"Do you mean at one of the intermediate stations?" He nodded. "I was considering that also; but—what would be gained? They'd get off with me, and—how should I be better off? I might as well go up to London now I've started. I suppose one can lose oneself there better than anywhere else in the world; and, of course, henceforward and for ever, the summit of my ambition will be reached if I can only manage to be continually lost."

Again he was conscious of that thrill of something which was so very much like physical pain; which, for an instant, held him still. Then he said—

"I'm afraid that you are right, and that that blackguard is with us on the train. He has not the slightest right to attempt to terrorise you; and, if we speak to the police, they'll put a stop to it."

"If you don't mind I'd just as soon have as little to do with the police as I conveniently can; and especially I don't want to have to rely on their protection. I think it quite possible that they may still take a sort of professional interest in Doris Osborne; and naturally I don't want them to know where she is, any more than the rest of the world. I want—" she held out her hands in front of her with a little gesture which seemed to him to be piteously pathetic—"above all things—I want to be lost."

"That I understand. On that account I should appeal to the police in the last necessity."

"Which, of course, may always arise. They may want to tear me to pieces. You mustn't let them do that on the platform of a London station."

He ignored her bitter humour; and the quiver in her voice.

"If that fellow does try to make himself disagreeable at Victoria you must leave the management of matters to me."

"I'll have to leave it to someone; and—it's very good of you to help me. You're the only person in the world who would."

"I don't know that I'm sorry for that." She looked at him quickly; with surprise in her eyes. He explained. "If you could do without my help I know you would; and I'm glad you can't;—that's what I mean. I've learnt already that it's only when you're in a desperate plight that you'll accept help from anyone; and—you see I want to help you. Directly I cease doing that my occupation's gone."

Her words, in her turn, were grimly uttered.

"In that case I shall be rendering you a service by depriving you of what you call your occupation at the earliest possible moment; a more trivial, or unworthy, one you could scarcely have. I have no patience with people who go about helping people who ought to be perfectly well able to help themselves. And for you, in your position, with the world at your feet, to do with as you will, to talk of having nothing else to do but mix yourself up with the sordid miseries of a creature such as I am,—it doesn't suggest a very healthy state of mind. I must fight my own fights, Mr. Hayter, if I can only get a fair field to fight in; for my own sake as well as for yours. If I'm ever to be anything I must win back my self-respect; no one else can win it for me. And you'll easily find something better worth doing than wasting your time in trying to wrap me up in the swaddling clothes which—however kindly meant—are the

very last things I stand in need of; or if you can't then I'm very sorry for you."

"After all, it's a fortunate thing to be still eighteen."

"That's so; even though one's something more than a bit of a fool."

"It's not your folly at which I wonder; it's your infinite wisdom. Already you know more than I shall ever know. But I've heard that children do know more than their fathers."

"Now you're laughing at me;—I don't mind. I know you're not laughing at me in your heart."

This was such a correct statement of the matter that the truth of it sealed his lips; in his heart there was something very different from laughter. It was some time before he broke the silence which ensued.

"I propose, if there is any trouble at Victoria, to take you to Mr. Burnett's office, and ask for his assistance and advice."

"If you think that he won't mind."

"I'm sure he won't; he'll be delighted."

"Where I'm concerned you always take the optimistic view; I don't think that, in general, it's your habit to use the language of exaggeration. If he'll put up with me, just long enough to throw these people off the scent, it will be something. I can't, in the character of a respectable young woman, go looking for rooms with a crowd of people at my heels; or even with one pointing an accusatory finger."

"Mr. Burnett will relieve you of all anxieties on that score. Possibly, if it becomes necessary, he and I between us may be able to teach our friend in the brown tweed suit a lesson."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE OTHER ENTRANCE

ALMOST as soon as the train came to a standstill at Victoria the man in the brown tweed suit was at their carriage door. If he had not been travelling in the next compartment then he must have been in one very close at hand. It was immediately apparent that the demonstration of which she had been the subject on leaving Worthing, to phrase it pleasantly, was to be repeated, with additions, on her arrival in town. For the last half-hour the minds of the station officials had been exercised by the advent of a number of doubtful-looking men, whose apparent object was to meet the Worthing train.

"Race-course lot they look," observed one official to another. "Perhaps there's some racing man in the train, and they're going to give him a welcome;—if I were in his place I shouldn't feel flattered."

Just as the train was signalled four or five men began moving about the station, inside and out, forcing handbills on whoever could be induced to take them; flinging others broadcast in the air.

"To All Persons who respect
Law and Decency!

DORIS OSBORNE
The Would-be Murderess
Is coming up from Worthing in the Train
Which is now entering Victoria Station.
Let all Lovers of True Justice
Give her
The Welcome She Deserves!"

That was the interesting information, and kindly suggestion—which was printed on the leaflets. Such persons as found themselves in possession of one, and who had nothing very pressing just then to do, were moved by an inclination to enter the station, and see the fun; to which a good many of them yielded. Suddenly, from all quarters, people came flocking on to the platform. The station authorities, waking to the fact that something queer was in the air, issued instructions that they were to be kept off. But for that it already was too late. The few railway police were unable to cope with the curious throng which was crowding on to the arrival platform, they themselves did not know why. When the train drew up someone shouted—

"Where's Doris Osborne? We want you, Doris Osborne!"

At once a dozen or more voices were raised in threatening chorus. It chanced that, as the train had entered the station, the unlocked door of the compartment in which were the girl and Gilbert Hayter was towards the platform. In an instant the man in the brown tweed suit had it open, exclaiming—

"Now, Doris Osborne, show yourself to the friends who have come to meet you."

Without hesitation, before Hayter could do anything to stop her, the girl, rising from her seat, descended to the platform; and in a moment was the centre of a violent, cowardly, foul-mouthed crowd; and would have been completely at their mercy, had not Hayter, flinging himself in their midst, lashing out left and right, compelled them to favour him with at least some share of their attentions. The thing was done so quickly, and was so unexpected, that the mêlée had already been in progress some seconds before the railway people, and the more respectable part of the spectators, realised that something very like a tragedy was being enacted before their eyes. In the confusion which, the discovery being made, at once ensued, Hayter, one arm about the girl, was able to fight his way through her assailants, and half push, half lift her into one of the long line

of hansom cabs which stood against the kerbstone. Scrambling in after her as best he could, he called out to the driver—

"Ninety-three, Lincoln's Inn!—never mind these brutes!—lash out at them if they get in the way!—damn you!"

This was addressed to an individual who, with more courage than discretion, essayed to follow him into the vehicle. Hayter accompanied the imprecation with a blow which, hitting the fellow full in the face, sent him reeling back among his mates upon the platform. A voice came from the driver on his perch.

"Now then, my lad, you leave my 'orse's 'ead alone!"

The speaker pointed his words with a lash of his whip; so adroitly that the man spoken to leapt nimbly aside;—and the cab was off, amid a pandemonium of shouts, and oaths, and yells. Some half-hearted attempts were made to stop it; but the police, officials, and respectable lookers-on, now fully roused, asserted themselves, and, presently, the cab was issuing out of the station, and then bowling along Buckingham Palace Road.

It was entering the Park before Hayter had recovered sufficient breath, and equanimity, to consider his companion. Then he was shocked to find that she was hatless; that her hair was disarranged; her whole attire in disorder.

"The brutes!—I hope they haven't hurt you."

She still smiled.

"Well,—they haven't quite killed me, thanks to you. You see how much wiser you'd have been if you'd taken my original warning. I hope that you're not seriously hurt."

"I'm all right! I only wish——" What he wished he left unuttered; possibly it was of too sanguinary a nature. A thought occurred to him. "By the way—your box!—we've left it behind."

"Under the circumstances we could hardly do anything else, could we? You'll find it will be perfectly safe in the railway company's care; they'll deliver it up on application."

"Have those blackguards robbed you?"

"I had nothing of which they could rob me, except this." She held up her hand-bag. "I got a good grip of this, and stuck to it; it holds all my worldly wealth."

The driver's voice came down to them through the trap in the roof.

"They're following us, some of those chaps,—there are three or four cabs full!"

"Are they catching us?"

"Don't fancy they want to;—I slowed down just now to see if that was their game, but they slowed too. They're just following; I don't suppose I could shake them off if I were to try,—some of them have got good horses."

"You needn't try; let them follow. You take us to Lincoln's Inn; we'll deal with them there."

"I'll take you to Lincoln's Inn all right. I hope the lady isn't hurt; those chaps handled her a bit."

The lady answered herself, with an upward glance.

"No, the lady isn't hurt—much; thanks for kind inquiries." Shutting the trap, the cabman devoted his whole attention to his driving. The girl said, "I'm having quite a day of it,—hunted out of Worthing and now chased across town. And the day is still young; what will the evening bring? Do you know that, this morning, when I had that letter from the editor, enclosing the cheque, and saying that he would take more work, I really thought that the sun, my sun, was rising at last, after a long night, and that his first gleams were lighting the sky. Fortune offers you a gift with one hand, and—knocks you down with the other. Isn't it—odd?"

When they reached the offices of Messrs. Hart, Burnett, and Clifford, the pursuing cabs drew closer. Before they could alight a dozen men were swarming on the pavement; as ill-looking a congregation as one might wish to see. All together they broke into speech; proclaiming continuously the girl's full name, Doris Osborne. Hayter descended first; the necessity of concentrating

all his energies on the protection of the girl constraining him to silence. He signalled to her with a movement of his head. She sprang out, and, as she did so, he dashed back, driving the men sufficiently aside to clear a passage through which she rushed. Before they had a chance of rallying she had passed the railings, into the stone-flagged courtyard before the house, and Hayter, pulling to the iron gate, held it against her enemies. There was a pause, during which each side contemplated the other. Then Hayter observed, with ominous suavity—

"Well, gentlemen, now you are at liberty to deal with me. I believe I could lick the lot of you. I feel as if I should like to have a try. Where's your lion-hearted leader? I trust that no untoward accident has compelled his absence."

He had perceived that the man in the brown tweeds was missing. None of his friends showed anxiety to deal with Mr. Hayter;—except one, a foul-mouthed ruffian, who vomited forth a volley of hideous oaths, in the possible hope of bringing his courage to the sticking-point.

"Get out of the way, you —— ——! or we'll knock your —— head off your —— shoulders."

"Knock it," said Mr. Hayter, simply.

The man rushed forward, with the apparent intention of doing as he was asked. But he was treated in a manner which moved him to further eloquence. He addressed his colleagues.

"Now then, you ——! why don't you go for the bloke? Who's he that he should plant himself in front of the gate and keep us off? If we was to go for him, the whole lot of us together, we should kill him, that's what we should do."

"Kill him," recommended Mr. Hayter, standing at the gate.

The cabman, perched up aloft, had his say.

"A nice lot of cowards you are, I don't think! Why, the gentleman's little finger is worth the lot of you. If you're not careful I shall have to get down, and then the gentleman and me, together, we'll take on the lot of you."

The voluble ruffian made what was perhaps meant to be an appeal to the cabman's sympathies.

"She's Doris Osborne, that there piece you had in your cab, that's who she is;—her what got jugged for attempted murder, and who'd have had a twelve-foot drop if they'd done her proper."

"Well, and what if she is? Attempted murder? From the look of you I should say you'd murdered all your relations right off; because it's hard to believe, if any of them was alive, that they'd let you be walking about."

Hayter came forward from the railing, saying, as he did so—

"If either of you brutes goes through that gate—he'll regret it."

No one showed any anxiety to put his words to the test. They glowered at the gate, but kept their hands in their trouser pockets, and stood still. He paid the cabman, handsomely; bidding him wait. As he was recrossing the pavement one of the rabble displayed a modicum of courage.

"Even if you are the girl's fancy man you needn't think such a —— lot of yourself; daresay you ain't the first she's had."

The speaker was rash; particularly considering that he was an undersized, ill-fed example of the London gutter-snipe. Hayter took him by the throat, and shook him, till one wondered if there was anything left of him to shake; while his friends looked on. Then he let him drop in a heap on to the pavement,—while his friends looked on. Then he went into the house. In the hall he found the girl.

"What! you here! I thought you would have gone straight upstairs."

"I couldn't; it would have seemed as if I were deserting you altogether. I played the coward enough in finding cover here. —I should think that you were fond of fighting."

"I think I am."

"I believe I should be if I were a man; but it doesn't seem as if it were regarded as right for a girl to be fond of anything that's really amusing."

They found Mr. Burnett, disengaged, in his office on the other side of the house. He stared as they entered.

"Miss Osborne!—Mr. Hayter!—I am glad to see you both, but—what has happened?"

"That woman, the second Mrs. Osborne, has organised a plot to harry Miss Osborne. Her agents have followed us to town and made themselves unpleasantly conspicuous. There are some of them now at your gate. Perhaps you had better send for a policeman to move them on."

"At which gate are they?"

Hayter explained.

"In the square? Then there they can remain. There are two entrances, Mr. Hayter, to this house; the other opens into Portugal Street. To reach the Portugal Street entrance from the square you have to walk quite a distance; so that, if those persons stay where they are, you'll have to walk into Portugal Street, and they'll be no wiser." A few sentences were exchanged; the lawyer evincing what seemed to be a genuine interest in the girl's well-being; telling her, for instance, of how he had gone to meet her at the prison gates, and found that she had left already. Then he said to Hayter, "If Miss Osborne will excuse us I should like to say a few words to you in the next room." Miss Osborne did excuse them. When they were alone the lawyer invited his visitor to be candid. "Now, tell me, please, what has occurred,—everything."

Hayter told the tale of the day's adventures, with a frankness which would hardly have been possible in Miss Osborne's presence. The lawyer asked—

"What proof have you that this is a conspiracy which has been organised by that woman?"

"None; at present I'm hardly likely to have. But I am

certain that the whole of this day's work has been her doing;—and, before I've done with her, I'll prove it."

"You'll find it difficult; and you'll not find it easy to do anything, if proved. Take this." He was holding the anonymous communication which Miss Bryant had received, and which Hayter had handed him. "Of course it's a disgraceful production, that goes without the saying;—anonymous letters always are disgraceful productions; but, suppose you trace it to that woman, what can you do to her? The statements it contains are, in their essence, true. You did introduce the girl into the house under a false name; legally—and actually—under false pretences. She is the person herein described; in exaggerated terms undoubtedly; but it would be hard to show that, under the circumstances, A, B, or C—or that woman!—was not justified in sending this communication to Miss Bryant. If you could establish the fact that the woman is responsible for the shameful treatment the unfortunate girl has received, then she would be placed in an awkward position;—but how would that serve Miss Osborne? My dear sir,"—Mr. Burnett's manner became confidential—"it's no use ignoring the fact that anyone, at any time, has only to state plainly who Miss Osborne is; and she at once finds herself in circumstances which involve extreme discomfort. You must be aware of that."

"I am; so is she. What she wants is to conceal her identity, and get a chance. Can't you help her there? It seems as if I had been rather a failure; she couldn't have got herself into a worse hole than the one into which I've got her. Can't you find her quarters, temporary quarters, where she would be free from impertinent observation, and the kind of thing she has endured to-day; and so get time to look about her, while arranging her future plans?"

"I can; and I will. That is precisely what I would have proposed to do had I met her—you know where. I know a house, in the occupation of a person with whom I have been

acquainted for many years; and with whom I have had various dealings; who would receive her; ask no questions; yet observe my wishes. She would be safe—and comfortable.—Would you wish to have access to her?"

"Do you mean, should I wish to see her now and then? I should; I don't wish to lose sight of her entirely. It's not to be expected."

"I suppose it isn't." There was perhaps the faintest suspicion of a twinkle in the lawyer's eyes. "Then that shall be arranged. Let's go to her."

They went; but Gilbert Hayter had lost sight of her already. The girl had gone. She had taken advantage of what Mr. Burnett had said about there being a second entrance into Portugal Street. She had left no message, either written or spoken; nothing to show that she had ever been. In the clerks' office they had seen her go along the passage; hatless, but apparently at her ease. She had passed them without speaking; they not supposing that it was their business to attempt to speak to her. They had seen her go out of the door leading into Portugal Street; and then had seen nothing more. Which way she had gone; whether she had turned to the left or the right; there was nothing to show. One would have thought that, in that part of the world, a bare-headed young lady would have attracted somebody's attention; but no one could be found who had noticed her. While the two men had been planning her future she had vanished into space.

CHAPTER XXV

DELILAH

TWO days afterwards Gilbert Hayter had a visitor. It was late afternoon. It had been a dull day; he had found it dull in every sense; and the dusk was already gathering. He was tired of himself; of his own company; of things in general;—even depressed. His home-coming bade fair to be a failure; nothing had fallen out as he had expected; all his hopes were threatened with disappointment. He was beginning to wonder why he had come home at all. Was he to have, as an only refuge, the most lugubrious of apartments, a private sitting-room in a hotel? It was while he was in this mood that someone knocked at the door. As his only visitors were waiters he took it for granted that it was one of them; so he said—

"Come in!" And a lady entered.

So little curiosity did he feel as to what the visitor wanted that he did not even glance up at the open door. He concluded, vaguely, that the waiter probably wanted to attend to the fire; for, to his thinking, the weather continued to be cold, and he still had a fire, if only for the sake of its society. It was the continued silence which caused him to look up; then, when he saw it was a woman who had come into the room he was out of his chair in an instant. He found that it was darker than he supposed; so dark that his eyes, which had been staring into the fire, were slow in ascertaining what sort of person his visitor

was. As she, standing just inside the door, remained still, and stared at him, it was a trifle awkward. At last he said—

"I beg your pardon,—I have so few visitors; I am afraid I thought it was one of the waiters. To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?—if, that is, you have not made a mistake in the number of the room."

There was again a perceptible pause. Then the woman, coming forward, seated herself, uninvited, in an arm-chair which was in front of the one which he had vacated, and said, speaking as one who was perfectly at home—

"It's quite comfy to see a fire. Perhaps you're like me, and like a fire pretty nearly the whole year round. In England there are not so very many days on which a fire's a nuisance. And I daresay that you, coming from Africa, find the climate trying."

Her calmness took him a little aback. Although the fire shone on her, her veil prevented him from making out her features.

"I—I fancy that perhaps I do. Excuse me,—I'll switch on the light."

"Why? Are you afraid of being alone in the dark with me? Are you nervous, as a rule? And is it so dark as that?"

One could picture her as smiling, behind her veil; for some reason it was a picture which did not appeal to him. Her tone was a challenge; of a kind he did not relish. He was conscious of a feeling of discomfort;—of a desire to see what manner of person his visitor was.

"I don't know about being afraid; but, with your permission, we'll have the light on."

She laughed, softly;—there was a quality in her laughter which disturbed him.

"My permission! There have been, and still are, men who, without my permission, prefer the darkness—in my society."

Her words settled it; the room was illumined with the

electric light before she had finished speaking. The switches were by the door. In the arm-chair in which she sat her back was towards him. He crossed the room so that he might face her. As he did so she raised her veil; and he knew her;—for the woman whose portrait Doris Osborne had drawn; the woman who had worn the scarlet domino at Covent Garden. He was not surprised; he realised that he had recognised her in the darkness; that it was because he had recognised her that he had insisted on the light. That, to some extent, his sensations were mirrored on his face, her words made evident.

"Am I such a very dreadful spectacle that you look at me like that?"

"I find you a dreadful spectacle."

"For my character apply to Doris Osborne;—is that it?"

"I know something of you from Miss Osborne,—to your discredit; I know something of you from others,—also to your discredit. I know something of you on my own account.—You are the woman who knocked Lord Sabin down in the street."

Her face wore an appearance of surprise.

"Knocked Lord Sabin down in the street?—What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean.—You are the woman who was the head and front of those tricks which were played on me in Lord Sabin's house in Mount Street. It was you who had a hand, probably the principal hand, in that man's murder."

"What man's murder?"

"I don't know; but you do. And I shall know—and the world shall know—before I've finished. These are some of the reasons why I regard you as a dreadful spectacle. If you were other than you are you would recognise that they are valid ones."

"Mr. Hayter, are you—a little mad?"

"The trouble is that I'm not mad enough. Were mine the

proper sort of madness I should take you by the throat,—although you call yourself a woman."

"Call myself a woman!"

"It is only in the animal sense that you are a woman;—and I'd wring the truth, or else the life, out of you before you left this room."

"Dear me, what a dreadful man it is! Do you know I think that I shall like you. You're—original. I don't know that I'd mind your doing some of that 'wringing' right straight off. It would be a new sensation;—my life is a chase after new sensations."

"I promise you'd find it a new sensation."

"Are you quite sure? You know, you're not the first man who's wanted to wring my neck; and some of them have tried to."

"I can believe it, easily."

"Men are such oddities;—they won't understand. But you're delicious. So—colonial. You sound as if you'd lived in places where people served one another up for tea; and no one was in the least amusing. I don't care for the colonial type, as a rule; but I feel sure that I should find you amusing.—I say." She had removed her gloves; with the fingers of her left hand she was turning round and round the rings which were on the fingers of her right. "What do you say to dining with me, this evening? As my guest? I don't suppose you've many engagements;—it would be rather fun;—I know we should understand each other better before the night was over."

"Do you think I'd be seen in public with such a creature as you?"

"You needn't;—can't we dine in private? It has been done. We might dine here, in your own sitting-room; and let me pay the bill,—I should like to stand you a good dinner. I should be a companion, of a sort; and one guaranteed not to bore you. I've a feeling that if you had some decent food, and

some fairish wine, your outlook on the world, and particularly on me, might become mellowed; and—I should like it to become mellowed.—Will you?—Do!"

He answered with a question.

"What have you come here for?"

"My reasons for doing a thing are sometimes so intricate that it's difficult to set them out in order. You see, Mr. Hayter, I'm interested in you; and you're interested in me.—You are interested in me, aren't you?"

"In the policeman's sense; as a policeman is interested in the criminal whom he hopes to call to an early account for his misdeeds."

"Poor dear Mr. Policeman!—Are you built upon those lines?—But haven't they most shocking feet?"

"What have you come here for?"

"I wanted to find out what kind of person you were;—and, if possible, why you had constituted yourself Doris Osborne's protector. She doesn't seem to have treated you very nicely; or to have shown much gratitude for your really fatherly goodness."

"Have you had a hand in that?"

"In what?"

"In Miss Osborne's disappearance;—you or your friends? You shall be made to regret it if you have."

"Has she disappeared? How naughty of her! It doesn't look as if she found you very entertaining; and I suppose you wanted her to regard you as all there was of the most charming."

"Be so good as to leave my room."

"Presently. Do you know I'm beginning to suspect that you and Doris Osborne have at least one taste in common;—that you're both fond of doing disagreeable things in a disagreeable way. It's such a mistake,—at times. Look at the way in which she behaved to me;—jumping out of an omnibus, and

making—in the middle of the day—such a painful scene in Piccadilly. Why Piccadilly?—and why the day?—except for purposes of advertisement?—it's absurd! Suppose she had a little grudge against me, why couldn't she come round to me, at my own house,—I should have let her in!—and done what she wanted to do in my own drawing-room? It would have been much nicer; and there wouldn't have been anything like such a scandal. It's quite possible that I should have said nothing; I don't go out on to the house-tops and start shouting every time someone wants to stick a knife in me. As it was, see what happened;—what was bound to happen! The frightful publicity! the ridiculous fuss! the positive inconvenience both to her and to me,—she dragged into the dock, and me into the witness-box. It was most painful; her lawyer was so rude; and I dined with him once at Ferrey's,—I remember they gave us some excellent curried prawns. And see what the result has been;—she has become an infamous and horrid character,—I am told that vulgar boys point at her in the streets.—And I—really I—don't know what I have become."

"You are pleased to be ironical."

"Is that meant to be funny? Do be funny, please,—even if it requires an effort. You seem to be frightfully stiff."

"Have you said all that you wish to say?"

"What a question!—as if a woman ever does! You don't know how I want encouraging."

"Because I would remind you that I have already once asked you to leave my room."

"So sweet of you!—Do dine with me, do!"

"Shall I ring for the waiter, or do you prefer to show yourself out?"

"You had better not ring."

"Hadn't I?—I seem to recognise a slightly different intonation."

"Come, Mr. Hayter, you're not a fool, and you're not a

boy;—what do you see in Doris Osborne? Tell me frankly;—you won't regret it." He looked at her; then moved to the bell. She rose to her feet. "Don't ring that bell."

"Why not?"

"Because!—I've something which I want to say to you; and if that waiter comes I'll say it in his presence; and you're not going to leave this room until I've said it."

"Now we are beginning to understand each other."

"We shall quite understand each other before I've finished."

"Say on!"

"Mr. Hayter, have you been used to nigger slaves? Because you treat me as if I were one, and as if you'd only to issue an order to be obeyed. You're mistaken; I'm not of an obedient kind." He eyed her, but said nothing. A suspicion was dawning on him that she had come there with the deliberate intention of making a scene. In a scene with a woman in the private sitting-room of an hotel, especially with a woman of her class, a man finds it difficult to appear to advantage; however clean his hands may be. He resolved that if that was her intention he would balk it. She seemed to have an inkling of what was passing in his mind. "Have you decided to let me say what I have to say in my own way, like a decent creature; and not to try to bully with threats of ringing for the waiter? If you do you'll find I'm not afraid of the waiter. I'll send the waiter for the manager; and then there'll be a flare-up." Still silent, he remained standing by the fireplace, in close proximity to the bell. "Let me give you a word of warning. Like the young lady in the rhyme,—when I am good I am very, very good, but when I'm bad I am horrid. I've come here; at no slight personal inconvenience, as you may easily believe, and at great risk of hurt to my good name; filled with the milk of human kindness, holding out olive branches in both my hands; and—I don't find you disposed to meet me very kindly. That's a pity; because—I should like to be your friend, and Doris Osborne's. You

needn't smile as if you thought that that's the most ridiculous suggestion you've ever heard; because it isn't. If I take Doris Osborne by the hand; and let it be publicly known that I forgive her; and that we're friends; that will do a great deal towards removing from her the stigma under which, otherwise, she will always lie. I really mean it when I say that I would be her friend; her true, her best friend. She might come and live with me; I'd provide her with what you'd admit would be a generous allowance; I'd take her about with me everywhere; —it is more than probable, I may tell you, that my position will be shortly altered." She paused; as if to afford him an opportunity of asking what she meant; but he said nothing. "Before very long I shall hold a position in society which will enable me to offer Doris Osborne advantages of which, even in her palmiest times—and, as perhaps you know, they never were very palmy—she never even dreamed. I will give her a chance of shining in the very best society in the land. She has only to say the word. And I will never once remind her of the past.—As for you, Mr. Hayter, I only ask from you an opportunity to show that I'm not so black as I've been painted. I don't pretend that I have been a Puritan; or that I ever shall be. You know I've not much faith in Puritans; or, I'm afraid, in women either. Few of us are angels;—and those few are not angels of a comfortable kind. There's nothing angelic about me,—I admit that frankly. But I'm not a bad sort, as women go; and you and I might have some capital fun. Won't you give me a trial? I've no warranty; no vet.'s certificate to show that I'm free from vice. But—most men give a woman a chance when she asks for one from the bottom of her heart, as I am doing now; won't you? I'm not asking for anything silly; I'm not a child. I'm just asking you to treat me as you would any other woman who was a stranger to you; and to judge me as you find me; not from the tales which you have heard of me from others."

"And the alternative?"

"The alternative?—I hope it won't be necessary to speak of an alternative! I cannot think that you are—what shall I say?—so rooted in prejudice as to decline even to consider the humble plea of a much-libelled woman."

"Mrs. Osborne,—is that still your name?"

"It is,—for the present." She sighed. "That was a most unfortunate match."

"That's certain."

"I mean for me; you are thinking of others;—prejudice again. If you would only let me tell you the whole truth!"

"Mrs. Osborne, is it possible that you seriously think I am such a fool as you suggest?"

"A fool?—Mr. Hayter!—I'm sure you're very far from being that."

"Let me remind you. I know you to be a party, probably the principal party, to a foul and cowardly murder. For it I mean, sooner or later, to bring you to book. If I only knew a little more I'd hand you over to a policeman now; as certainly as you are standing there I'll do it before very long.—Isn't that a sufficient answer to your suggestion about giving you a trial as a friend?"

"The man's mad; stark staring mad! with his talk about a murder which only exists in his lunatic imagination. The only murder in which I very nearly played a part was the one in which your friend Doris Osborne was the principal performer. But it's no use arguing with madmen.—Am I to take it that we're to be enemies?"

"What do I care how you regard me?"

"I see;—that's your high-toned point of view. Dear, dear!—how impressive!—and how ridiculous!—And Doris Osborne,—am I to take her by the hand?"

"You know how likely Miss Osborne is to allow herself to

become associated with the strumpet who made of her mother's home a house of shame."

For a moment she looked as if she would assail him with hands as well as tongue. Evidently, however, she was a person who had her emotions well under control. The disposition towards violence passed; she laughed instead.

"That's plain speaking, at any rate; so now I'll be plain. I've offered you peace; you prefer war;—you shall have it. I fancy you will find that you are overmatched. I'm better acquainted with Doris Osborne's whereabouts than you suppose; better than you are. It's plain she can't stand your society at any price; to escape it she has done her best to hide from you;—and she shall hide. I'll see to that. I drove her into the gutter before,—until you dragged her out. I'll drive her into it again; but you shan't drag her out a second time;—that also I promise you. I'll make her so that she shall be glad to accept a meal from the first man who comes along; and to pay for it any price he likes to ask. Perhaps then I'll let you have a peep at her; but she shall be dead to you till she's no longer worth keeping alive."

"Have you finished?"

"You can ring the bell; the waiter shall show me out,—with all the honours of war."

He touched the ivory button. They remained silent till the waiter came; she, stretching her gloves at full length with both her hands, regarded him with smiling eyes;—he, with impassive countenance, watched her. The waiter entered.

"Show this lady out."

His tone could hardly have been curter; hers was soft and sweet.

"Yes, waiter, do;—only wait one moment, please." She went close up to Hayter. He did not flinch, although there was something in her bearing which was sinister. The waiter looked on. Suddenly she raised her right hand, and then her

left, and smote him first with one and then the other, on either cheek, a smart, stinging blow. It was done so quickly that he would have had no time to guard himself, had he attempted to do so. He made no such attempt; but stood, his hands hanging at his sides, very upright; motionless. She turned to the waiter. "You see?—that is how I brand a liar and a coward.—Now you can show me out.—By the way, this man is the friend of Doris Osborne, a name with which you are perhaps familiar. I am the woman she tried to murder. Here's a sovereign for you to act as newsmonger. Tell the tale upstairs and down; all over the house. It is desirable that it should be known what kind of person it is who is in residence in the hotel."

She went out of the room. The waiter, with the coin she had given him in the palm of his hand, going after her, closed the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MARRIAGE

GILBERT HAYTER, subjected to such an outrage, might have done many things; he only did one,—he washed his face. He continued motionless for some moments after the woman had gone; then, going into his dressing-room, which adjoined, he endeavoured, with the aid of a liberal quantity of soap and water, to cleanse his face from the contagion of her touch. It is difficult to see what else he could have done. It is not easy for a man to punish a woman who slaps his face. As for striking her again,—that is a more delicate matter still. The woman who condescends to an action of the kind is entrenched behind the knowledge that she does it with impunity. But Hayter remembered. Although the actual sting passed quickly, for a long time afterwards it was as if she had left the pattern of her fingers on his cheeks. He could feel them there;—and he watched; and waited.

But his chief concern for the present was the girl. Could the woman be believed when she said that she was acquainted with her whereabouts? He thought not. For she would have gone to her at first hand with her offer of alliance. Of the reality of her evil intentions he had no doubt. That, given the chance, she would, to use her own phrase, drive the girl into the gutter; or into the river; he was assured. The point was, would she ever have the chance? Did she know where Doris Osborne was, any more than he did? When he told Mr.

Burnett of the visitor he had had; and of all she had said and done; the lawyer laughed.

"That's a clever woman;—and, mind you, that's not usual. My experience is that these feminine bad lots are generally insensate fools. She's an exception. That idea of making friends with Miss Osborne is, in its way, a stroke of genius. And, from her point of view, there's something in it. She may plausibly argue that she gives as much as she receives; and, if it really is her intention to range herself in the ranks of the respectable, she would receive good value; the fact of her becoming identified with her late husband's daughter she might find of material assistance. But as for her knowing anything about Miss Osborne's whereabouts, I don't believe it;—that's bluff. As you suggest, she'd have gone straight to her if she had. I don't believe that anyone knows where Miss Osborne is except Miss Osborne; though why she should be so anxious to be concealed from you I fail to understand."

"I've explained to you how strong was her desire to work out her own salvation."

"And a very proper feeling for her to have; I wish everybody had it; but having it is no reason why she should not let you have, say, an address at which a letter would find her;—considering all that you have done for her I feel that strongly."

Mr. Hayter felt it also; though he would not have acknowledged it to the lawyer; or to anyone. The more he thought of it the stronger the feeling grew that she was meting out to him a measure which he had not deserved. He tried to play the cynic, to tell himself he did not care; that this was exactly the kind of treatment a wise man would have looked for; that to expect gratitude from a woman was a dream; that she was certain to cover up her innate, deep-grained selfishness, under a cloud of pretty names. But it would not do. He did care; cared so much that, pretend as he might, it seemed as if he could care for nothing else. He had not expected to be treated

in such fashion; he knew the girl; was persuaded that he knew her well;—he knew that she was not of the kind which bites the hand which feeds it;—not she. As for gratitude;—in his bitterest moments he smiled at the thought of her being ungrateful. She was at least as incapable of ingratitude as he was. She would work her fingers to the bone, and wear out her young life, in her efforts to prove it. Still, in the meantime, she might at least let him know that she was alive; he would be more content if he were sure of it.

He "exhausted all the resources of civilisation" in his endeavours to make sure; exhausted them in vain. And, after all, the "resources" were but few. It was such a difficult task he had to perform; hampered by so many considerations. For instance, he could not go to a "private detective" and bid him spare no expense in a search for Doris Osborne. That would involve conditions which he was aware that the girl would resent; and justifiably. She would resent his going to a stranger, and bidding him hunt for her, for money. It would be too much like setting a bloodhound on her track. Calling in the assistance of the police was, of course, out of the question; there were sufficiently obvious reasons why she might not desire that her movements should be known to them. He tried advertisements in the agony columns of the daily press. Odd advertisements some of them were. Since he could not inform the world that he was looking for Doris Osborne, he had to word them in such a manner that they should be intelligible to her, and to her alone. And this was not so simple as it seemed. He was debarred even from the use of her initials; not wishing that Mrs. Osborne or her agents should blazon abroad the fact that they stood for Doris Osborne.

"You are implored to send your address,"—those seven words, standing alone, constituted the first advertisement, which appeared daily for a week. As might have been expected, so bald an intimation distinctly erring on the side of caution, was

productive of no tangible results. Then he ventured on a variation, "The young lady who went away without a hat is entreated to write." That was published in many London daily papers for a fortnight; before that period was at an end it had been fastened on by the comic papers, who used it as a target for the shafts of their wit. Allusions to "the young lady who went away without a hat" cropped up in many places; even in a music-hall, where, in ambiguous language, a comedian professed his anxiety to learn what else she "went away without." Worse; in the selfsame papers there appeared, in the line following, these words, "Doris Osborne went away without a hat." That seemed ominous; obviously the allusion had been understood by somebody. He had concocted what seemed to him to be an ingenious advertisement,—"The Good Investment in which a certain gentleman invested a small sum of money is urgently begged to communicate with the investor." He thought that that might be understood by the person for whom it was intended; and by her alone. But when he saw that line —"Doris Osborne went away without a hat"—he tore up the copy he had made into tiny shreds, and dropped them in the waste-paper basket. Evidently the wrong people were cognisant of what it was that he was doing; they might guess at the meaning of even such a cryptic sentence; and it might produce some fresh impertinence. He decided that he would avoid fresh irruptions into the agony column; at least for the present. Mr. Burnett agreed that in so doing he would be acting wisely.

"It's no good," declared the lawyer. "Miss Osborne has vanished; and she means to continue vanished until it suits her. She knows where a letter will reach you; she probably knows that you would not object to receive one; but she declines to write,—so there you are. I don't see what beneficial results will be gained by discovering her address, against her will. You must pardon my frankness, but this appears to me to be a case in which Miss A. wishes to have—at any rate temporarily—

nothing to do with Mr. B.; what good will he do by trying to force her? Young women are young women, and sometimes they do strange and wonderful things. We have the best of reasons for knowing that Miss Osborne isn't built on a commonplace model; and that if she means to do a thing, she'll do it. My advice is, dismiss her from your mind; let her go her own way;—plainly she prefers to be left alone."

"I am afraid she may be in a tight place."

"What if she is? It won't necessarily do her any harm. She knows where to come for help;—the inference is that if she doesn't come she doesn't want it."

Hayter was not so sure; although he left the lawyer's words unanswered. He recalled his first meeting with her. He thought it very possible that she might be in as bad a plight again; and yet keep still,—out of very shame. Her notions of what was, and what was not, proper for a self-respecting young woman were her own; he was persuaded that she would be brought again to the very verge of starvation before she would admit that she was beaten. Rather than come to him again for help he was convinced that she would go through sufferings which he did not care to think of. That he had all the money he wanted, and more, while she might be in actual need—that reflection filled him with sensations which were part pain, part anger, part a mysterious something which, even yet, was beyond his comprehension.

Mr. Burnett went placidly, and, as it seemed to his listener, irritatingly, on.

"Get the girl out of your thoughts completely." It was easy to say, but harder to do. "Candidly, I'm inclined to suspect that she is not deserving of all that you have done for her already."

The other interrupted.

"I'd rather you didn't say that, even in jest. I know you're wrong."

There was a smile on the lawyer's face as he glanced at his client; nothing at which the sensitive could have taken offence; yet one felt as if he had smiled. He went lightly on.

"You're concerned about the young lady and we about the elder one,—her very remarkable stepmother. She is making herself a most consummate nuisance; and promises to do worse. Lord Sabin is entirely under her influence;—it's deplorable. We have written to him again and again, but he pays no attention to our letters;—he pays no attention to anybody's letters,—not even his own lawyer's. He is placing himself in a most serious position, and if he persists in ignoring us it's quite possible that we shall be constrained to take extreme steps;—it is very painful. No callers are admitted at Mount Street; though, in that respect, an exception was made;—and that I cannot but feel was an unfortunate exception. You are possibly aware that Mr. Fortescue called to see his uncle, and saw that woman instead?"

"He told me."

"Mr. Fortescue seems to entertain a sincere regard for you, Mr. Hayter."

Gilbert Hayter split an infinitive.

"He doesn't seem to particularly object to me."

"On the contrary, he esteems you highly. Mr. Fortescue, though a very young man, represents interests of the first importance. If you would use your influence to bring him to some responsible sense of what those interests imply, you would be doing a service, not only to him, but to others."

"I'm afraid that sort of thing is out of my line. Responsibility will come to Mr. Fortescue with advancing years."

"Quite so;—quite so;—we hope it will. But, in the meantime, if, when with you, he shows an inclination to do something egregiously foolish, I wish you would at least raise your finger to dissuade him."

"I undertake to raise my finger."

"That is all I ask; he is easily led. Did he tell you of the lamentable episodes which marked his interview with that abominable woman?"

"You call them lamentable; as he told them, they struck me as being rather amusing."

"She kissed him; positively kissed him,—in Lord Sabin's drawing-room."

"That part of her behaviour he does not seem to have regarded in the light he ought to have done."

"But he did shortly afterwards, when she told him that she had done it in the character of his aunt, since she was shortly about to marry his uncle."

"That intimation does seem to have caused a change in his feelings."

"He lost his head;—all sense of diplomacy. From what I can gather he said some very pointed things."

"He says that among other things he told her that she might lie till she was black in the face, but he didn't believe his uncle would be such a silly juggins."

"And for that she boxed his ears,—soundly."

"So he tells me. She appears to have useful hands."

Mr. Hayter touched his cheek with his fingers, remembering.

"There then ensued a short, regrettable scene. She had up Crowden, and between them they hustled Mr. Fortescue out of the house,—actually throwing his hat and cane out after him. It seems that she took a principal part in the ejection.—I wish, Mr. Hayter, you could do as you threatened, and hang her."

"I shall do—in time."

"Yes, but by that time it may be too late.—Since then she has dragged his lordship down to the family place in Derbyshire."

"Dragged him?"

"From what I can learn her action was tantamount to that.

She seems to have him under her thumb,—to such a degree that he simply acts as her mouthpiece. Already she has worked a revolution in the place. She has dismissed all the servants;—most of them old servants, and some of them members of families who have been in the Sabin service for generations. There appear to have been some extraordinary scenes;—it is really a tragedy."

"Has she dismissed Crowden?"

"No,—so far as I can ascertain. And that is the more curious since his demeanour towards her can hardly be always what she might wish. Mr. Fortescue says that when she had him up in the drawing-room, and suggested that he should put him out, Crowden first looked at Mr. Fortescue, and afterwards at her; and then he said—to her, 'Don't you think that's more in your line than mine?'—which was scarcely the kind of remark which a woman would like a servant to make to her. However, it seems that he was right, because she immediately assailed Fortescue with a violence against which he was powerless.—Still, when she was dismissing all the old family servants, one would not have thought that she would have cared to retain a man who, in the presence of a third person, could speak to her like that."

"One would have thought so, under ordinary circumstances, but in this case the circumstances are exceptional."

"That's true enough, in a general sense; but are you speaking in a particular sense?"

"Crowden shares with this woman a secret."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. What part he had in the events of that night I cannot tell; I feel convinced he knows what part she took."

"You refer to that adventure of yours in Mount Street. That was indeed a singular experience. I confess that at the time I thought you must have dreamed it. And the more I

have considered it since the stranger it has seemed. Now, although I know you're not subject to hallucinations, I am constrained to the conviction that, on that occasion, you were the victim of some uncanny psychological phenomenon;—there's no other way out of it."

"Perhaps. I confess that the farther that night's adventures recede the more incomprehensible they become. But if I was the victim of a psychological phenomenon, then, indeed, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

A few days after this conversation Mr. Hayter found among the marriages in his morning paper this announcement—

"SABIN-OSBORN.—On the 3rd inst., by special licence, Marmaduke Lord Sabin, to Maria Osborne, widow of the late Lawrence Osborne."

He had to read it a second time before he grasped its meaning. Then he laid the paper on his knee and—communed with himself. He was still engaged in self-communion when there entered unto him Mr. Beaumont Fortescue. Mr. Fortescue had acquired a habit recently of dropping in on him whenever the fancy took him; which was sometimes very early, and sometimes very late. Hayter, being a man of infinite leisure, showed no sign of objecting. He found Mr. Fortescue amusing; and credited him with more shrewdness than his family lawyer did. He had reasons for his belief that, in common with other modern young men, the young gentleman thought that it was the proper thing to pretend that he was a bigger fool than nature intended.

As usual, he was clad in resplendent attire; when he looked at him Hayter was apt to wonder how he did it; and to inquire of himself what he would look like if he was dressed in some other way. The young gentleman offered no greeting to Mr. Hayter; and Mr. Hayter offered none to him. He placed

himself in an arm-chair; crossed his legs; and looked straight in front of him; until he thought proper to observe—

"I perceive you've seen it."

"The news of the wedding?—Oh yes;—some minutes ago."

"She's sent me a card."

"That's nice of her."

"Isn't it? She's a beauty; so's he; the dears. I wish them all the happiness they deserve;—oh lor, what a time they'd have!"

"Where did the wedding take place? It doesn't say here."

"It doesn't say anywhere."

"Wouldn't it be desirable to make inquiries?"

"My simple child!—Do you think that anyone will believe they're married unless they prove it?—What ho!—I picture Burnett's infantile credulity. When he hears of this he'll drop down dead; they'll have to get an undertaker to bring him round."

"You see the date,—the third? That's more than three weeks ago; they seem to have been some time in making up their minds to publish the interesting fact. One rather wonders why they've done it now."

"I called at Mount Street on the seventh, so, if that's true, they were married then,—four happy days.—No wonder she kissed me as an aunt.—My hat!"

"And no wonder she threw you down the stairs when you suggested that the old man wasn't juggins enough to do it."

"My poor old uncle! When I think of her muscular development I tremble for his ancient bones.—If that woman's son is to be the next Lord Sabin!"

"We'll have her safely hanged before there's a chance of that."

"I used to contemplate that prospect with undiluted pleasure; though I never did see how it could be managed. But things have altered now. She's the feminine head of the family. I don't see how it would suit us to have her hanged. It would make such a mess of the family tree."

CHAPTER XXVII

A GENTLEMAN IN SEARCH OF SOCIETY

GILBERT HAYTER might not willingly have admitted, even to himself, that he only continued to reside at the Metropolitan Hotel in the hope of receiving news of Miss Osborne,—which never came. He went on flying visits in all directions; he even called upon Miss Bryant, who, with unmistakable plainness, refused, in spite of his being his mother's son, to have anything to do with him on any terms whatever; but he always returned to the hotel, to learn if a letter had come for him, or if an inquiry had been made; and always in vain. At last he decided that he had had enough of it;—he had decided that several times already, but this was a final decision. He would wipe her off the tablets of his memory; or, if he could not quite do that, then, in future, she should be, at most, but an incident. Certainly he would play the fool on her account no longer;—he phrased it as strongly as that. Evidently, with whatever fortune she was meeting, she wished to have no more to do with him. Then so be it. Let her go;—or, rather, since she had gone already, let her continue gone. What did it matter to him? Nothing. Why should he forfeit his self-respect by allowing people to suppose that it did? She was only a casual acquaintance, for whom he had done what he had meant to be a good turn,—which had not been appreciated. Very well; there was an end of the matter; the affair was finished. It was absurd to suppose that he could not find a

large number of people who would interest him at least as much as she had done; and probably much more. The only difficulty was to find them;—unfortunately that was the difficulty. It seemed that they were not to be found in England. He made a number of acquaintance, male and female, in whom he honestly tried to be interested; and utterly failed. There was not one of them whom he would not have been perfectly content never to see again; which was annoying.

Obviously the thing to do was to go abroad; that was where really interesting people were sure to be found. Moreover, it seemed that while he remained in England thoughts of that girl would worry him; it was not likely that he would be really interested in other people while that went on. The only course for him to pursue was to cut himself adrift; to leave the scenes with which she was associated; to begin all over again amid fresh surroundings. So he spent the remainder of that year, and the beginning of the next, in travelling over the continent of Europe in search of that congenial society which he knew existed somewhere.

He visited the Italian lakes; which, scenically, he admitted were not bad; though they bored him;—for some reason the congenial society which he sought did not happen to be there. At Bellagio he came upon a honeymooning couple, who spent long days alone together upon the lake, in a state of what was, clearly, drivelling happiness. The sight of them exasperated him so much that, to all intents and purposes, he ran away. He went through Italy, right down to the toe of the boot;—the congenial society was not there. At Taormina he met an old gentleman in a bath-chair, whose society he almost found congenial. He was a bachelor; and the worst-tempered old gentleman he had ever met. It did him good to hear the dreadful things he said of everyone; especially of women. When that old gentleman once got started on the subject of women it was hard to stop him; to say, merely, that he left

them without a shred of anything, either moral, physical, or mental, was to do him scant justice. He had the gift of vituperative eloquence; and Mr. Hayter agreed with every word he said. However, one evening, after dinner, he re-read, for the thousand and first time, the one letter he had ever received from Doris Osborne; in which she requested him to visit Mr. Burnett;—and the next morning he left Taormina, lest he should have an unpleasant scene with the old gentleman.

He spent some time at Monte Carlo; and he lost some money there; but he cared for neither the one nor the other. He explored the Riviera; and found it dull. He tried Spain; but continued unamused. Finally, in Easter week, he found himself in Paris; having gone there with the deliberate intention of doing the things which he ought not to do. He had that curious notion which so many Englishmen do have,—that Paris is the wickedest city in the world. He meant to taste of its wickedness; perchance to wallow in it. But he did nothing of the kind. He went in search of it, in all the well-known places in which it is asserted that it is to be found. While he was uncertain if his search had been crowned with success, he had no doubt whatever that what he did find was neither entertaining nor alluring. Paris, like all those other places, was a disappointment. The congenial society he was seeking was not there;—until one never-to-be-forgotten day, when he stumbled on the girl.

It seemed to him that he stumbled on her by a miracle;—it had the miraculous effect of transfiguring Paris, and making it the most delightful city in the world.

It was one morning on the Boulevard des Capucines. He was sitting outside the Café de la Paix sipping absinthe. He did not know why he tried to drink absinthe. He hated it. But he had always understood that it was an improper thing to drink; and as he was engaged, just then, in the cult of impropriety, he always ordered it, when he had a chance; and left it

in the glass. Among the throng of passers-by, which moved along the Grands Boulevards like a constantly changing phantasmagoria, there came a girl, alone; came and went. It was only when she had already passed that it struck him—it was the girl! His thoughts, and eyes, had been engaged elsewhere; he had only had but a vague and flying glimpse. He whizzed round in his seat, to the serious displeasure of the two gentlemen who occupied the small round table behind him, and peered into the crowd. Laying down a franc, staying neither for waiter nor change, he rose from his chair, and went after the girl of whom he had caught that flying glimpse.

For a second or two she was not to be seen;—no one was in sight who was at all like her. Then a figure crossing the road towards the Avenue de l'Opéra caught his eye;—she was already nearly on the other side. Across the road he went, heedless of the tangle of vehicles which—to the discreet eye—made the road impassable. Drivers shouted at him; some swore; he went regardless on. When he gained the opposite side the feminine figure had disappeared. He hastened to the corner of the Avenue de l'Opéra and stood; and stared; and saw her again;—yes, some fifty yards ahead, going down the street. It was certainly her; beyond a doubt. He was not likely, at that distance, to mistake her figure for another's.

When he realised that, within hailing distance, was the young woman he had sought so long, and so vainly, he behaved in a ridiculous manner. He was a prey to a variety of emotions; which, in a grown man, was absurd. He was overtaken by an attack of nervousness; which really amounted to trepidation. He did not dare to run after her, tap her on the shoulder, and ask her how she was. It came to him with appalling clearness, —right there, at high noon, at the corner of the street!—that, after all, she had run away from him; had ignored his existence; had done her best to make him understand that she wished him to ignore hers. Under the circumstances he hardly felt justified

in assuming a familiarity which she might not impossibly resent. Suppose—as the thought occurred to him he almost shook at the knees—she was to refuse him recognition; to decline his acquaintance;—in short, to cut him;—after stumbling on her, by a miracle, in that Paris street. He was so affected by these apprehensions as to be deprived, temporarily, of his common-sense. He wanted time to collect his thoughts; to decide upon his course of action. She had come on him so suddenly that he felt it incumbent on him to take no risks, lest a worse thing happened. So he followed, at a discreet distance; and kept her well in sight; and enjoyed the consciousness of her near neighbourhood, from behind.

How well she walked, with that dainty, upright little air which he remembered so well. How nicely she was dressed;—she was not wearing the frock for which he had paid. Of course, it might be worn out, since that was a year ago;—also, it was possible that she had put it from her, together with all else which connected her with him. It was at least conceivable that she had desired to blot out from her existence all memories of him;—presently he was telling himself, with grinding teeth, that in fact nothing was more probable. Evidently she was not in want. He knew little of the cost of women's clothes, but that costume she was wearing had not been bought for nothing; and that pretty hat,—he felt convinced that it had cost a lot of money. He was not sure that he was cheered by these evidences of financial well-being. Had she been penniless—as once—she might have received his friendly overtures with, at any rate, moderate approval. But, if her affairs were flourishing,—then it might be different. That was what he told himself, as, with eyes which never left her, he followed, down the street.

She went straight on; looking neither to the right nor to the left; nor pausing even to glance at a shop. Then she turned to the right; causing Mr. Hayter some pangs of doubt. Here the street was emptier. If her senses were on the alert

she would quickly know that she was being followed, and—she might not like it. What was he to do?

What he did do was to hang about the corner of the street, till she had turned into another, again upon her right. Then he went after her full pelt; lest he had lost her. He caught sight of her just as she was entering the Tuileries Gardens; and resolved that there the chase should end. He would take advantage of the comparative seclusion of the open space to compel her not to ignore him, but to grant him at least some measure of recognition. So, quickening his pace, he was presently at her side; and he said,—with, despite himself, a ludicrous catching of his breath—

"I hope you haven't quite forgotten me."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SELINA

IF he was awkward she was worse. When he spoke to her she jumped as if a bomb had fallen at her feet; and she staggered back as if she had been hurt by its explosion. She went from white to pink, and from pink to white, and stared at him as if he had been a ghost. When she saw that he was a thing of flesh and blood she went redder still, and the tears came to her eyes; the sight of which so affected him that he stammered more than ever.

"I—I'm afraid I've taken you by surprise; I—I ought to have been more careful." She still stared at him, as if tongue-tied; which increased his concern. "Let me—let me take you to a seat."

Something in his manner, or his words, seemed to have on her a tonic influence. She suddenly demanded, "Did you ask if I had quite forgotten you?"

"I—I did say something of the sort."

"Did you think that I had quite forgotten you?"

"I believe that I expressed a hope that you hadn't."

"The expression of that hope was not flattering—to me."

It came to him with a sense of shock that she was so much prettier than she used to be; this discovery, combined with the fact that her bearing was almost pugnacious, moved him strangely. His own manner was the soul of meekness.

"It is so long," he reminded her, "since you let me hear from you."

"I was going to let you hear from me almost directly."

"That was very kind of you."

"Is that meant sarcastically?"

"Sarcastically? Indeed no. It—it was very kind of you."

"I was waiting till I could return you the money you advanced me. I have put aside franc to franc, and louis to louis, until now I have most of it; and I was only waiting till I had it all."

When she said that his manner changed; it became severe. He squared his shoulders; straightened himself; and his eyes gleamed.

"You talk about that wretched money, when you know perfectly well that I would have given it twenty times over for a line from you! Is that all you have to say now that we meet again?"

It was her turn to be meek.

"I was only trying to explain."

"And you call that an explanation? Thank you. So you only regard me as a creditor?"

Then she fired up.

"You know I don't; I daresay I am a wretch, but I am what I am, and I shan't be happy till I have paid you back,—every farthing."

He met her eyes; something which he saw in them, which he would have been unable to define, made him smile, a little wryly. His tone softened.

"I ought to be glad to have so conscientious a debtor. Do as you will."

Her glance fell. She moved forward; they walked together side by side. When they had gone a little way she asked—

"How long have you been in Paris?"

"A fortnight. And you?"

"Since I saw you last. I came straight out of England. I felt it was my only chance."

He did not ask her what she meant; he understood. She put another question.

"Are you alone?"

He smiled again, still more wryly.

"I am always alone. I think I must be one of those persons who are sent into the world to be alone,—even in a crowd."

"Isn't the fault your own?"

"You mean couldn't I find companions if I tried? I suppose I could,—of a sort. Perhaps I am not a gregarious man.—Is it an impertinence to ask how you have prospered?"

At this she fired up again.

"You know perfectly well that it is not an impertinence for you to ask me anything." Something which she saw in his face caused her to reconsider her words. "At least it is not an impertinence for you to ask me that. If you are not entitled to know, who is?" She did not wait for him to answer. "I have done much better than I expected, or deserved. My first editor has been true to me; I've done quite a lot of work for him;—perhaps you've seen some of it."

She named a well-known illustrated paper. He struck the ferrule of his stick against the ground.

"What an idiot I am!—I might have thought of that."

"Thought of what?"

"I scarcely ever look at picture papers——"

"Picture papers!"

"Or I might have come across some of your work, and found out where you were that way."

"What way? Do you suppose an editor would give you a contributor's address without permission?"

"He might have forwarded a letter."

"He might, perhaps, have done that." In her next words

her air of innocence was inclined to be a trifle overdone. "Were you—anxious to know where I'd vanished to?"

"Anxious?—I'd have given— I will merely remark that I was—slightly—anxious."

"Were you? I don't see why you should have been."

"Don't you?"

"Why should you care?"

His tone was grim.

"I did care,—that's all.—So you've done well?"

For some reasons all at once she spoke more gaily.

"Excellently,—considering; because, after all, I haven't been at it very long."

"Nearly a year."

"What's a year?"

"To you?"

"To an artist!—who has to make a name!—and a connection.—For my kind of work I'm almost better placed here than I should have been in town;—I'm surrounded by a superfluity of the most delightful subjects. I'm in touch with London, and with America;—quite a lot of my things have been done in 'picture' papers over there;—and even here in Paris. Why, I've just come from an editor, who was not only excessively polite, but who—which is much more to the point!—has given me a commission for ever so much work, at really decent prices."

"So you're on the highroad to become a millionaire?"

"I'm on the highroad to that twenty pounds of yours."

Again he struck his stick upon the ground;—an action which she interpreted in her own fashion, saucily.

"Don't use bad language, please; even under your breath. I heard."

This time his smile was grim.

"Are you alone?"

"No,—I've been lucky all round, but I do think I've been luckiest there. Indeed I'm not alone; I never have been.

On the train which brought me from London I met a girl—an American—an art student—who was coming to Paris to study. We forgathered; and we set up our establishment together;—a very modest share mine was of it at first, but I paid my share."

"I can believe it."

"Yes, you can believe it, because I did. You are the only person to whom I have been indebted for the necessities of existence whom I have not paid; so you see I'm leaving you to the last. We've lived together ever since; and I don't think either of us has regretted it;—I know I haven't. Her name's Cawthorne; she's from Chicago."

"And yours?"

"Mine?—Oh, I see;—I'm Dorothy Olive; but she knows. I'd had enough of false pretences; I told her everything;—but she didn't mind."

"Why should she? No sensible person would mind."

"You still think so?—Oh dear!—What amount of demonstration is needed to bring it home to you that one and one make two?—I've an idea!" She suddenly stopped and faced him. "Do you think your dignity would permit you to pay a visit to Selina?"

"Who's Selina?"

"Selina is Miss Cawthorne of Chicago; and when I say to Selina, Selina includes me.—Mr. Hayter,—" she dropped him a curtsey, out there in the gardens of the Tuileries—"would you honour us with a call,—Selina and me?"

"You know I should be only too delighted. When may I come?"

"When? Why, right now;—at once;—I'll take you. I guess that we shall find Selina is to home; and if that's so you may safely count on her extending you the hand of welcome.—Mr. Hayter, if you notice anything in my speech which is suggestive of that great land, America, you'll kindly attribute it to Selina;—you'll find that she's infectious." She led him over

the Pont Royal, and through a network of turnings, till she paused before a grimy house in a street in which all the houses seemed old and grimy. "Within this building we have our joint establishment. It is not yet marked by a commemorative tablet; that, if it comes at all, will come later on.—Up four flights of stairs, if you please, Mr Hayter."

The staircases were in keeping with the exterior of the building; but the apartment into which she ushered him was an agreeable surprise. It was not only a good-sized room, it was distinctly a pleasant one; well lighted, and by no means ill-furnished,—even though the somewhat heterogeneous articles it contained might not have hinted at a lengthy upholsterer's bill. It had character; distinction; and though both these qualities were flavoured with eccentricity, the eccentricity had charm. To Gilbert Hayter, so soon as his foot had crossed the threshold, it was as if he had entered the holy of holies;—a feeling which was not dispelled even by the nasal voice which immediately saluted his ears.

"Say, this world's a back-number; I'm figuring it out whether it wouldn't be worth while to move on to the next. And don't let anyone speak to me of art, or I'll move them on, if I pay for the funeral myself. You know it's visiting day at Ledoyen's, and who should be the visitor but old Ziem; and when he came to my easel, he stood and stared at my study till I wondered if he'd been struck dumb with admiration. And at last he said, 'It's a pity,' he said, 'that you can't draw.' And that's all he said, and he walked right on. Now, considering that the visitor last week expressed his regret because I couldn't paint, it's about up to me. I'm meditating some new walk of life; because I can grind colours if I can't use them."

"Selina, here's a visitor."

The girl who had been speaking was seated at an easel, painting; and had delivered herself of her remarks without troubling to look round to see who it was who had entered.

Nor did she exhibit any curiosity now; she continued to paint, while she talked.

"A visitor, is there? Well, we'll try to bear our burdens.—Who are you? what do you want? how d'ye do? take a chair, and make yourself at home. If you're a man you can put your feet up. You'll find some American tobacco in the soup tureen. Neither of us is attached to what is known as soup in the family circle; so we keep it there."

"Selina, this is Mr. Hayter."

"Mr. Hayter!" Then the speaker did look round; and he found her not ill-looking; despite the fact that a butcher-blue overall was her only visible garment, and that she wore pince-nez. She had a mass of beautiful fair hair; an intellectual face; was fashioned on a generous scale,—when she did rise from her stool it would probably be to the height of a good six feet; and, in some subtle way, she seemed to disseminate the very spirit of good-humour. She stared at him with a frank freedom which he found amusing. "This is an astonishing surprise. Although I never thought to see you in the flesh, if you're the Mr. Hayter, let me tell you that I know you from the beginning of you to the end, and that I'm about tired of you. Your feminine compatriot has talked of nothing else since the day on which we were enfolded in each other's arms; it's become monotonous."

"Selina, it's not true."

"You hear? She says it's not true; and what she says, goes. So she's never breathed your name; which makes it strange that I should seem to know you so well. Though I expected to find you plainer. I gathered from what I was told that in appearance you were plain but honest. Seems to me that I've met men who thought themselves quite fair to see who were about as plain as you.—Glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, Mr. Hayter."

"Pay no attention to Selina, Mr. Hayter. You'll find, when you know her better, that no one ever does."

"You hear!—that's how she talks to me.—What I've had to suffer from that young female! I call her female because it's a term of opprobrium. I rise superior to my sex, I do.—That young female is a genius. She's a compound of Charles Dana Gibson, George du Maurier, John Tenniel, and Steinlen,—all that. And when you're dealing with a genius you have to brace yourself to bear.—Won't you place yourself on a chair, Mr. Hayter? Unless you think that standing displays your figure to more advantage."

"Selina!—Whose flowers are these?"

"They're your flowers, as you very well know. And all the other things are yours as well. No one ever brings anything for me.—It's that young female's birthday; and as she's advertised the fact on the dead wall outside—perhaps you noticed it as you came along—all Paris has been shooting flowers."

He moved towards the girl.

"Is it indeed your birthday?"

She was holding a bouquet of flowers in either hand. She looked at him, and smiled.

"It happens to be."

"How lucky that I should meet you again upon your birthday!"

"It was lucky, for me."

"Are you in earnest? I meant that it was lucky for me."

"If you two young ones wish to say things you can drop me out of the window, or stuff me up the chimney, or put me in any odd place where I'm out of the way."

"Selina, you're exceedingly absurd. Who's there? Come in."

There entered two young men, with flowers, and packages of what looked suspiciously like bonbons;—presentations for the girl. Then came two young women; also bringing offerings. Then a quartette, in which the sexes were equally divided,—bearing gifts. And presently the room was crowded; the girl

was the centre of a friendly, congratulatory throng. Miss Cawthorne said to Hayter, who felt a little out of it; and also, perhaps, a trifle overwhelmed by these evidences of the place which the girl had won for herself—

"I'd have you to know that all these people have come to see me really; they're only pretending to be her callers so as to give her pleasure. Between ourselves, I'm the only friend she has in Paris;—the one and only."

He laughed; he could see for himself how much truth there was in that. He lingered till they had all departed; no one stayed very long; and then ventured to make what seemed to him the daring proposition which had been shaping in his mind.

"Are you two engaged for to-night?"

Miss Cawthorne disposed of any misgivings he might have had by replying on the instant—

"We are not, or, if we are, the engagement's off; that is, if you have another to offer us in its place."

"I was wondering if you would care—if you would be so good as to dine with me? I shall be greatly honoured if you will."

"We would care; and we shall be so good; and you shall be honoured.—Tell him so."

She waved her hand, which still retained the paint-brush, towards the girl.

"It always pleases me to do what Selina wishes."

"Good girl!—Isn't she a paragon?—when she chooses!—Mr. Hayter, have you any money? Excuse the abruptness of the question; which, for reasons on which I need not enlarge, is one which the members of the society of which we are the chief ornaments often put to each other;—and the occasion for it will presently appear.—By the way, she owes you twenty pounds, because she's told me so, about two thousand times, and she's got it nearly all, because I've seen it; so if you happen, as is frequently the case with members of our society,

to be temporarily pressed, though the temporarilyness is apt to be long-drawn out, as I know from painful personal experiences, why you know where to go to."

"Selina, that's a painful subject. When I spoke of it to Mr. Hayter, on our first meeting, he nearly knocked me down."

"In his anxiety to lay his hands upon the cash?"

"On the contrary. So far as I could make out in his anxiety not to. He practically said that, if he could help it, I shouldn't pay my debts;—but, of course, he can't."

"So you mean to tell me that he said he wouldn't take that twenty pounds,—practically the whole of which, as I happen to know, you have hidden in your stocking at this moment?"

"That's what it amounted to. As if I should allow myself to be dictated to in a matter of that kind."

Miss Cawthorne advanced towards him with outstretched hands;—a palette on the thumb of one hand, and a paint-brush between the fingers of the other.

"You are the man I have been looking for for years; I have found you at last;—at last! If she insists on giving you that twenty pounds; and I know she will,—for, oh! she is a terror! —pass it on to me. I give you my word I will accept it, as a gift; and I'll never, never pay you back; and I'll spend it, every cent; and, if you like, I'll stand you tea at Colombin's.—How glad I am I've met you; for you must have money, in the proper sense, or you'd never treat with contempt such a sum as twenty pounds. A hundred dollars!—my!—when I do lay hands on such a pile as that I can't control myself,—I can't; so I do flip-flaps all round the room;—ask her! Since you have got money, I crave from you a boon; let me order the dinner for to-night."

"I shall be only too delighted. I know a man oughtn't to confess it, but I'm not much good at that sort of thing; I suppose it's because I haven't had the opportunities."

"Haven't you? You poor pale peach!—Let's shake!" She transferred her paint-brush; took his hand; and shook it

solemnly. He laughed. "I haven't had the opportunities; but I've all the desire to have them; and I believe that I've the taste to take proper advantage of them when they come;—I'll prove it you, up to the hilt, to-night. I'll order you such a dinner as only Paris can provide;—I haven't done much ordering on that plane up to this present date, but I've read enough about it to know what Paris can provide;—I'm not sure, but I think we'll dine at Paillard's. I believe you can spend as much money there as you can anywhere."

"Mr. Hayter, you had better be careful, or she'll be guilty of some wicked extravagance. Money burns her fingers; so that it slips out of her hands even before she's got a proper grip of it."

"That's the cold truth;—how well she knows me;—this English miss!"

"I don't mind. To-night she's at liberty to spend as much money as she can."

"I can choose what I like?"

"You can choose all they've got in whatever restaurant you take us to."

"Can I?—No, I don't think I will do that.—But—can I have the bill, when you've paid it? It will enable me to prove that, once in my life, I dined."

"Selina!"

"You can have the bill,—receipted. This is one of the occasions of my life; and, this time, I will celebrate."

Possibly his thoughts were recurring to that previous occasion in his life, the occasion of his return to his native land; and of how, then, he had tried to "celebrate." Miss Cawthorne, her mind dwelling on other themes, clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"And you shall celebrate!—Oh, flag of my country, he's found at last!—the man who wants to celebrate,—with his pockets full of money!"

CHAPTER XXIX

SELINA'S FEAST

THEY dined at Paillard's; Miss Cawthorne being solely responsible for the bill of fare. She spent the greater part of the afternoon in drawing it up, and in its revision. She declared, and was almost believed, that she had changed the entrées two-and-twenty times; while the sweets had cost her an hour of earnest thought. The menu, in its final state, she bore to the restaurant in person; giving strict instructions that it should be exactly carried out. The imposing personage who received her floored her with a single question.

"And for the wines?"

"The wines?—my!—I'd forgotten all about them. That's a subject about which I'm afraid I don't know as much as I might, even in theory.—What wines do you think we ought to have?"

"For such a dinner as this Mademoiselle would desire for each dish its appropriate wine?"

"Oh dear!—Do you think that's necessary? There are such a lot of dishes. If we have a different wine for each I'll be ill, for sure."

"Mademoiselle would wish to have a white wine, and then a red wine, and afterwards champagne?—Or would Mademoiselle prefer to have champagne all through?"

"I think I should;—it sounds appealing. Champagne? It's a thing I've heard of oftener than I've tasted; my momma

and my poppa they're abstainers. Let it go;—champagne throughout,—the best you've got."

"That is understood.—And cold?"

"Frozen."

So the wine was cold; and the dinner was hot; and there were four to eat it. The fourth person was Mr. Beaumont Fortescue, who was passing through Paris, and whom Mr. Hayter had met on the staircase of his hotel. Bearing in mind the fact that if he gave his special attention to the girl, as he would like to do, her friend would be companionless, it instantly occurred to him that the young gentleman would be an excellent companion for Miss Cawthorne. So he invited him, then and there, to dine; an invitation which Mr. Fortescue accepted with alacrity. He explained, in his own characteristic fashion, that he was extremely low-spirited; owing, in some measure, to the fact that, having left all his money on the tables at Monte Carlo, he was only in possession of sufficient funds to pay for a bed, and a ticket for town.

"Hayter, you're a friend in need; if you hadn't offered to dine me the deuce knows where I should have dined. I have heard that you can dine in Paris for a franc, but I never have found out where. Fancy dining for a franc!—I know you'll treat me better than that;—I do so want to be treated well;—my aunt!"

The repast did Miss Cawthorne credit. Though Mr. Hayter was haunted by a vague suspicion that the establishment found something amusing in the fact that such a feast should have been commanded for three; or even four. No reflection of the kind, however, seemed to occur to either of his guests. Mr. Fortescue's depression vanished directly he saw the menu.

"I say!—what!—this is a dinner!—Mr. Hayter, you are!"

"I am not; Miss Cawthorne is;—the dinner is hers."

Mr. Fortescue, who was sitting by that lady, turned to regard her.

"No !—Yes ?"

"I chose the dinner, in all its details, from the beginning to the end."

He was again studying the menu.

"You chose this dinner !—Great Jehoshaphat !—what a wife you'll make !"

"I flatter myself I shall; being convinced of the profound truth of what you English say :—'Feed the brute.'"

"And drink him !—What a wine !—'Moët Brut, 1884'—Did you choose the wine ?"

"I cannot, with strict regard to accuracy, say I did, unaided. We chose it between us,—the establishment and me."

"Pardon me, but I hope that you're not paying."

"I am not. There'd be trouble if I was. I'd hate to have a fuss; but there'd be one. It's only the dinner that's mine. It's Mr. Hayter who's paying for it."

The host had been wise in his generation; they amused each other very well,—the young gentleman and Miss Cawthorne. And, in the intervals of eating and drinking, they were content to amuse each other. They left their host the girl; which was all he wanted. Perhaps Miss Cawthorne had a finger there; she devoted herself so exclusively to Mr. Fortescue, one wondered. Anyhow, their host was happy. So happy that it was not until afterwards—the inevitable afterwards—that he understood how happy he had been. And the girl seemed happy too;—in the old days she would have denied that such capacity for happiness was in her; and he would have doubted. Her happiness was of the quiet kind; the pair in front of her were boisterous in their talk and in their laughter;—she was not that. Noise was a thing which one would have found it difficult to associate with her. One had a feeling that, while her presence would never be ignored, it would never be conspicuous.

The meal progressed; and, as dish followed dish, one began to understand that there was more in that bill of fare than might

meet the unpractised eye. For the second time the girl left untouched the plate which had been placed before her.

"I'm afraid," she admitted, with an air of comic resignation, "that Selina's feast is going to be beyond my strength. My usual dinner is of such a very modest kind that in such a temple of food as this it would be hardly worth considering. Yesterday I dined off a *petit pain*—one does get nice little breads in Paris—some slices of Lyons sausage, an apple, and a cup of coffee;—and I dined well. And to-night to be confronted by this! The capacity to do justice to such a meal only comes from training; and I'm not trained."

"You seem to thrive on your incapacity. You're looking tons better than when I saw you last."

"I'm feeling better. I'm a different person;—at least, I believe I am. You see, I'm earning my own living;—you don't know what that means."

"Don't I? I ought to; I've been doing it for more years than I care to think of. And I found it a harder job than, from all appearances, you are likely to do."

"Isn't it wonderful that I should be so lucky? If they would only pay proper prices for one's work, I should be quite rich; but some of them won't. Do you know that last week I sold six quite good drawings for fifty francs,—which is six-and-eightpence each. But then that week I hadn't sold anything, and only one drawing the week before; there's the rent to pay, and one must live, so that one's bound to have something coming in all the time. On the other hand, last month I sold a single drawing in New York for fifteen dollars,—that's over three pounds."

"Then there does seem to be some sense of decency over there."

"Selina is always urging me to fix what she calls a lowest standard of value; to make up my mind not to accept less, say, than half a sovereign for a single drawing;—and I've tried to,

over and over again. But when one does receive an offer one is tempted. And, of course, I've not the slightest reason to complain."

"So you're perfectly happy."

"Perfectly happy? Isn't that a largeish order?—Are you?"

"No, I'm not; I'm perfectly unhappy; at least I have been these I don't know how many months. When one loses one's only friend one is."

"That's absurd. I won't pretend not to understand what you mean."

"I wouldn't. And of course I already know what is your opinion of me."

"What are you insinuating now?"

"Nothing; beyond what I say.—What is going to happen now that I have met you again?"

"In what way?"

"Am I to be told that our acquaintance is to cease for a further indefinite period?"

"Don't be ridiculous;—you will be told nothing of the kind. Things are altogether different now; as you are perfectly well aware.—Are you staying in Paris?" That morning he had given notice at the hotel that on the morrow his rooms would be vacated; which notice had since been countermanded. "We shall both of us hope to see a good deal of you while you are in Paris."

"That's very kind of you—both."

"Isn't it?—You'll find Selina amusing."

"Shall I?"

"And I believe she'll be amused by you. She has a great gift of being amused,—Selina has."

"Has she?"

"We rather hoped that you would come and take tea with us to-morrow afternoon,—if you'll condescend."

"Condescend!—You know I'll be delighted."

"We shan't be able to offer you much in the way of amusement;—but some of Selina's friends will be there."

"Will they?"

"She knows no end of people, Selina does."

"Judging from what I saw this morning you seem to know one or two."

"They were all, or nearly all, introduced to me by Selina;—everyone likes her."

"It struck me that one or two of them did not seem to dislike you."

"Oh, that's different;—they put up with me for Selina's sake."

"Ahem!"

"What's the matter?"

"I was wondering what began with an H."

"Began with an H!—Mr. Hayter!—I hope that you're not suggesting that I'm either a humbug or a hypocrite?"

"I was only feeling for those people who have to put up with you for Selina's sake."

"I don't see what that has to do with beginning with an H; nor do I see why you need laugh at people for showing me a little sympathy.—By the way, I've a splendid idea; you say you're lonely;—I'll introduce you to Selina's friends; some of them are charming;—you won't be lonely then."

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Have you ever heard the story——"

"Is this another story of a man who made a bad investment?"

"That story—of the man who made the good investment—was my own story. This is the story of a man who knew a host of people,—which I never have done; his house was continually full of people, who called themselves his friends;—yet he was always lonely."

"You are using the word in a very special sense. I have been given to understand that, in that sense, some people are lonely their whole lives long."

"I am going to be."

"Are you? How very misanthropical that sounds!—in the middle of Selina's feast, which is never, never going to end!—and seated at my side!—I am sorry that my society has that effect on you. You used to accuse me of pessimism; I believe you're more pessimistic than I ever was."

"Pessimism in my case is another word for old age."

She looked at him in what seemed to be genuine surprise.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're nineteen to-day, still a child; and I—I'm far advanced in the sere and yellow."

"Are you? How sad. I'm afraid Selina's feast is not agreeing with you. You're very funny."

"It's unintentional humour."

"Is it? That makes it so much sadder,—doesn't it? I didn't think that meeting me again would have such a very depressing effect on you; especially when you said you—you wanted to."

"So I did; you know I did."

"But why?—when you knew it would make you unintentionally humorous? Throwing my age in my face!—as if I could help being only nineteen!" At this he smiled. "Oh, you may laugh! I don't mind confessing that I was rather glad to see you; only—of course—if I'd known that I should depress you; apparently the mere sight of me, the mere sound of my voice——"

"You haven't."

"Something has;—if I haven't what has?"

"I'm an idiot."

"Are you? That's odder still. I don't seem to remember you as that; except—no doubt—that was not a wise investment you made."

"It was the wisest thing I ever did."

"Then what strange things you must have done;—to have crowned them with that folly;—and to call it wisdom."

"If you only knew how I have dreamed of you all these months."

"Dreamed of me? Then perhaps that accounts for your depression;—sleep troubled by dreams can do no one any good."

"I had my dreams, if I had nothing else."

"I—I have thought of you."

She was crumbling the bread on her plate. The pair in front were so engrossed with one another that the host and the girl, to all intent and purposes, might almost as well have been dining alone; which, possibly, was as it was meant to be. Gilbert Hayter looked eagerly at the girl by his side.

"Really?—have you spared one thought for me?"

"I couldn't help it;—was it likely that I could?—I don't remember you as having been unkind."

"Unkind!—To you?—God forbid!"

"You—you don't know how glad I was to see you."

Her tone was shaky;—it set him trembling.

"If you only knew how glad I was to see you."

"You've an odd way of showing it,—getting depressed."

"I'm not depressed."

"And talking about your being in the sere and yellow."

"What's the use of blinking facts? I am an old man,—compared to you."

She looked up at him suddenly; her head thrown back; the gleam in her eyes he knew so well.

"I think you are unkind! Is it my fault I am only nineteen?"

"It is your good fortune;—how good a fortune you'll not know until you've lost it."

"Then why do you speak as if I were to blame? Would you have me ninety?"

"I would have you—as you are; don't you—know it?"

Something in his tone affected her. She returned to the crumbling of her bread.

"You—you must eat your dinner."

"I'd not have you changed in one jot or tittle. I would have you—as you are—for ever."

"I couldn't remain as I am, even though I wished to please you;—unless 'some power the giftie'd gie' me."

"The years would not change you,—in my eyes."

"They would in the eyes of other people. But I know, of old, that you've the power of not seeing things you've made up your mind you will not see."

"I'd see them; but they wouldn't change you;—except——"

"Except—what? I knew there was an exception."

"Except—to draw you closer."

"It's very silly," she said, crumbling her bread with added energy, "to talk of ourselves; let's talk of something—interesting."

What they would have talked about there is nothing to show. The conversation was showing a tendency to drift. Whether it would have drifted to a point which it is generally supposed is only reached under circumstances of greater seclusion none may know. For while it is to be supposed that Gilbert Hayter was searching for a remark which may have been intended to give the conversation that interesting direction which the girl professed to desire, Mr. Fortescue delivered himself of an observation which, for the first time since the meal began, was addressed to the table at large. In the middle of what seemed to be a lively discussion with Miss Cawthorne he chanced to glance across the restaurant. Something seemed to catch his eye; he stared, and started;—put his eye-glass into its place, and stared again. And, as he stared, the fashion of his

countenance changed; all traces of laughter fled; there came, instead, the most unmistakable signs of perturbation; and he exclaimed, in accents which were uncomfortably audible,—forgetting, apparently, that there were ladies present—

"My aunt!—Lady Sabin!—the dear!—What the devil's brought her here?"

CHAPTER XXX

HER LADYSHIP

THERE came, sweeping across the restaurant, in a blue velvet gown, over which was a satin coat of another shade of blue, worn open so as to display lining of still another shade of blue, a lady of imposing presence. She had, on her almost suspiciously luxuriant hair, a black hat of huge dimensions; a large pair of gloves and a fan dangled from her right hand; her fingers were covered with rings; about her neck was a diamond necklace. As she came she looked about her with an insolence which was, in its way, superb. Behind her were four men; all of whom seemed, for some subtle cause, to be fitting companions for so gorgeous a lady. They moved in a go-as-you-please formation. Slightly in front was a tall man; elderly, but still of uncertain age; he was so obviously a work of art that one could only say that he was probably somewhere between fifty and seventy. He wore an eye-glass, which was attached to a black silk ribbon; his hat was tipped forward over his eyes; he leant forward as he moved; his hands were in his trouser pockets; his overcoat over his arm. On his right, a little behind him, was a shorter, clean-shaven man; who might have been an actor. Behind him was a well-set, dapper man, whose shirt-front was uncreased,—with a hatchet face, and keen, watchful eyes. At his side, again a little behind, was a big, stout man over-jewelled and over-dressed; in his embroidered shirt-front was a diamond stud; he wore his

hat on the side of his head; his neck and face were puffed and red.

It was the sight of this quintette which caused Mr. Beaumont Fortescue to exclaim;—immediately adding, as by way of a postscript—

"And, with my aunt, my venerated uncle!—the old pet!—And, as I'm a tinker, Crowden!—What the blazes has he brought his servant out to dinner with him for?"

The imposing lady saw him; as she could hardly help but do in view of the particular stare with which she favoured the occupants of each table as she passed. At sight of him she was pleased to smile.

"Why, it's Beaumont Fortescue," she proclaimed, in a voice which the diners round about were bound to hear;—one wondered how many of them understood the English tongue. "My affectionate nephew, Beaumont! What a delightful encounter.—Well, Beau dear,—here's auntie."

"Beau dear" seemed hardly to appreciate the fact that it was "auntie" in the manner which that affectionate relative apparently desired. He did not even rise from his seat to acknowledge her; indeed he did not vouchsafe her an acknowledgment of any sort or kind. He did what a gentleman seldom does do when a person of the opposite sex is concerned, he cut her, ostentatiously, dead; in a manner which hinted at the possession, on his part, of considerable presence of mind;—equal to her assurance. He looked up at her, steadily, without moving an eyelid; then he said to Hayter, across the table, speaking as if she was not there—

"Seen any of the shows since you have been over this time?"

The lady, seemingly not one whit disturbed by the singularity of his bearing, glancing at the person he addressed, recognised Gilbert Hayter.

"You!" she exclaimed. Then she saw the girl, who, at the

moment of her appearance on the scene, had undergone a sudden metamorphosis. All the light—it might almost be written, all the life—had gone out of her face; the pretty flush had faded from her cheeks; the sparkle from her eyes. She sat, very straight, very rigid; her hands gripping the edge of the table; staring right in front of her, with set, unseeing glance, as a somnambulist might stare. The imposing lady contemplated her with something on her face which transformed it also; in spite of the paint, and the powder, and the expensive complexion. For some seconds one almost expected to see her take her in her two hands and rend her. But that mood seemed to pass; and, instead, she smiled,—not nicely; and she said, "Why, it's Doris Osborne,—the girl who cheated the gallows. Sabin, this is the young woman who was all but hung for trying to murder your wife. Perhaps I'd better get farther from the table; there are knives upon it, with which, made perfect by practice, she may make certain a second time.—And in such company! It seems deplorable that one cannot come to what is presumably a respectable restaurant, without running the risk of meeting with a person of this class, who was only recently the inmate of a prison.—Come here!"

She addressed an individual connected with the establishment, who had been hovering about the party obsequiously, on its passage towards the door. As he advanced Hayter stood up.

"You had better be careful what you say," he told her.

She regarded him with an air of supreme insolence; then, with a contemptuous laugh, turned from him.

"Sabin, this is Mr. Gilbert Hayter, the person who has chosen to associate himself with this—creature. I thought the connection was at an end; but it appears it isn't. He seems to think that it is possible to conceal the character of his friend. I have already had to teach him one lesson; I may have to teach him another."

The men at her back stood silent. Conscious of his

impotence Hayter could only stand and glare. Mr. Fortescue proffered advice.

"Let her talk. Who cares what she says? She's that sort."

The lady favoured him with a smile.

"Mr. Fortescue, I have also had to teach you a lesson. If you are not careful, I am quite ready to repeat it."

The young gentleman was not at all abashed; for which Selina's interrupted feast was perhaps in part responsible. His insolence was a match for hers.

"Waiter, remove this lady. She's a woman of bad character who has tricked my unfortunate uncle into a rotten marriage;—there he stands;—and well he knows it!—what!"

The lady addressed the representative of the establishment in her turn.

"This young woman, sitting here, is Doris Osborne, a notorious criminal, whose infamous reputation has not impossibly reached Paris. She is a would-be murderess; and, for attempted murder, was sentenced, in England, to a term of imprisonment. You hear what I say?"

Mr. Fortescue interposed.

"Don't you listen to what she says;—she's the mother of lies;—turn her out."

The badgered functionary endeavoured to temporise.

"If miladi will permit me——"

"I will permit you nothing. I asked if you heard what I said?"

"Ah, miladi, but certainly."

"Then be so good as to tell me if one runs the risk of meeting persons of this description if one dines at the Maison Paillard; because, if so, the fact ought to be generally known;—and it shall be no fault of mine if it isn't." By now the whole restaurant was interested in what was taking place at this particular table. So far she had been speaking in English. Turning, she

repeated, for the benefit of the assembled diners, the gist of what she had been saying in English, with an addition or two, in fluent French. Then she said to the elderly man, who was carrying his overcoat, "Lord Sabin, please give me your arm. And have the goodness never again to bring me to a place of public resort where one is likely to run the risk of meeting notorious criminals."

On his lordship's arm the lady swept along; the three men following in the rear; the representative of the establishment going in front to act as usher.

"Of all the capers," Mr. Fortescue remarked, as the lady went, "this is the very caperest."

His companions were ominously still. Gilbert Hayter remained standing, glaring after the retreating five; as if in doubt as to what course he ought to pursue. Then, as if realising that the only thing to be done was to do nothing, he resumed his seat,—turning to the girl with an appearance of being at his ease which did him credit.

"I trust that you won't give that abominable woman's conduct an importance it doesn't deserve. It's unlucky we've run across her, but,—she's behaved as was to be expected. All we have to do is to forget her;—it's easy."

"What I'm regretting," observed Mr. Fortescue, "is that I didn't bash her over the head with one bottle, and my dear old uncle with another. It's jolly odd how some people never do think of the proper thing to do till afterwards."

"What I'm wondering," declared Miss Cawthorne, "is not that you put a knife into her before, but that you didn't put one into her again. If it had been me I'd have done it;—the way you treated her was grand."

"Come!" urged Mr. Hayter. "Let's get on with our dinner!—and wipe the woman out of our minds!"

But the girl sat silent; as if she had not heard anything that they had said to her.

The individual who had played the part of usher had returned. The general atmosphere was obviously ruffled. Some of the diners had quitted their own tables to speak to persons who were at others. When the representative of the establishment reappeared the occupants of one of the tables called him to them; plainly something emphatic was said. As he moved away he was called to a second; then a third. Presently he approached the four.

"Why," demanded Hayter, "are we being kept waiting? It is some minutes since we had the last course. Be so good as to put some life into the waiters."

"Monsieur must excuse me." His manner was courteous to the verge of servility. "I am not my own master;—I am the servant of the house;—the clients tell me that if this lady remains they will go and will never return. Among them are some of the oldest and best of our clients. I trust that Monsieur will not do to the house so serious an injury."

"What is it you're driving at? what is it you want? Speak plainly."

The girl stood up.

"I will not trouble Monsieur to explain. I find his meaning plain enough. I will go. There is no reason why you others should not stay. I take it that the objection extends only to me."

"And do you think," asked Hayter, "that if you go, we will stay? Thank you. If you will be so good as to sit down you shall not be detained a moment longer than is necessary. But, before we go, no doubt this person would like to be paid his bill. I presume that his desire to be rid of us is not so strong that he would like us to leave his bill unpaid."

The bill was brought, and settled; the quartette went,—with such show of dignity as they could command. As they were going someone behind them hissed. Hayter turned hastily round. The girl laid her hand upon his arm.

"Please pay no attention. Don't you think that the less attention we can manage to attract the better?"

They went out into the street. There she said—

"I have to thank you for what was meant to be a very pleasant evening; which has been marred by what was not any fault of yours. The last time I saw you I was chased from the house to which you had introduced me; on the occasion of our re-meeting I am chased from the restaurant to which you had taken me to dine. It would seem as if fortune were against us; as if —I am afraid I must say it—as if we were better apart. I certainly seem luckier when you're not in the immediate neighbourhood; more exempt from—this particular kind of humiliation. I will say good-night to you——"

"Here?—mayn't I see you home,—Miss Cawthorne and you?"

"You may not; I prefer to be alone with Selina. And—Mr. Hayter, couldn't you make it convenient to leave Paris to-morrow?"

"Leave Paris?—why—I thought—that to-morrow I was to come to you for tea."

"You were, a long time ago. But, don't you understand that that's out of the question, impossible, now? If you wish to do the kindest thing you can, so far as I'm concerned, to-morrow you'll leave Paris. But, of course, I cannot chase you; it is only I who can be chased. Good-night;—thank you;—and, whether you go or stay, good-bye."

Without waiting for him to answer she entered the cab which was standing by the kerb. Miss Cawthorne took her place; there was no sign of any change in her;—she still seemed to be in the highest spirits, and the best of tempers.

"I've had a dandy time,—real good; and I've to thank you for it. And, between ourselves, I don't mind having seen the ogre, not one bit. Ever since I heard the story, I've kind of felt that I'd like to see her; and now I have;—so it's all come

out as I wanted. Though, mind you, if I'd been Dollie I'd have taken the largest carving-knife there was, and I'd have pushed it right clean through her, handle and all, and it would have done me good,—and I reckon that it would have done her good likewise;—though perhaps it's just as well for the rest of us that that isn't how Dollie felt; they'd have locked us up for certain, and I don't believe it's over and above nice to be locked up over here.—Well, I've the bill, and I've the menu, so that anywhere, at any time, I've only to produce them to prove that once I dined. And I have to thank you for that, Mr. Hayter, and I wish you good-night."

Her manner encouraged him.

"Miss Cawthorne, may I come and have tea with you to-morrow?"

"You may, to-morrow and every day. I'll have your name put on the cup, and I'll always keep it handy. But how about my partner? You know half that brown stone mansion's hers; what did I hear her say?"

She spoke so that what she said was audible to the girl in the cab; who answered for herself.

"Selina, if Mr. Hayter is going to be a visitor of yours I'm afraid that I shall have to change my quarters. If he stays in Paris I must go. Will you come into the cab, please, and let the driver start?"

"You hear?—I've my orders!—All that remains for me is to obey."

She obeyed; the cab went off, leaving the two men standing on the pavement;—Hayter with his face all at once grown white and haggard. Mr. Fortescue said—

"I don't know how it is with you, but I tell you that I feel like painting this beastly old town red,—blazing scarlet; what!—Do you think my old uncle's mad?"

"He must be;—to endure that fiend."

"It's jolly odd;—it's beastly rum;—it's devilish queer;

but do you know, he's changed;—he has changed;—I can't say just how, but he's changed altogether;—he's a different man. I noticed him particularly; and, if I hadn't known he was my uncle, I shouldn't have known him;—my hat!— Hollo!—what's the matter now?"

Mr. Hayter had disappeared from his side. He had been watching the cab, which contained the two girls, threading its devious way through the tangle of traffic which thronged the Boulevard; and had seen someone step off the opposite pavement, stop the cab, and speak to the driver. In an instant, paying no heed to the fact that Mr. Fortescue was still speaking, he made a dash across the way; but, in spite of his haste, was so hindered by the passing vehicles, that, before he could gain the point at which he was aiming, it was lost in the multitude of its congeners. On the kerbstone, however, there still remained the man whom he had noticed, who stood, a cigar between his lips, his hands in the pockets of his dress overcoat, as if awaiting his approach. He had been one of the quintette,—the hatchet-faced man; whom Hayter had instantly recognised as the man in the brown tweed suit. Hayter unceremoniously addressed him.

"Why did you stop the cab in which were those two ladies?"

The other regarded him with the air of calm assurance with which he was familiar.

"Why?" Removing his cigar from his mouth, he moved it backwards and forwards before his face, as if to enjoy its odour. "Because I wanted to know the address to which he was taking them. He gave me the information I required,—in exchange for a five-franc piece; so that, even if they don't pay him, he won't lose. It happens to be in a quarter which I know quite well."

"What right had you to ask for their address? What business is it of yours?"

The other smiled,—indulgently.

"What an unnecessary question to ask;—as if you didn't know! Is it not extremely desirable, for the public safety, that the whereabouts of all criminals should be known?"

"If you—if you molest her, or cause her to be molested, again, as you did before, I—I'll kill you!"

The muscles of Hayter's face were showing through his skin; he clenched and unclenched his fists. The other's smile only grew more indulgent.

"Kill me, will you? It's easy to talk of killing; as your young lady friend will tell you, it's easy to try to kill; but, to kill really—that is a much more difficult matter, as you will discover;—especially if I am the subject on whom you propose to operate. You've no idea how tough I am."

CHAPTER XXXI

A FORLORN LOVER

IT seemed as if Gilbert Hayter was disposed to accept the challenge contained in the speaker's words; and to try, then and there, how tough he was. But, despite the rage which possessed him, he could not but be conscious that for him to attempt violence would be worse than criminal, from his point of view; since it would be playing into his opponents' hands. It was that which had galled him throughout;—the knowledge of his helplessness; of his incapacity to offer even a semblance of resistance; of the futility of resenting attack with attack. So, fleeing temptation at the eleventh hour, he left the man upon the kerbstone, and, sweeping round the first turning to which he came, dived into a network of streets, through which he tore aimlessly on.

He was too agitated to think clearly; or to appreciate justly the position with which he was confronted. Passion seemed to be consuming him; he saw red. If he could have laid hands upon the woman who claimed to be Lady Sabin, he would have ignored her sex in the fury of his desire to mete out to her the punishment which it seemed to him that she righteously deserved. If he could have strangled that scoundrel, with his smile, and his cigar, it would have been something;—it would have been an outlet for his fury. The pity of it! the tragedy! how, all in a moment, the scene had changed. After all these months of weary waiting; of hope postponed; of lonely longing; of

heart sickness; he had stumbled on her, at last, as by a miracle. Stumbled on her in a melting mood; a friendly mood; a tender mood; the like of which he had hardly dared to dream that he would ever find in her. Grown so much softer, so much sweeter even, that she had become transformed into a creature all delight. And all the winter of his discontent had gone; and for him, after many days, there was the promise of the summer. Straightway he had begun to build his castles; not, as he imagined, in the air; but on the solid foundation of the maid's esteem. For, unless he deceived himself most grossly, she did esteem him somewhat. What had he said to her at dinner? and she to him? Had she not, almost in so many words, given him to understand that in the future they should be friends; and, peradventure, if the fates were kind, and he continued on his best behaviour, something even closer? Had she not, by a—as yet—not clearly defined system of wireless telegraphy, which is as old as the hills, transmitted to him some such message, in a cipher which he only was able to translate? So that, for the first time in his life, he had gained for himself one friend; that one whom he most desired; who might—if only more miracles would happen—be even dearer to him than a friend.

And then, in the moment of his winning, all was lost. He was again alone; more alone, he feared, than ever. Nothing was left him but to tramp the streets of Paris. He was so helpless; he could do nothing; neither his money, nor his strength, nor his love, would avail. Strive as he might he was powerless to protect this girl, even in the smallest degree, against this relentless persecution which, so it seemed, might follow her to the grave. So far as he was able to judge, there was no human institution which could protect her. She would have to bear the brunt of it alone; and what that might mean he was beginning to understand.

In one way he might, perhaps, shield her in, at least, a measure;—if she would consent to become his wife. His brain

reeled at the thought of the happiness that would mean for him. Then, in his bitterness, he asked himself,—how could he shield her, even if she did become his wife? He pictured her putting to him that question, herself, with that logical clear-sightedness which he had learnt to dread. He might convey her from place to place,—until the pursuit, following, chased her from the pillar to the post;—but she could do that for herself, as she had shown, without his aid. He might provide her with a house; a shelter; a dwelling-place; from which none might drive her forth. But if a line was set about it, which should mark that house as quarantine, so that decent folk should shun it as the abode of a leper,—what would it profit her then? That house of shelter would become a place of imprisonment, from which she would not dare to issue forth, lest the bells be tolled, to bid people make way, for she was coming. How would she be bettered, when the people called out "Leper! Leper!" by his walking at her side? Would his presence make her clean?

He could picture her putting to him some such questions as these, to which he would be unable to find answers. And yet, something, within him somewhere, whispered that in all such arguments there were flaws. Her morbid forebodings might be realised; people might treat her with the cruelty which she seemed to consider to be part of the Christian hierarchy; yet, if he loved her, if she loved him,—would not some comfort be found in that? Would not his love, in some degree, recompense her for those other things? Was it not within the range of possibility that each might find in the other's love the world; the whole world,—a world which was wide enough;—with God beyond? He could not, at that moment, give such reflections articulate shape. He was, at best, slow tongued; in the stress of his emotion words would not come. But they were there, such thoughts, somewhere within; and they gave him courage. If he could but communicate them to her; if he could only make her see, though dimly, what he saw, clearer

vision might come later on;—with him, in the service of love, doing all that love could do, to remove the scales from before her eyes, it might come very soon; and—yet all might be well with the world.

If he could—if he only could! If?—why did he say If? He would. At any rate he could try;—he would try. Now;—at once;—before the night was older;—and opportunity, perhaps, was gone. While the blood was hot within him; and his heart was strong.

He looked about him. His knowledge of Paris was scanty;—he had not a notion where he was; nor of how far he had walked; nor of the direction in which he had gone. He had tramped blindly on, heeding nothing. One thing only was apparent,—that he was in a quiet street of private houses. So slight was his acquaintance with French that he did not venture to make inquiries as to his whereabouts of the occasional passers-by. Even if he succeeded in making himself understood it was certain that any explanation he might receive, if it was couched in French, would be incomprehensible to him. He was aware from experience that the only thing he could do was to find a cab; cabmen had extricated him from undignified positions before then; and, since there was none in sight, he needs must go blundering on—until there was. He blundered on,—some distance. When, at last, a cab was hailed, he bade the driver take him to the girl's address; he was master of enough French for that. All he had to say, as he entered the vehicle, was, "Rue de l'Ecu, dix-neuf." He said it; and the cab started; with him inside. And scarcely had it started than he began again to be assailed with doubts. He looked at his watch. It was past ten; approaching eleven; a weird hour to visit a young lady; on such an errand;—in view of the fact that, to all intents and purposes, she had forbidden him to call at all. Suppose she refused to admit him? Miss Cawthorne might have something to say on that point; but, even if Miss

Cawthorne admitted him, the girl might still decline to see him; —it was extremely probable that she would decline. What would he gain by practically forcing himself into one room, if she shut herself into another? He could hardly force himself into that. Or, if he did, how long was the process to continue? Was he to chase her from room to room?—until she had no refuge left her but the street?

The farther the cab progressed the more plainly he perceived that the project he had formed was but an idea born of frenzy. More than once he was on the point of bidding the driver take him to his hotel instead; but each time he was restrained by a reluctance for which it was, perhaps, not difficult to account. If he might not see her, he could, at any rate, see the house in which she lived, the exterior of it, at least; and that was something;—to such a condition had he attained. Then, also, he might be leaving Paris on the morrow, as she had bade him; in which case it would be some satisfaction to feel that he had gazed on the exterior of her dwelling-place for the last time that night;—though what amount of satisfaction was to be derived from that feeling he had still left undetermined when the cab drew up. He alighted; over-paid the cabman, as was his wont; having but the vaguest notions as to what were their proper fares he habitually overpaid the Paris cabmen;—on this occasion to such an extent that the man drove off at top-speed lest the mad Englishman should repent his folly.

But the mad Englishman had folly of another kind to contemplate; now that he was actually in front of her abode he realised the absurdity of his behaviour. Not only was he indisposed to force his way into her presence on that upper storey; but he was fearful lest, at that unconscionable hour, she should discover his presence there upon the pavement. So, at a good round pace he made off again, almost as rapidly as the cab had brought him. And had not proceeded a great distance before he perceived, in front of him, a figure which he

recognised;—the figure of the man whom he had left smoking a cigar on the Boulevard des Italiens; whom he had once known as the wearer of a brown tweed suit. It was, at that period of the day, an unfrequented neighbourhood, evidently; this was the first person he had seen since he dismissed his cab. The sight of that man, there, was not only significant, it was ominous; he had not come there for nothing. What had brought him there Gilbert Hayter, with a sinking heart, could guess;—it meant mischief to the girl; mischief of a too familiar kind. His first impulse was to retrace his steps to No. 19 Rue de l'Ecu,—if only to convey what might be a much needed warning. While he hesitated the man in front stood still, and, passing into a brightly lighted building on his right, disappeared from sight; apparently unconscious that he in his turn had had a follower. Hayter at once went after him; something might be gained by doing a little spying on his own account. As he had expected, the place the other had entered was a café, of an unpretentious sort. The door stood open. So far as he could see from the doorway the place was empty; its only occupant was a waiter, who, with the quick instinct of his craft, scenting the neighbourhood of a possible customer, springing up from a doze on a chair, began to wipe a marble-topped table with his serviette. But that the place already had customers was obvious. It stood at the corner of the street; and was shaped like an L. From the doorway the other arm of the L was invisible; but from round the corner, which formed the right angle, proceeded voices. Moving towards the table, which was in plain sight, Hayter became immediately aware that the still invisible customers were speaking English. Hayter gave his order to the waiter in a tone which could have been audible to that individual alone.

"Un bock."

"Un bock!" repeated the waiter, in strident tones, as the Continental waiter has a trick of doing. "Oui, m'sieu!"

The talkers round the corner, thus advised that someone else had entered the café, were for a space still. Then, as if indifferent to a possible listener; or, perhaps, taking it too readily for granted that the new-comer was a Frenchman, familiar only with his native tongue, one of them spoke again; not loudly, yet clearly—and carelessly enough for his words to be audible to the keen-eared person who, although unseen, was but a few feet off;—and not only did Hayter recognise the voice, but what he said put him instantly on the alert.

"So Lady Sabin has gone to pay Miss Doris Osborne a call, has she?"

The speaker, to imitate, at a respectful distance, the style of which the author of that well-known classic, "The House which Jack Built," was a master—was the stout man who had catechised him in the smoking-room of the Metropolitan Hotel; who had pointed him out to the man in the brown tweed suit; and whom he had recognised as forming one of the quintette at the Maison Paillard;—the originator, indeed, in a sense, of all the trouble which, since his first appearance on the scene, had befallen the girl. At the sound of this fellow's voice Gilbert Hayter clenched his fists; his breath came a little faster; and he sat and waited,—for more. It came; in the shape of a reply from the man in the brown tweed suit;—it was not necessary for Hayter to see his face to recognise his tones; he had heard them too recently.

"She's gone to make hell, Lady Sabin has;—if that's your idea of paying a call."

"It would not surprise me much if it was Miss Doris Osborne who made hell. She's too fond of playing with fire, her ladyship is. She forgets that sometimes sparks will fly."

This again was the stout man. He was followed by a voice which the listener did not recognise;—it was low, penetrating, vicious; as if the speaker was giving utterance to a personal grudge.

"If Miss Doris Osborne does get even with her it will serve her right; that young lady is a good deal in arrear at present. If I were her I'd cut her into little pieces before I'd let her go; I'd teach her to play the game she's trying to play;—personally I should be obliged if she would. It would save trouble."

After a pause the stout man again.

"She's looking for trouble. I've generally found that when a woman does that she finds it before she's done."

Then the hatchet-faced man.

"She's had a good run, considering."

"She has; few women have had better. Any other woman would have come to an end of it long ago. She's a—well, she's a——"

The unknown speaker interrupted.

"Never mind what she is; we don't want anyone to tell us that.—What did you say to her?"

Apparently the question was put to the man in the brown tweed suit; it was he who answered,—deliberately, as one who measured his words.

"What did I say to her? One or two things. Among others I said that if she went to Doris Osborne on that errand I shouldn't be surprised if Doris Osborne killed her quite this time."

Again the unknown speaker;—in lower tones; which were still audible to the strained ears round the corner; and which were pregnant with a sinister significance.

"You shouldn't have said that there was any if about it. You should have told her, right out, that Doris Osborne will make a clean job of it this time; because she will; as sure as we are sitting here. I know it."

There was that about the words, and the way in which they were uttered, which made Gilbert Hayter go hot and cold. The speaker's singular assurance seemed to affect his associates.

There was a perceptible interval before anyone spoke again. Then the stout man asked, curtly—

"Honest?"

The stranger's voice sank lower still.

"Honest. I tell you that she's doing it now."

Silence. Gilbert Hayter was conscious of sensations which he had never known before. On the face of it it seemed absurd that the stranger could speak with the certainty which he professed to feel. And yet, if that fiend in woman's shape had forced herself on Doris Osborne, in her own apartments, was not anything possible? Was it not conceivable that the harassed girl, goaded to madness by the woman who had already done her so much wrong, might—might do anything?

Gilbert Hayter did not attempt to fit replies to his own questions. He waited to hear no more; he waited for nothing. Laying a franc upon the table; rising from his seat; he passed noiselessly from the café. And, so soon as he was out of it, he hastened, with all the speed he could command, back to the Rue de l'Ecu. And, almost at the outset, he encountered a check. Which turning had brought him where he was? Was it the first on the right? the second? the third? In the darkness they seemed so much alike. How far had he come down the street in which he was, how many turnings had he passed, before he caught sight of the man in the brown tweed suit? He could not remember. There seemed no one about whom he might ask; even if he could understand what might be said to him. Hesitation was useless; he dashed into the street opposite; reached what seemed the end of it;—now what was he to do? There were turnings on either side; which was he to take? He went down that on the left; then on the right;—turning after turning. He was bewildered. Minutes were passing;—how long was it since he had left the café? Again a turning; fresh perplexity. He looked up; the lamplight shone on a plate which was fixed to the wall,—Rue de l'Ecu.

Surely Providence had directed him to what he never would have found unaided.

It was a long street. No. 19 was towards the other end. On he went; until, when he had gone more than half-way down it, suddenly, he stopped;—and stared. What was that, twenty or thirty yards ahead,—what was that lying on the pavement? Like—like—the figure of a woman? All at once a strange thing happened;—he was afraid. He glanced, stealthily, around. Was anyone in sight? No; not a soul. He had the long street, with the old, high, dark houses on either side, wholly to himself;—with the figure on the pavement. He advanced again, softly, on muted feet; as if he desired that none should hear his steps. He reached the figure on the pavement.

It was that of the lady of imposing presence; in the blue velvet dress; and the satin coat in another shade of blue; and the huge black hat. She lay flat upon her face on the pavement; with her arms stretched out on either side;—he noticed that in her right hand was a pair of long white gloves, and a fan. It was as if, smitten, unawares, from behind, at a moment when she never dreamt of danger, she had fallen forward on the instant, flat; and had not moved since. She lay so curiously still;—in front of No. 19.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BREAK IN THE LINE OF HOUSES

IF the figure on the pavement was curiously still, there was also something strange about the impassivity of Mr. Gilbert Hayter; he remained — leaning forward, looking down—as motionless as if he had been a figure carved out of stone. Then, stealthily, he looked about him again; behind; in front; this side and that. Still not a soul in sight. Bending lower he touched the woman at his feet; placing his hand upon her shoulder he slightly shook her. No responsive movement; nothing to show that she was conscious of his touch. He stooped still lower; and perceived that the fine satin coat she wore was damp, just under the left shoulder. Not only damp, but, apparently, soaking wet; with something which went badly with the blue shade of the coat. As he watched it seemed to him that the stain grew larger; and larger;—it certainly was growing before his eyes. He said to himself—

"It's only just been done; if I had come round the corner a little quicker—I—might have seen it;—I might have seen it done." Again that stealthy glance around. "There can't have been time for anyone to get out of the street; I should have seen. It—it must have been done by someone who—who went into one of the houses."

It was a pity that the woman was lying in front of No. 19.

He tried to consider; to collect his thoughts;—he was enduring such a stress of mental strain it was not easy. Suppose

—suppose the person who had done it had—gone into No. 19, what ought to be done? What was he to do? From his point of view there was one thing which he must do. He must see that person before—before anyone else did;—he must. Before the woman was found; the hue and cry was raised; the avengers of blood were abroad. Therefore it was essential that he should have time;—time to see that person before—anything happened. How was he to ensure his having time? At any moment some-one might come round the corner; and—he would have no time. He knew nothing of that part of Paris, but it seemed strange that no one had come already; he could not expect that such immunity would continue much longer. Those speakers he had heard in the café he had just now quitted;—if no one else came, they might;—they knew where the woman had gone;—to learn what kept her.

At the thought of such a possibility he lost the even balance of his mind; which had been wavering already; and on the rising scale came desperation. Whatever happened, that should not; those men should not find the woman there;—not yet. He had noticed, in the daylight, that close by this house there was an aperture; a break in the line of houses. It might have been a passage-way; a lane; a back entrance; anything. He looked round; recalling with sudden vividness, this—something: —there it was, close to his hand. Stooping lower still, he began to raise the woman from the pavement.

It was not altogether a simple task which he had set himself. She was as big as he was; probably weighed more. She was lying in a position which made it difficult to handle her; there were reasons why he did not wish to be brought into too close contact with her back;—that stain was still spreading. Yet—it was not an occasion for ceremony. Speed was the essential thing. He put his arms about her waist, and, keeping as clear of her as he could, levered her on to her feet; or, rather, he tried to lever her on to her feet; but, so soon as he had almost

brought her to the perpendicular, her legs gave way beneath her, as if she had no legs; and she subsided so rapidly that she all but brought him down with her, back on to the pavement. It needed both strength and agility to keep himself from falling;—and her. But he managed to do both; though the manner of it was not graceful. He lurched so violently that it was only the fact of her coming into contact with the wall of the house which saved him. That wall was a welcome friend. He pinned her up against it; and held her there; while he paused to take breath.

While he still had her pinned against the wall he heard footsteps behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, never for an instant relaxing his hold of the woman, he saw that someone—another woman—had come out of one of the houses on the other side of the way, a few doors lower down. If she had seen him or not he could not say; it seemed as if she had paid him no particular heed if she had. She was striding rapidly down the street, in the contrary direction, apparently unconscious of the fact that—he was pinning that woman against the wall. As he watched her go he became aware that he was trembling to such an extent that he conveyed his tremors to the figure against the wall; so that she seemed to be trembling between his hands,—as if with the rush of returning life. So strong was the illusion that he turned to stare at her. It was an illusion; an uncomfortable spectacle she presented,—in her tawdry splendours. Her head hung right forward, as if her neck was broken, so that he could not see her face,—which was perhaps as well; all he saw was the huge black hat. She was so limp that it was as if her bones had all been fractured; it seemed as if it was all he could do to hold her together. And she was so heavy;—perhaps it was the quality, rather than the quantity, of the weight which made her seem to be the heaviest dead-weight he had ever handled.

The woman's footsteps on the other side of the way were

becoming fainter; he could not wait until they had gone entirely. This other woman was getting to be beyond his strength. He put his arms about her, and clasped her tightly; — which necessitated his pressing her to his bosom; it was horrid how her hanging head, with its huge hat, got in his way;—and, putting forth all his power, he lifted her off her feet, and bore her round the corner into the aperture which broke the line of houses. The aperture was narrow; only a few feet wide. It was unlighted. So soon as his back was turned to the open street it was as though he was confronted by impenetrable darkness. It was impossible for him, a stranger, to realise his whereabouts; to understand what sort of place this was which he was entering. He could see nothing; he might have been blind for all the use his eyes were. He went blundering on; perhaps a dozen, or even twenty, tottering steps. The woman's skirts impeded him, more and more. He could with difficulty advance at all. Her weight was becoming, under such conditions, insupportable; he could carry her no farther. He lowered her, as carefully as he could; but, unexpectedly, she slipped from between his hands;—he heard her bump against the ground. He listened; not a sound came from the street. It was advisable that he should have some idea of his surroundings; so that he might do better with her than—leave her where she was. Would it not be safe to strike a match? It was unlikely that it would be seen from the street. He would risk it. He lit one, under cover of his coat; and by its glimmering light perceived that he was in some sort of yard, which was littered with objects whose nature the illuminant had not sufficient power to enable him to determine. One thing he saw; that close by where he was standing was some sort of shed; what seemed to be a lean-to against the boundary wall. Moving towards it he perceived that it was intended to be secured by a padlock and a hasp; but, as no padlock was there, it was held by the hasp and staple. He pulled at the hasp;

the door came open,—and the match went out. A musty smell came from inside the shed. He hesitated whether to strike another match, to learn what the shed contained. Time was precious;—how long he had been he could not tell; but he had been long enough. Each second increased the risk which he was running. Leaving the door of the shed open, he returned to where the woman lay; feeling for her with his foot. The toe of his boot touched her hat, just in time to prevent his treading on her face. The sudden contact affected him unpleasantly. He closed his eyes; as if to shut out what was lying in the pitch-black darkness at his feet; but he saw it plainer with his eyes closed than with them open;—and he did not relish what he saw. It filled him with a new reluctance to lay hands on her again.

But he got the better of that. It had to be done; and he did it. He stooped, and he gripped her by the shoulders, as best he could, inspired by an eagerness which was almost savage, and he dragged her, in the darkness, towards the shed. He could not have carried her again, to have saved his life;—it was enough to drag her. When he gained the shed he bundled her into it; somehow; anyhow; among he knew not what;—he did it in a kind of foolish frenzy. It seemed to him that the process caused commotion enough to wake the dead. But the dead gave no sign of hearing; nor the living either. And when all of her was in, he pushed the door to, and hasped it; and stood for an instant to listen—to what was happening on the other side.

Everything was still.

Moving away from the shed, he put his hands up to his face;—but so soon as they came into contact with his skin he found that they were wet. What was he to do? They were wet with the woman's blood. Although he remained dry-eyed, there, in the darkness, it was as if he would have been torn asunder by his sobs.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE EMPTY ROOM

IT was not long, however, before he regained, at least outwardly, his self-control. He had not done—what he had done, for nothing. To do what he had it in his mind to do required that he should have some semblance of being at his ease. Returning to the comparative brightness of the lamp-lit street he examined himself, so far as he was able. There certainly were stains upon his hands, tell-tale smears; especially upon the fronts of his fingers. He had brought his fingers into contact with his face,—though it had only been the merest touch. Such stains have a singularly transferable capacity; he wondered if the touch had left its marks. He tried rubbing with his pocket-handkerchief; then looked at it,—to find no signs of what he feared. Apparently, if there were marks they were so slight as to be negligible. His hands were a bad job; only soap and water would do them any good; the handkerchief only made things worse. He stuffed it into the hip-pocket of his trousers, lest he should inadvertently bring it out into the light. Then, again, there was something the matter with his black dress overcoat; here and there it was damp. But, so far as he could see, by that light, nothing was visible. He might take it off, and carry it over his arm; as Lord Sabin had done at Paillard's. But that was at a fashionable restaurant;—here, it would seem odd. It might attract more notice than—what really could not be seen. Besides, his shirt-front was badly crumpled; and he

rather fancied there was a little something the matter with that. He decided that it would be best to keep his overcoat on, and his hands as much as possible in his pockets;—he passed them to and fro on the surface of the dusty road. If anyone did notice, he might suppose that he had had a tumble.

He looked at his watch; it was still not much after eleven;—these things had happened in a much shorter space of time than it has taken to describe them; it was only a very few minutes since he had found that figure lying on the pavement. He could see from where he was that the outer door of No. 19 was still open. He strolled leisurely towards it, and entered. As he did so a woman's voice, probably that of the concierge, or his wife, speaking from a sort of hutch by the doorway, said something to him. He did not understand what she said, nor try to; but continued to ascend the staircase;—only he wondered, if all the time she had been so near, how much she had seen, and heard. He certainly had been running it very close.

This was the floor on which she lived; and that was the door through which she had taken him that morning. By it was the push-piece of an electric bell, which he pressed; telling himself not to play the fool, and to keep from trembling. Almost instantaneously Miss Cawthorne's voice inquired on the other side of the door—

"Who's there?"

"It is I,—Gilbert Hayter."

The door opened, three or four inches; Miss Cawthorne peeped out.

"You?—again?—What's brought you,—now?"

"Please let me in."

She let him in, across the little passage-way, into the sitting-room. He glanced quickly round. Apparently Miss Cawthorne had been writing; there was some manuscript on the table; but there was no sign of the girl.

"Where—where's Miss Olive?"

"She's in her bedroom. What do you want with her? You haven't brought more trouble? Hasn't she had about enough for just one night? What's the matter with you anyhow? You're looking—queer."

He felt that the shrewd eyes behind the glasses, which were looking him up and down, might see more than he desired. He answered in a hurry.

"I'm all right; there's nothing the matter with me,—thank you."

"Then what do you want at this time of night? Has someone told you? Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"That my sweet Lady Sabin has been favouring us with her presence?"

"Do you mean that she's been here?"

"I do mean that she's been here;—I very much mean that she's been here, all there is to her; or if there is any more it must be well worth seeing. She's been making the fur and feathers fly till the air's just full of them."

"Do they—know in the house that she's been here?"

"Unless they've been badly struck since, they do. She's been proclaiming Dollie's whole history, with embellishments, on each landing. I reckon that we'll be having notice to quit in the morning; but maybe Dollie will quit without waiting for the notice. If she goes, I go with her;—that's written."

"What did Miss Olive say to her?"

"She didn't say much; and she wouldn't let me say much; but she looked what she left unsaid. Her ladyship did all the saying; and if there was anything she didn't say it must have been something nice. If I'd been Dollie I'd have killed her, I'd have made a clean job of it this time; I would. But I tell you that though she talked and talked, and Dollie gave her no

talk back, but just stood still, and looked at her, she didn't care to go too close;—she was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of what do you think she would be afraid?"

There was significance in Miss Cawthorne's manner. He turned away; it was a question which, for reasons of his own, he did not care to answer.

"How long has the woman been gone?"

"The woman? Don't call her a woman, I beg of you,—that thing! The creature has only just gone; perhaps ten minutes ago, perhaps fifteen. You might have met her. Which way did you come?"

"Which way did she go?"

"Do you think I noticed?—four floors up? I only know she did go; and that was all I cared to know, just then. I hope she's gone where she didn't want to go; and that she'll stay there."

He looked down; her words struck him oddly.

"Can I see Miss Olive?—Do you think she'll let me?"

"Do you want to see her to-night? Is it likely she's in a mood to receive more visitors? I guess not. Won't it keep?"

"There is something I should like to say to her, if you don't mind."

Miss Cawthorne seemed to see something in his face which moved her to silence. She went to a door which was in a corner of the room, and tapped at the panel with her knuckles. None answered. She tapped again; without result.

"She's asleep."

As he watched it was as though all the blood in his body was rushing to his head, and choking him. It was with difficulty he could speak.

"How long—has she been in her room?"

"Why, she can't be asleep already; she hasn't had time.

She went into her room directly that creature took herself off, but—that's only a few minutes ago."

"Knock again."

She knocked,—more vigorously.

"Dollie!" she cried, her mouth towards the panel of the door. Still none answered. He came and struck at the door, three or four times, with his clenched fist, shaking it in its frame. "What a noise!" said Miss Cawthorne,—half beneath her breath.

"But she doesn't hear."

There was nothing to show she did. Miss Cawthorne looked startled.

"Something's happened." She tried the handle. "It's locked;—she doesn't generally lock her door. What has happened?—Dollie!"

When there was still no answer, putting his shoulder against the door, he gave one great shove; the rickety lock burst from its fastenings; the door was open.

"There's no light in the room; get a light." He waited, motionless, while she fetched a box of matches. Striking one—a smouldering French sulphur match, which smelt—she went into the room. He remained without, constrained by he knew not what. She had evidently lit the gas. "Is she—there?"

"The room's empty."

Then he rushed inside. It was not a large room; but it was daintily kept. Everywhere were evidences of its owner's personality;—but the bed had not been touched; it seemed as if nothing had been touched; everything was in its place; there were no signs of recent occupation. Opposite was another door. Opening it, he found that it opened on what appeared to be a passage.

"Where does this lead to?"

"To our front door."

"Could she go out this way without your knowing it?"

"Of course she could; she often does; we both do. You don't suppose one always wants to go across one's sitting-room?—Why, she must have gone out directly that creature left;—she must almost have followed on her heels."

"Why do you say that?—How do you know?"

"Because directly the creature went she ran into her room, without a word to me. Thinking that she might be the better for a little comfort I came and knocked at her door; but she didn't answer. She must have been gone out then."

He returned into the sitting-room, and sat upon a chair, as if he had dropped down on to it. Miss Cawthorne, also returning, came and stared at him, as if struck by the singularity of his manner.

"What has happened to you? There's nothing so very strange about her going out to get a mouthful of fresh air; she wanted it after all she's gone through; and what she'll say when she finds that you've burst her door I don't know. But there's something about you which I do not understand.—What's wrong with your hands?"

"I've had a fall."

"A fall?—How's that?"

"I stumbled over something."

"What did you stumble over?"

"I stumbled against the kerb-stone.—What does it matter what I stumbled over?"

"My!—what a temper!—and she's always said you had none!—What's that on your face?"

"My face?"

"It looks to me— Say, Mr. Hayter, have you been fighting?"

"Fighting? — Why should you think that I've been fighting?"

"You've been doing something, that's sure; and, if it isn't fighting, then what is it?—Now you tell me, right straight, what's brought you here,—just now?"

"I came to see Miss Olive."

"More trouble?"

"That depends;—such action has been known to lead to trouble." He stood up; a curious smile flitting across his face. He yielded to a sudden impulse to make a confidante of this girl;—who, after all, was a friend of the girl's. "I came to ask her to be my wife;—and that's a sort of action which I have been given to understand sometimes leads to trouble."

"You came to ask her to be your wife?—Why!—At this hour of the night!—After all she's had to bear already!—You have your own way of doing things, that's sure."

"And—she's gone. It's almost as if her keen sense of perception had warned her of my errand, and—she had made her own arrangements in consequence."

"Of all the things to say! You're crazy. She hasn't gone far, and she hasn't gone for long. Can't she go out for a breath of air, however much she may be in need of it, without your making all this fuss?"

"You think she's only gone for a breath of air. In that case may I wait here till she returns?"

"You may not. The idea! What next? Do you suppose that I'll let her think that I've been having you stay here to keep an eye upon her goings and her comings? Not much! You'll have a material as well as a moral bill to pay for what you've done to that door;—and I'll have to do my share of the explaining;—and I prefer to do it after you have gone.—Good-night, Mr. Hayter.—That was a dandy dinner you gave me; and when you do put that question I hope you'll get the kind of answer you'll like; only—if you take the advice of someone who doesn't count, you'll keep it by you till those sort of questions are in season."

"It's possible that I'll have to keep it by me till, for me, the season for questions of that sort has passed entirely. Suppose she's gone for good?"

"Why should she?—without telling me?"

"She walked out of a house in London, after an episode of the kind which occurred to-night, and she vanished;—until, by the merest accident, I encountered her again to-day. Is it not possible that she has done, once more, what she did then?"

"I'll not believe it;—why should she treat me like that? I've not been making trouble. I'll believe it as soon as that the moon says 'Dollars'! You call around to-morrow morning; you have my most gracious permission; and you'll find the bill for that door ready waiting; and I wouldn't be surprised if she presents it to you with her own hands.—Mr. Hayter, let me show you our front entrance."

She showed him through it. Below, at the door which led into the street, he was greeted by a man and woman; who probably were the concierge and his wife; though, as they addressed him in voluble French, speaking, for the most part, together, and every word they uttered was entirely incomprehensible to him, he had no certain data to go upon. He explained, first in English, and, afterwards, in what he meant for French, that he did not understand that language;—which, no doubt, by that time they had perceived for themselves. They let him pass into the street; making remarks to each other, which sounded as if they had a scarcely flattering application to him; and they stood side by side in the doorway, watching him go, and continuing to make observations as he went. Under the circumstances, with those two pairs of eyes fixed continually on him, so long as he remained in sight; and those two voices following him; it was hardly likely that he would be able to pay much attention to that break in the line of houses; but he glanced at it as he went by; and even strained his ears to listen, for he knew not what.

And he wondered what that man and woman had been saying. He felt that it would have been convenient to have known more French than he pretended; if only for the sake of learning if the observations with which they had been favouring him contained any references to the girl.

He saw nothing of her as he went.

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHAT HAPPENED TO MR. FORTESCUE

IN the courtyard of the hotel, that fine night, people were still sitting on the *terrasse*. When Gilbert Hayter appeared, Mr. Beaumont Fortescue, rising from one of the little tables, made directly for him. Hayter would have avoided him if he could; but the young gentleman took care that he did not.

"As the song says, 'I've been waiting and watching for you'; I was beginning to wonder where the what-d'ye-call-it you'd got to, leaving a man in the middle of a sentence, you were so jolly keen to get yourself run over." The volatile youth, seemingly suddenly struck by something in the other's appearance, closed his left eye, and softly whistled. "Hollo!—you have been painting the town red!—what!"

Hayter could only answer with a question.

"What makes you think so?"

Mr. Fortescue winked again.

"Nice boy!—so sweet and gentle!—and so simple!—mother's own! Perhaps you don't know that someone left his marks upon your handsome phiz; and that you look generally as if you'd been having a high old time in a first-class row;—lucky bargee!—all the good things come some men's way."

Hayter laughed, perfunctorily.

"I fancy I've heard something like that said before;—I'm a bit tired;—I'm off to bed."

Mr. Fortescue caught him by the arms; as if he feared his running away.

"No you don't,—till I've had a talk with you. Don't I tell you that I've been waiting and watching for the chance? One of the queerest things has happened to me to-night that I should think ever happened to anyone.—Is there somewhere where we can be alone? In a place like this you never can tell who understands English, and even the very chairs have ears. Can't I come up to your room?"

Mr. Hayter regarded the young gentleman more attentively; and perceived that there was something unusual about his appearance also. He seemed to be more in earnest than he was wont to be. For the first time since Hayter had had the pleasure of his acquaintance he showed signs of agitation.

"Is it about something which interests me? Because, if it isn't, I must really ask you to keep it till the morning;—it sounds brutal, but I've worries of my own to-night."

"It does interest you."

Mr. Hayter was still keenly searching the young man's face.

"Really? Can't you give me some idea of what it's about? Honestly, I don't want to let myself in for a long jobation if I can help it."

"Hayter, I'm coming up with you to your room, and I'm going to tell you all about it there. I'll be as brief as I can; but I'll guarantee that you'll be interested."

There was something so peculiar in the speaker's manner that Hayter, desirous though he was of being alone, so that he might have an opportunity for quiet thought, if quiet thought was to be had, yielded to his solicitation.

"Come along; though, mind you, I warn you that if I'm not interested—and it will take a good deal to interest me to-night—I shall make no bones about turning you out."

Mr. Fortescue's rejoinder was oddly worded.

"You'd be interested in what I'm going to tell you, if this was the last night of your life."

They went up in the lift to Hayter's sitting-room. So soon as they were in and the door was shut, he demanded—

"Now, Fortescue, what's it all about?"

"You wait a bit; I'll tell you fast enough; but before I begin, I want a drink. I've been on the drink ever since it happened, but somehow I'm still all over the shop; the thing's positively given me the twitters; before I begin to talk about it I'll have another."

Again Mr. Hayter laughed;—again in a fashion which hardly suggested merriment.

"I know what you mean; I've felt that way myself;—in fact I've an inclination to feel that way just now; so I'll have a drink with you."

They helped themselves to whiskey. Mr. Fortescue having liberally sampled the contents of his glass, commenced his story.

"Now, don't you bustle me; I'll tell the tale on my own lines;—I'll get there shortest that way; if you keep cutting in you'll only make it longer.—As the French book Johnnie says, I have seen my aunt and my uncle."

"Have you? If that's all there is to it, after lowering my whiskey, you can get. I also have seen your aunt and your uncle."

"Yes;—but the point of mystery is that I've seen them since you have." Hayter doubted it; at least, as regards the aunt; but he held his peace. "Also," added Mr. Fortescue, "I've seen them under circumstances, particularly one of them, which—beat anything."

"Well,—get along." The young gentleman had paused, to pay further attention to his glass. "In what respect did they beat anything? I warn you, Fortescue, that I'm not even beginning to be interested."

"No, but you will be soon. Didn't I ask you not to keep

chipping in? You let me tell the tale; I'll get there." The young gentleman paused, as if to consider. This time Hayter made no attempt to speak; the more attentively he regarded his companion the more impressed he became by the subtle change which had taken place in his appearance and manner;—he was becoming persuaded that something really remarkable must have happened to have produced it. He began to be conscious of an odd curiosity to learn what it was. Mr. Fortescue went on,—in his own erratic, jerky way. "When I left you I went to the Folies Bergères;—rotten show; nothing worth looking at; nor a creature either;—never saw such women;—gave me the hump. All at once I put my hand into the pocket of my overcoat and found Miss Cawthorne's purse;—you know what a no-pocket lot women are; she gave it me to take care of when we went into Paillard's. 'Hollo!' I said. 'What ho!' Then I did a think. 'Let's hope,' I said, 'that this doesn't contain all her worldly wealth, or else she'll worry.' Queer lot, women;—will worry. Remembered I'd got her address;—looked at my shirt cuff and there it was;—she'd written it there with a pencil we'd borrowed from the waiter during the second entrée;—said I was a type of Englishman she hadn't met before, and as she wanted to study it I might call. Calm young woman;—hicockalorum and all that;—though not a bad brand. 'Blow me,' I said, 'if I don't go blithering round there, and dry that poor girl's tears.' Got into a cab; put me down at corner of Rue de What-d'ye-call-'em. It was getting latish;—struck me, now I'd got there, that it was hardly the time to pay a morning call. Walked along, thinking for all I was worth. All at once saw, slap-bang in front of me, my aunt, by marriage;—and wasn't she covering the ground, as if she owned it."

"Was she alone?"

"When first I saw her. Just as I was wondering if I should turn and flee, for I've a kind of feeling that we never shall be folded in each other's arms, not for love's sweet sake; and her

fighting weight is against nature in a woman; who should come hopping out of one of the houses, about half-way between us, but my venerable and venerated uncle. I jammed the break on hard. I didn't want to run over both my relations; though we are bound together by affection's ties. Besides, dear uncle's behaviour was so jolly queer. He didn't seem to be trying to catch up auntie; not a bit of it. He kept dodging into doorways, and squeezing himself flat against walls, as if he was afraid of auntie turning round and seeing him;—I'd nipped into a doorway directly I caught sight of him, and watched the whole of the fun from there. Just as I was thinking I should have to get a few doors higher if I wanted to keep the game well in view, auntie stopped; flat against the wall went uncle, in the nick of time, if his game was lying low,—because auntie turned; if he'd put off flattening himself another half-jiffy she'd have spotted him;—if she'd had extra good eyes she'd have spotted me, I didn't take to cover quite on time. When I looked out again she'd vanished."

"Into the house in front of her?"

"Or else through the pavement. If she had wings she hadn't time to spread 'em. I was so keen on seeing the game that I doubt if she was out of range ten seconds."

"All this took place in the Rue de l'Ecu?"

"Of course it did; aren't I telling you? Have you got it into your head that it all took place in Regent Street? Regent Street was never mentioned."

The young gentleman's unwonted irascibility went unheeded; Gilbert Hayter was trying to read into his story very much more than appeared on the surface.

"Do you know what was the number of the house which, as you suppose, she entered?"

"No. 19;—her house. I said to myself, 'They're practising with ball cartridge; this is no place for me;—I'll return that purse to-morrow.'"

"Then what happened?"

"That's what all the tale's about; that's the devilish funny part of it."

"Well?" suggested Mr. Hayter; for his visitor was indulging himself with a pause of portentous length.

"It's not well;—who said well? You wait; then you won't say it.—My dear sainted uncle unflattened himself. He took up his position in the middle of the pavement; the bravest of the brave now auntie 'd gone; and stood staring towards the house into which she'd vanished. I took the stopper out of my bottle of the family courage, and finding, now that auntie 'd gone, that there was something in it, though I couldn't quite say where, out of my doorway I crept, and towards uncle sweet I softly stole;—I lay a cat couldn't have stolen more softly than I did. There are things which a nephew, who does his duty, ought to say to his uncle, when occasion requires; and, as uncle's fighting weight is nothing like auntie's, I felt that occasion required then. The poor innocent stood stock-still, recking nothing of the fate which approached from behind, until, when I was within a couple of feet of him, I said, 'Uncle!'—just like that. Then it happened."

"Then what happened?"

"He became changed, before my eyes, into another man entirely."

"What on earth do you mean?—You've your own way of telling a story."

"Haven't you?—Who hasn't?—Why shouldn't I?—I tell you he was standing, with his back turned towards me, within two feet of me; when I spoke to him, he swung right round, as if taken by surprise, and I expect he was; and, as he turned, he changed into another man,—I saw him changing; so, when he had turned, I found myself faced by a perfect stranger."

"Do you mean to tell me that all this has been leading up

to a confession of the fact that you took someone to be your uncle, who wasn't your uncle?"

"Nothing of the kind. I know I'm a bit of a fool; but I'm not such a fool as old Burnett thinks; or you either. If your back was turned, and I was sitting here, do you think I shouldn't know you? And do you think I don't know my uncle better than I do you? It was almost as light in the street there as it is here, because we were right under a lamp, so there was no question of being taken in by a bad light. If I had a doubt I'd say so; but I haven't. I'm absolutely certain that that was my uncle, Lord Sabin, so long as his back was towards me; and that, during the period occupied by his turning round, he became transformed into a perfect stranger."

"How did he do it?"

"I don't know; I only know that he did do it, and that I saw him changing."

"Into what sort of person did he change?"

"Hayter, I was afraid of him, as you might suppose a chap would be who found himself suddenly faced by the devil;—I felt as if the devil was facing me. My uncle is not short; but he was two or three inches taller;—I saw him growing taller as he turned."

"Fortescue!—come!"

"I'll not support my statement with an oath;—if you'll not believe me without, you will not with; I am not a liar; I am not mad; I was not drunk; I do not see double; I merely tell you that what I say I saw I did see. You may put your own construction on my words; but they embody a plain statement of a fact." Mr. Fortescue leaned over the table; punctuating his remarks with the index finger of his right hand. It was curious to observe how he became more and more like the normal man the more serious he grew. "Mr. Hayter, I have heard a story of certain strange things which you have stated happened to you at Lord Sabin's house in town. Although the

facts are against you I have been given to understand that you still assert that those things did happen?"

"I do; they did happen; exactly as I have narrated them."

"I believe that you yourself admit that there was much about your experiences that night which is incomprehensible, even to you."

"That's so."

"Very well then. Can't you conceive it as possible that something equally incomprehensible might happen to me;—and yet happen? It has happened, whether you can conceive it or not. The only suggestion, by way of an explanation, that I can offer is, that I have for some time felt that there is something strange about Lord Sabin and the woman he is supposed to have made his wife; after what has occurred to me to-night I am certain that there is something very singular indeed.—I repeat that the person who followed the woman who proclaims herself to be my aunt down the Rue de l'Ecu to-night was my uncle, Lord Sabin, and yet was not."

In spite of himself Hayter could not help being affected by the young man's manner. That he was saying the thing which he believed was true seemed evident.

"What happened after you found yourself confronted by a stranger?"

"The man—or demon, whichever he was——"

"You are not suggesting that there was anything supernatural about him?"

"I merely wish to state the facts; you can draw what inferences you choose. The person, when he saw me, was convulsed with rage; I don't think I ever saw a man so beside himself with passion. For some seconds he seemed able to do nothing but gibber and grin; the spectacle he presented during those few seconds filled me with a feeling of discomfort which I have not got over yet. I thought he was going to attack me. If he had I doubt if I should have been able to offer the least

resistance, I was so overcome by the strangeness of the whole thing. Instead, however, of going for me, he turned again and marched off down the street at the rate, I should think, of five or six miles an hour."

"And you? what did you do? Did you follow?"

"Not I, I was too jolly glad to be rid of him. I never felt queerer in my life. If you'd been there you'd have understood. I let him go; I came straight back to the hotel;—and I brought Miss Cawthorne's purse back with me."

He laid it on the table.

CHAPTER XXXV

M. DE KERCHRIST

THAT night there was heavy rain in Paris, followed by a glorious morning. As early as he dared, Gilbert Hayter journeyed, on foot, to the Rue de l'Ecu. He had hardly slept. Rest had been banished by uncomfortable waking visions. He had been haunted, in particular, by two fears. He wondered if there had been any stains of blood upon the pavement; blaming himself for not having noticed. They might tell a significant tale; especially to anyone who was already prejudiced against the girl. Then, in conveying the body to the shed, what had become of the gloves and fan;—the long, white gloves which she had held loosely between her fingers; the fan which had dangled from a cord? It was at least extremely possible that they had become detached during the process of conveyance. If so, he had left them behind him somewhere on the ground, lying waiting to attract the attention of the first passer-by;—bloodstained relics. If they had been lying anywhere near the shed, the finder might notice other things, and, his curiosity being aroused, find—it. In which case he might learn that already many things had happened.

It appeared, however, as he turned into the Rue de l'Ecu, conscious of an unusual constriction in the region of his heart, that matters were still in their everyday state. A tradesman's cart was in the roadway; a hawker, with a hand-barrow, was crying his wares; two small children, accompanied by their

bonne, were starting for a morning stroll;—with these exceptions, the street was empty. With an odd sense of growing excitement he neared No. 19,—and the break in the line of houses. He glanced into the passage as he passed; he would have liked to explore it, if only to discover if anything was to be seen of the gloves and fan, only the hawker was just the other side of the way, and—he did not dare. The torrential rains of the night had washed the pavements clean; if any evidences had been left by what had lain there they had been washed away. He entered the house;—someone came out of the concierge's quarters to stare at him; but she said nothing; probably recognising that to attempt to hold communication with an ignorant Englishman was useless.

The door of the apartment above was opened by Miss Cawthorne. He perceived, by her face and manner, before he put his question, what her answer would be.

"Has Miss Olive returned?"

She led him into the sitting-room, shaking her head.

"No; I was waiting for her all night, but she hasn't returned, —not yet."

"Then I was right." She looked at him; but said nothing. He produced the purse, which Mr. Fortescue, on leaving overnight, had entrusted to his charge. "Here is your purse. Mr. Fortescue asked me to bring it. He forgot to give it you when you left him outside Paillard's."

She acknowledged its reappearance with a movement of the head; and she handed him a paper.

"I've just had this."

He found that it was partly written, partly printed.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what this is; I haven't French enough."

"It's a notice to quit, at the end of the month; and of course that practically means at once. And we haven't been bad tenants; we've lived regular lives; kept decent company;

paid up to the moment, storm or shine; and we've got to feel as if this place were kind of home. For that we have to thank Lady Sabin; if she's a sample of your English aristocracy give me American democracy. Perhaps it's as well Dollie hasn't returned; maybe she knew what would greet her."

"Have you any notion where she's gone to?"

"She may have gone to any one of ten thousand places. It's like this it seems to me;—I'm American and you're English, so perhaps it won't seem like that to you. She's a girl, and I'm a girl; we ought to stand shoulder to shoulder against our common enemy. You're a man; you want to find her for reasons of your own."

"Isn't that rather a hard way of putting it?"

"Isn't it the true one? Don't you want to find her for reasons of your own?" He looked down. This was a subject on which he was constitutionally unable to give adequate expression to his feelings. He felt that this girl was unfair to him; yet he was conscious of his incapacity to make her see it. What she said when she went on caused him to look up with a start. "And, mind you, Mr. Hayter, you are not the only man who wants to find her for reasons of his own."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think that you're the only pebble on the beach? Or that a girl like Dollie can be in Paris all this time without men tumbling over each other for a smile from her?—because, if you do, you're wrong." This point of view was a novelty to him; his countenance showed it;—which she observed. "I do believe that you're surprised. Why, Mr. Hayter, you really are quite too ridiculous. For every finger she can hold up she could have a husband if she'd take him. It appears to me that if she wants any of these men to know where she's to be found she'll take means to let him know;—not excluding you. It might look to some as if it were from you she's running away; if she has run;—she waits until you do come to run anyway.

So if I did know where she's gone, which I don't, I wouldn't give you so much as the ghost of an idea without her special leave."

Miss Cawthorne's bluntness might be distasteful; but her listener could not but feel that, like the surgeon's knife, it was well meant.

"But suppose something has happened to her?"

"That's what I've been saying to myself all night,—suppose something has? Shan't I feel I'm just a brute, if I don't make a fuss, and start things stirring? But then I tell myself that nothing has happened; I know that nothing's happened; so that if I do make a fuss I shall be doing just what she doesn't want me to do; and I'll not do that;—and that's how it seems to me, Mr. Hayter."

"But oughtn't we to remember that she was hardly herself when she went, and that in her agitation and trouble she may have done anything?"

Miss Cawthorne's bluntness was to the fore again.

"Are you hinting at the Morgue, or anything in that way? Because I've also thought of that. You can go and look there if you like; but I think that if I ever hoped to ask her to be my wife, I've a kind of feeling that I shouldn't; she mightn't like it when she came to hear. No, Mr. Hayter, if she has gone, I guess she has gone because she chooses. She's free to go; you've no call upon her movements; I reckon she just wants to be left alone; and I'm content to leave her. She may come back to tea this afternoon; it's a kind of a sort of a meal which, like all you English, she is fond of. You may come and knock at our front door this afternoon to make inquiries; if there's any news which I am free to give you shall have it. But now I must ask you to excuse me, as there is a life class which is just about to begin which I'm rather anxious to attend. Say, you can knock at our front door again at five."

It was about five o'clock when he knocked again. The

interval had been a dreary one. All the sunlight seemed to have gone from Paris although the day was beautiful. Black care was with him all the while. In his darkest African days it had not sat closer. His nervous system was all on edge; he was like one haunted; listening, waiting, watching for he knew not what. He was by nature a man of action; his idea of getting the better of an opponent was to make haste to meet him face to face, and to resort to primitive methods to learn who was the better man. The irony of life had cast him lately for the part of the looker-on. He had been condemned to watch the fight; without being able to assist, in any way whatever, the side on whose success all his happiness depended; he had not been permitted to lift so much as a finger even when the antagonists resorted to the foulest and basest methods of the unfair fighter. And now his side was being harried again; brought, perhaps, to its last gasp; and not only was he constrained, as always, to sit with folded hands; but to his other sufferings was added yet a greater;—he was haunted by the woman in the shed. She sat down at table with him when he sat to eat or drink; moved by his side when he walked upon the Boulevard. Her bold eyes, set in her painted face, looked into his; her insolent voice whispered, he knew not what propositions of horror, in his ears; wherever he turned she beckoned to him with obscene gestures. And this in the bright sunshine; no wonder that the world was dark.

That afternoon he drove to the Rue de l'Ecu in a cab; he had had enough of her society upon the pavements. All the way he had a horrid feeling that she ran behind the vehicle; and sometimes tapped to advise him she was there. He knew that such a fancy was absurd; he had only to look back and its absurdity would be self-proclaimed. But he would not look back; not he; no, not once; why should he? If she was there, she was, let her run; if she was not there, why should he do anything which might cause the driver to suspect that he

was a fool? Only—he was tickled by a grim fancy; if she was there was she running through the Paris streets in that velvet dress and satin coat, in different shades of blue? On entering No. 19 he had a notion that she had peeped out at him from the break in the line of the houses, just as he had passed the doorway; and had an inclination to go back and see. They might have a game of peep-bo together if he did.

But, instead, he went upstairs, and found that Miss Cawthorne already had a visitor;—another gentleman; a young one. Attired in a lavender coat and trousers; a pearl-grey waistcoat; cut very open so as to display a bright blue shirt; while from the front of his turned-down white collar, of dimensions so minute that it was scarcely worth while calling it a collar, depended a black silk bow of magnificent proportions, which streamed in the air with his every movement, and the ends of which were of lace. This young man—who was very young—was six feet high; upstanding; broad-chested; well shaped. His black hair, brushed back from his brow, without a parting, was a trifle long. His eyes, to match his hair, were big and bright; his cheeks were pale; his tiny moustache pointed towards the skies in a manner which was most becoming. Gilbert Hayter felt that he had never seen a more startling looking person. Miss Cawthorne introduced him, in her own manner.

"Mr. Hayter, this is M. Raoul de Kerchrist.—M. de Kerchrist, perhaps Mr. Hayter may be able to give you the information you require; he is a friend of Miss Olive's."

Mr. Hayter at once found himself being addressed by this gorgeous vision in voluble English of the most picturesque kind.

"Ah!—is that so?—Then, sir, you are indeed the gentleman I seek. I entreat you to tell me where Miss Olive may be found. I beg you to give me only so much as the suspicion of a hint; I will draw from it my own conclusions; it will be

sufficient. The whole quarter is full of her romantic story. It is a true poem;—a veritable tragedy. How this woman of infamy has chased her;—she, an angel whom it is an honour to be permitted to adore.—You adore her, sir? I, also! If you have but the glimmer of a notion of where she has taken shelter I entreat you to afford me an opportunity to prove to her my adoration."

Miss Cawthorne translated; which, although the young gentleman spoke in such fluent English, to Mr. Hayter seemed desirable.

"M. de Kerchrist wishes to know, Mr. Hayter, if you can kindly provide him with Miss Olive's present address."

Mr. Hayter received this interpretation with a certain degree of stiffness.

"You know very well, Miss Cawthorne, that I can do nothing of the kind. If this gentleman seeks information on this subject I should advise him to apply to you; I know no one who is more likely to be able to give it him."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hayter, that is what I'm not. I'm not in any such position, as it happens."

"Have you heard nothing since I was here this morning?"

"Not one little bit; nor half a little bit. But M. de Kerchrist has been to the Morgue."

The resplendent youth broke out into another flood of volubility.

"Indeed yes!—It was terrible! But I shrink from nothing in my endeavour to find her; on earth, if she is on earth; what is left of her on earth, if she is in heaven. Thanks be to God, she was not there. Nor did I think that she would be there; no, not for an instant. She is of the English temperament; she is not of the kind who would seek refuge from life in death. The idea came from Miss Cawthorne."

"I don't fancy that's quite the correct way of putting it, M. de Kerchrist."

"No?—how then?"

"You said to me, where can she have gone? what can have become of her? And I said to you, have you been to the Morgue?"

"That was it;—so I went;—as I say, without result. Therefore it would seem that she has hidden herself even from her friends for fear of this infamous woman. Oh, it is monstrous! One asks oneself why is such a creature suffered to exist?—And the answer?—There is no answer!"

"Well, M. de Kerchrist, there's this answer; she continues to exist because you suffer her to. You might put a full-stop to her if you liked."

He made a significant gesture; she nodded; he shrugged his shoulders.

"Certainly I might do that; but, after all, what then? I have to ask myself. Would she be glad, or sorry? Would she thank me, or the reverse? Would she rather that I should do this thing? I have to answer, I am not so sure. You will understand that in a matter of this sort it is necessary that one should be very sure."

Miss Cawthorne turned to Mr. Hayter.

"What do you think? Are you not of opinion that it would be doing Miss Olive a real service to give this lady a helping hand over to the great majority?"

Mr. Hayter's response was plain enough.

"I am quite certain that she would endure anything rather than that, for her sake, wrong should be done on the off-chance that good might come of it."

"Isn't that rather being on the side of the strenuous? Didn't she once try to pass her over?"

"Do you suppose that she would do again what she did once? You know very little of her if you do. I hold that in what she did she was not without justification. The old code of honour was not the foolish thing some of us in modern

England choose to pretend. I believe that there are wrongs for which we are entitled to take the wrong-doer's life; with our own hands. I believe that the day is not far distant when, even in England, we shall admit it. But, whatever was Miss Olive's feeling once, she has changed it now. Nothing that woman can say or do will induce her to use violence against her again; or to countenance the use of violence. Of that I am assured."

"Well, I am not; and that's honest."

"Miss Cawthorne, I beg you won't say that;—I beg that you won't think it."

He spoke with sudden curious earnestness.

"I will not; if you had rather I did not; but all the same if I was in her place I'd—I wouldn't worry overmuch about the lifeboat if the ship in which she was was sinking."

In his own fashion M. de Kerchrist declared himself to be on the side of Mr. Hayter.

"You are right, sir; you are absolutely right; I know it here in my own heart. If she has a fault—which I would not have you think I say—it is that she has in her too much of the angel. She cannot help it; it is simply that already she is more than half divine. When we regard her it should be upon our knees. She is all goodness; all purity; all innocence;—and we?—ah, what are we? When we come into her presence it is as if we enter a church; we find ourselves in an atmosphere which speaks of heaven. Who are we that we should gaze on her with eyes uncovered? And yet, so perfect is her beneficence, that, as we gaze, we absorb into our souls some of the virtue with which heaven has so richly endowed her, that it issues from her as light issues from the sun."

Gilbert Hayter outstayed this eloquent young man; who favoured them with one or two more rhapsodical outbursts, of which the missing lady was always the subject. When he had gone Hayter asked Miss Cawthorne—

"Is that young man a trifle mad?"

Miss Cawthorne's reply was diplomatic.

"I don't think that a girl necessarily objects to a little madness in a man, if she knows that she's the cause of it;—why should she? Lovers are nowadays so sane, that it's refreshing to come on one who is a little mad; if only because it shows he has the fever badly." Then she added, with a touch of malice, "I don't suppose, Mr. Hayter, that there's any fear that you'll ever be insane." She need not have been so sure, though he did not say so;—had she known of the episode of the break in the line of houses, she might have had her doubts. It seemed that she was in a mischievous mood; for, presently, when he continued still, she said, "I told you you were not the only man in Paris who'd be wanting her address. M. de Kerchrist is one of them, and he's only one of a crowd. I've had half a dozen pestering me for it already; and, when it's generally known that she has gone—if she's gone!—there'll be a dozen more;—and more than one of them is a little mad, because of her. And, mind you, if she's hidden herself it will be the mad ones who will find her, if they set themselves to do it, because they stick at no absurdity. If M. de Kerchrist and you start looking for her, each in his own way, I am betting that he tracks her to her lair in half the time you will."

She smiled sweetly; as if it was not cold comfort which she was administering to Gilbert Hayter.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HIS LORDSHIP'S GANG

THE next morning Mr. Hayter was having his *café complet* in the sitting-room of his hotel, when someone knocked at the door, and, without waiting for an invitation, Mr. Beaumont Fortescue entered.

"Hollo!" exclaimed Mr. Hayter. "I thought that you'd left Paris!"

"Why should you think that?"

Glancing up Hayter realised that the young gentleman was still playing his new rôle of the normal man.

"I don't know why I thought so. Why does one think such things? I thought perhaps that you were tired of the place."

Mr. Fortescue's manner, as he replied, might conceivably have been intended to convey a reproach.

"I'm not so easily tired when I'm interested; and, as you know, I'm extremely interested in my dear old uncle."

"I didn't know;—that is, I didn't know that you were interested in any particular sense."

"Not after what I told you about the other night? Then you must have a jolly short memory. I told you that I'd long suspected that there was something queer about the dear old boy; and that what happened the other night convinced me. So I made up my mind that if I could I'd find out what it was before I left Paris; and I've been doing it."

This was said with an air of justifiable pride. In spite of himself Mr. Hayter was tickled; though his mood was black enough.

"I congratulate you. How did you manage?"

"The first thing I had to do was to find out where the dear old duck was stopping."

"And you did that?"

"I did;—saw it in the *New York Herald*; Elysée Palace Hotel. So round I toddled. Felt a bit shy about the aunt; having a sort of notion that she'd have me thrown down the stairs if she could. But needn't have worried. Aunt and uncle had both gone."

Mr. Hayter pricked up his ears at this.

"When did you call at the hotel?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And Lord and Lady Sabin had then left Paris?—who told you?"

"I didn't say they'd left Paris; I said they'd left the hotel."

"Both of them?"

"That's the queer part of it; it seems that the dear old gentleman went alone."

Mr. Hayter opened his ears still wider.

"How do you mean—he left alone?"

"It's like this. You'll remember—if that memory of yours hasn't failed you altogether—that I told you I saw her ladyship enter No. 19 Rue de l'Ecu; and that she was followed by his lordship, who, directly I spoke to him, was turned into someone else. You thought I was drunk; or a liar; you were wrong; I was neither. Very well then. It seems that auntie never went back to the hotel at all; but uncle did. It cost me no end of a lot to acquire the information which I am giving you gratis; but, when pursuing the family skeleton, I regard money as dross."

"And, occasionally, at other times as well."

"Never mind about other times; one time at a time. I'm talking about this time. Don't frivol." Mr. Fortescue's manner was perhaps meant to be severe. "I had to tip pretty well every beast about the place, and there were such a lot of beasts;—no end of them;—my hat! But I got some value for my money;—you bet! I found out everything there was to find, and some deuced odd things there were among them;—at least they seemed deuced odd to me. Just you listen." It was not necessary to ask his host to do that. Gilbert Hayter was listening already, with a degree of interest of which the speaker had no notion. "In the first place, my uncle and my aunt have been staying there with a regular gang; that, in itself, seems to me to be uncommon queer. Everyone knows my old uncle is a corker; but then he's always been a corker of a very special and particular type. For one thing, he's been the most unsociable of beggars. I've never heard of his travelling in double harness in my life—and I don't believe that anyone else has either—till he got mixed up with the present Lady S. As for going about in a gang,—why, he's always been the most quarrelsome and cantankerous beggar that ever lived. He always fed alone;—he could hardly sit at the same table with a man through a meal without a row with him,—fact! You should hear some of the stories they tell about him in town;—he's an old dear! Crowden once told me that he was the only man he ever knew who could live with him for four-and-twenty hours; but we've always felt in the family that Crowden's a remarkable man. He'd let my uncle throw everything in the room at him,—and hit him, mind you, with most of the things—yet never turn a hair. And then, to put it mildly, my uncle fancies himself to be the only decent creature on God's earth; a pretty sort of scoundrel he is to fancy it;—but there it is. If he had his way, he'd only allow princes of the blood to breathe the same air he does,—that is, as regards men; he's not so particular

where women are concerned.—Now listen to the gang he's had staying with him at the Elysée Palace Hotel; remember the kind of man he is; and then tell me if you don't think it jolly queer. You know the Ethiopian don't change his skin at his time of life." He paused; as if to afford his audience an opportunity to make remarks; but it seemed that his audience had none to make. Gilbert Hayter, forgetful of his coffee and his roll and butter, had been following him with the most flattering attention; now he sipped his coffee, as if reminded of its existence. Mr. Fortescue went on. "The gang consisted of three,—all men; they were those three beggars we saw at Paillard's. The first was a brute named Jarrow,—I got this part of my information from a chap who used to be in the reception office at an hotel at which I used to hang out a good deal in town; he's now at the Elysée Palace; when I spotted him I asked him to come and have lunch; he came; what he told me was worth the lunch. It seems that my uncle's crowd has been the cause of considerable comment at the Elysée Palace."

"How long have they been there?"

"This time about a week. But they've been there two or three times during the last twelve months; and always, or nearly always, the same gang."

"That in itself seems odd."

"Odd!—that's not the word!—fancy my uncle going twice to the same place with the same lot of men!—and such a lot!—if you knew him!—The man Jarrow's a coarse, fat beast——"

"I think I've met him. I recognised him the other night as a person I've encountered once before."

"What do you think he is?"

"A retired publican."

"Nothing so good. He's a tipster;—one of those animals who advertise three horses for half a crown. One of the hotel customers who recognised him declared that he was a ruffian

even of his kind. A second man calls himself Rice, Frederick Rice."

"A tall, well set-up fellow, with a cast-iron face?"

"That's the cherub."

"I've met him also."

If Mr. Beaumont Fortescue had not been full of what he himself was saying, the peculiarity of his host's tone could hardly have escaped his notice.

"My Johnnie tells me that he believes that Mr. Rice is a professional sharp."

"I've not a doubt of it."

"All sorts of people who have been to the hotel have had tales to tell of him, always to the disadvantage of his character,—if he ever had one. He's one of those unfortunate people who, once seen, is not easily forgotten; and as he has been seen, in different parts of the world, under circumstances which, again, were always to his discredit, that he should have such a recognisable personality comes doubly hard on him.—Who do you think the third man is?"

"Crowden."

"Of course,—Crowden! Picture Crowden, of all men in this world, as my uncle's boon companion. Knowing the old geeser as I used to know him, it strikes me as being the most impossible of all impossible things. Yet here is his lordship, his so-called wife, and these three blackguards travelling together, and living together, like a band of brothers; and, like brothers, quarrelling like blazes."

"Oh, they do quarrel?"

"Rather!—have the most tremendous rows!—regular Kilkenny shindies! If he weren't Lord Sabin, and ran up bills which are marvels of bigness, they wouldn't have one of them inside the door."

"Who pays the bills?"

"The old dear!—that's another tit-bit!—fancy his paying

other people's bills when, during most of the years of his life, he's persistently refused to pay his own. They'll tell you in town that he'd go into a pastrycook's, eat a Bath bun, tell them to send in the bill, and then keep them five years waiting for their money. Yet at the Elysée Palace he ladles out for what my Johnnie owned are the most monstrous bills, without troubling even to glance at a single item."

"He's in his second childhood. They've got him completely at their mercy. You'd better instruct Burnett to move for a writ *de lunatico*."

"Not a bit of it! That's the queerest part of the whole jolly queer business;—I'm coming to it. You tell them at the Elysée Palace that he's in his second childhood, or that he's at anybody's mercy, and you hear what they say. Why, Hayter, it's the fixed opinion of the staff at that establishment that he's the biggest ruffian of the lot."

"In what way?"

"In every way.—Hayter, there are people in the place who are afraid of him."

"Afraid of him?—In what sense?"

"I'll tell you what the head private-room waiter on the floor on which they've had their sitting-room told me. He peered about into all the corners as if to make sure that there was no chance of being overheard, and then he rather whispered than said, '*Monsieur, ce n'est pas un homme;—c'est un diable!*' Of course I laughed. I said, 'Then he must be a pretty old devil.' Said the waiter,—if you know anything about a head private-room waiter in a fashionable Parisian hotel you'll know that he's no fool, but very much the other way, or he wouldn't be where he is,—'Milor Sabin is a devil who is any age he pleases; he is old or young as he chooses. I could tell you things—' Then he told me some of them. Hayter, you'd laugh if I told them you; just as you laughed the other night; but I wasn't laughing by the time he'd done. That that man

was speaking the unvarnished truth as he knew it I am sure;—just as I was telling you the truth the other night."

"What was there so remarkable about your waiter informant's revelations?"

"Lots of things. He believes—and it's generally believed in the hotel—that there's something uncanny about my delightful uncle; that there's something uncommonly mysterious is a dead sure thing. One thing the man said struck me. He owns that the staff stands in something like unholy awe of the dear old man;—for instance, one waiter allowed himself to be dismissed rather than enter the room in which he was sitting all alone,—only a minute before the old pet had given him such a terrific fright;—but he insists that the gang is as much in awe of him as anyone; and that as regards Lady S., when he's about she goes in terror of her life."

"That sounds the most incredible thing you've said yet."

"They don't occupy the same room; and when she's in her bedroom she locks and bolts it, and will not open, let him thunder and hammer as he may.—And what do you think that waiter said? That she told him that she wouldn't be alone in a room with his lordship for all the gold there is on earth;—and that waiter believed her. What do you think of that?"

"I'm beginning not to know what to think of anything."

"And there's something else that waiter said. He declares that the only person who didn't use to shiver and shake in his shoes when his lordship was about was—who do you suppose?—Crowden. But the last time they were here Crowden and my uncle had a most terrific row. One afternoon the people next door were startled by the most frightful din. They summoned the waiters. Crowden was yelling and screaming inside my uncle's sitting-room like some lost soul."

"But Crowden is much the younger man. Surely, physically, he is more than your uncle's match."

"You wait. When they entered the room, which they did uninvited, they found Crowden lying on the floor, alone. There were no signs of my uncle, although his voice had been heard only a moment before."

"As they came through one door he went through another, into an adjoining room."

"Perhaps.—Crowden was a sight; he looked as if he had been half torn to pieces by some wild beast. But the men Jarrow and Rice came into the room and bundled everyone else out. They pooh-poohed the idea of medical assistance, and declined to give any information as to what had taken place. That night the whole crowd left Paris."

"Including Lord and Lady Sabin?"

"Including the lord and the lady. Crowden was conveyed to the station in an invalid carriage, so wrapped up as to be unrecognisable. Jarrow went with him in the carriage, and Rice rode with the lord and the lady. His lordship was laughing all the time he was paying his bill, as if in the enjoyment of the best joke in the world; but my informant said that anything less like laughter than the look on the faces of his companions, Lady S. and Mr. Rice, he never saw. It has been remarked, this time, that Crowden has regarded his lordship with the same furtive awe which has always marked the demeanour of the others. The lesson he received that afternoon has left a lasting impression on his mind."

"To listen to you one would be almost disposed to regard Lord Sabin as one of the ogres of the fairy tales."

"It is as an ogre—of the most ogreish type—that he is regarded by the staff of that hotel."

"You say that he's left Paris?"

"There seems to be something queer about everything that dear old man does, and there was something queer about his way of doing that."

"How?"

"The night before last they all went out to dinner, as we know, to our cost, to Paillard's;—by the way, that was another peculiarity, that they always went everywhere in a crowd. His lordship always seemed disinclined to go anywhere alone; which is a novelty, since he has always been the most unsociable of humans; and as no one seemed disposed to go with him as his sole companion, they would all go together in a bunch, as if for the sake of keeping each other company. That was how they went out the night before last,—all in a bunch; but that wasn't how they came back. Between twelve and one o'clock Jarrow and Rice came back together in a cab. They kept the cab and went up to their rooms, which adjoined. Presently they rang and requested the night porter to take their luggage down to the cab; which he did. They got into the cab, and drove away; tipping him a louis."

"How about their bill?"

"Nothing was said about the bill; it was understood in the house that that was exclusively his lordship's affair. Shortly after they had gone his lordship returned—alone, on foot; at least no one saw a vehicle. As it was then nearly two the outer door was shut. Because there was a moment's delay in opening it my dear uncle behaved like one possessed. He took the porter by the shoulders and whirled him out into the street."

"That old man!"

"I have seen the porter, and he says the look of him was enough to take the stuffing out of any man; he never saw a person in such a frenzy of apparently speechless rage. And then his strength;—that porter declares that when he gripped him he was as helpless as a baby in his hands."

"That porter's an imaginative man."

"I'm not so sure. It's not the first time he has assaulted a member of the staff; but as, afterwards, he showers plasters in the shape of bank-notes, nothing has been said; but everyone who has come in contact with him agrees that, young or old, his

arms are like steel wires.—About eight o'clock the next—or, rather, on the same morning, he rang his bell."

"Neither Lady Sabin nor Crowden having put in an appearance in the interval?"

"Precisely.—The story having been told of how he had handled the porter, two waiters stood outside the room while a third went in. However, he was suavity itself. He wanted his bill. It seemed that he had packed not only his own luggage but her ladyship's and Crowden's also. Her ladyship does not travel light."

"Hasn't she a maid?"

"She didn't bring one this time. They brought him his bill, in several volumes. He paid, as usual without so much as a look at it, with English bank-notes;—another thing that they've noticed is that he never pays with a cheque. Had the luggage taken down; placed on two cabs; put himself in a third; drove off to the Gare du Nord. The presumption is that he started to town on the nine-forty."

"And—Crowden?"

"Nothing has been heard or seen of Mr. Crowden. He made no inquiries about him; nor about Messrs. Jarrow and Rice. Doesn't it strike you as extraordinary that old Sabin who, at any rate till recently, never did a thing for himself in his life, should pack not only his own luggage, but his wife's and his valet's? Ye whales and little fishes! The idea of my domesticated old uncle packing Crowden's bag does strike me as being altogether too too-too!"

Gilbert Hayter, having risen from the table, had gone to the mantelpiece, against which he leaned with his face turned a little away from Mr. Fortescue. He spoke with an air of indifference which was almost too marked to be quite real.

"It does seem funny that your uncle, at his time of life, should take to valeting his valet; but, Fortescue, your uncle's a funny man."

"Yes, but there's funniness and funniness; and he's taken to a kind of funniness which, since it involves the turning of his whole life upside down, and inside out, and backway front, strikes me as being something more than funny."

Hayter's tone was still quite placid; one suspected him of making experiments in the art of self-control.

"There's a good deal in what you say; the story of your uncle's proceedings at his hotel isn't exactly commonplace. But —how about her ladyship?"

"What about her ladyship?"

"You mention Jarrow, and Rice, and Crowden, but you say nothing about her ladyship. Doesn't she count?"

"Apparently not, in the estimation of his lordship."

"Didn't she go up with him to town?"

"So far as it is known she didn't."

"Has nothing been heard of her at the hotel?"

"Not a word. I'm wondering if they've all of them gone off and left her behind in Paris; and, if so, why? Have they had a quarrel?—one more? Do they disapprove of her intention to behave like a brute to that little girl of yours?"

"Of mine?"

"You know who I mean,—no offence intended."

"None is taken; only—she never will be mine.—Doesn't it occur to you that if these five people are in the habit, as you put it, of travelling about in a gang, that it is odd that that habit should have so suddenly been broken; especially under what really are singular circumstances? Why did those two men return together, and rush off together, at that hour of the night? Then why did Lord Sabin return alone; and then depart alone? What has become of Crowden? More particularly, what has become of Lady Sabin? Don't such proceedings seem to point to—something unusual?"

"Of course they do; that's what I feel. And therefore I'm going to find out where my dear aunt is."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I'm going to start with the Gare du Nord. Both she and the old man are pretty conspicuous figures; the betting is that if they've been there either yesterday or to-day, someone has noticed them. If she's been seen in one of the boat-trains then it's all right; if she hasn't then the inference is that she's still in Paris. If she is, what I've got to do is to find out where and why. And, by way of a beginning, I shall call at No. 19 Rue de l'Ecu."

This time Hayter started; there was not a doubt of it.

"Why?"

"Last time I saw her was just as her skirts were whisking through the doorway; so far as I know nothing has been seen or heard of her since. What I have to ascertain is: one—" he checked the points off on his fingers—"who did she call on at No. 19; two, how long did she stay; and, three, where did she go to when she left?"

"I can tell you who she called on, she called upon Miss Olive."

"Miss Olive?—you mean——"

"Miss Olive is the name by which Miss Osborne is known in Paris. She stayed there long enough to make herself exceedingly unpleasant; on lines at which you, no doubt, can guess."

"The seraph!"

"And then she went."

"The question is, where did she go to?"

"That is a question to which you will have to find an answer."

If there was a hint of something like truculence in Hayter's manner, by the other it went unobserved.

"I mean to.—Do you know, Hayter, what I should have felt disposed to do if I had been Miss Olive?"

"Haven't a notion;—can't see you in the part."

"No, perhaps not; but if I'd been playing the part I should have felt very much disposed to cook her ladyship's goose; and —I daresay I'd have done it. All she'd have to do then would be to stuff her into the first drain-pipe, and let her rot."

"Don't you suppose the drain-pipe would tell the story? Under such circumstances drain-pipes have the eloquence of a god."

"Mind you, if I thought that that was what she had done, I wouldn't move a finger to find out what she'd done with what she'd left of my aunt by marriage; I'd let the remains remain,—wherever she'd bestowed them. But I've a kind of notion that Miss Olive hasn't made the best use of her opportunities; so—I think I'll call at No. 19."

But fate had ordered that it should not be necessary for him to exert himself to that extent,—since No. 19 called on him.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A COUNCIL OF THREE

OR, rather, No. 19 called on Mr. Hayter,—in the shape of Miss Selina Cawthorne. But as Mr. Fortescue was still holding forth when she appeared in Mr. Hayter's sitting-room, it was just as though she had also called on him. Her entrance took the two men wholly by surprise. There was a slight tap; the door was opened; closed again; and there was Miss Cawthorne standing with her back against it;—with something of a hunted look about her, as if she were seeking refuge from pursuit. There was a momentary silence; she staring at the two men, and they at her. Gilbert Hayter was the first to speak; as if he perceived in her unceremonious entry a significance which escaped the other.

"Miss Cawthorne!—Are there any news?"

"Yes;—there are news;—and you know it."

Her tone and manner were accusatory; her cheeks flushed; her eyes blazed behind her glasses. Hayter gazed at her as if at a loss to understand.

"I know it?—What do I know?—Are there—any news—of Miss Olive?"

She came farther into the room; resting her hands on the table she leant over it towards him.

"Don't you know what the news are?—Will you swear it?"

Her voice was low; but it had a resonance which gave to her words a singular quality of emphasis. Either it; or her

words; or her manner; oddly affected Gilbert Hayter. He started back; changing countenance as he did so.

"Will I swear what?"

"Will you swear that you don't know the news?"

"If you will make yourself a little plainer, Miss Cawthorne, I shall be able to give you a clearer answer."

She stood up straight; putting her hands up to her face as if to brush something from her brow. She glanced about her; again with that suggestion of the hunted thing. Her agitation, her indecision, were equally obvious. There was something of which she seemed to be afraid. Then she looked at Mr. Fortescue, with curious keenness.

"I don't know what to do—to say—if you are here. But I suppose it doesn't matter. It'll be all over Paris directly; if it isn't now; you'll soon know."

As Gilbert Hayter watched her, and listened, he understood. In some subtle way he changed. He drew himself up; self-possessed and wary; prepared for anything. Beaumont Fortescue did not seem as if he knew what to make of the lady.

"If I'm at all in the way——" he began.

She cut him short, with a question.

"Where is Lord Sabin?"

"The dear old man;—he's left Paris."

She seemed startled.

"Left Paris?—when?"

"Yesterday morning;—he and his whole jolly gang."

"His gang?"

"The male part of it; with the exception of Crowden. Her ladyship he seems to have left behind; perhaps he'd overlooked her; he's a forgetful old chap."

"Did you know that he'd left Paris?"

She was staring at Mr. Hayter, to whom this inquiry was addressed, with fixed intentness. He met her gaze unflinchingly; he even smiled.

"Not until Fortescue just now told me."

"Did you know—that he'd left—her ladyship behind?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because—" her lips seemed dry—"because—I should like to know."

He persisted in giving her question for question.

"Why would you like to know?"

"Because—" she paused, as if her voice was rusty, so that the words refused to come; "because—they have just found her dead body—in the shed—in M. Courvoyer's yard—which is at the back of our house."

He was still; merely returning her look for look. Fortescue exclaimed—

"What's that?"

"You had better—ask Mr. Hayter—what that is."

"Hayter!—What does she mean?"

"I presume that Miss Cawthorne means what she says."

"Look here, there's something up between you two. Miss Cawthorne, what was that you said about my aunt,—by marriage?"

"She's been murdered. They've found her dead body in the shed behind our house; someone hid it there."

"No!—by George!—of all the capers!"

Miss Cawthorne said to Gilbert Hayter,—her eyes had not for a moment ceased to search his face—

"She must have been killed just before—perhaps only a minute or two before—you came to see me."

"To see Miss Olive."

He corrected her; she went on unheeding.

"She must have been killed right in front of our house. I thought how strange you seemed. There was blood upon your hands and face; your clothes were soaked with it. You said you'd stumbled; but I didn't see how you could get yourself in that state—through a stumble."

"Why," cried Fortescue, "when I saw you downstairs the state that you were in hit me in the eye; I told you you'd been fighting."

Gilbert Hayter continued to be entirely at his ease; he even continued to smile.

"Admitted—that you told me so; admitted also the blood upon the clothes. Those identical clothes are in the next room, still in the same condition."

"What do you know—about her death?"

The young lady's voice seemed growing rustier; the gentleman's was buoyant and easy.

"Nothing. I hardly know whether or not to wish that I did know something."

"You swear that you know nothing?"

"I'll swear it if it is necessary; but I don't think it is. I fancy that I shall presently be able to convince without resorting to any protestations."

"How came that blood upon your clothes?"

"That's not easy to explain. Miss Cawthorne, this is a much more complicated and delicate business than you seem to imagine. I don't mind telling you, since you continue to stare at me as if you saw the brand of Cain upon my forehead—which you can't do, because it isn't there—that it was I who put the woman's body in the shed in which it seems it has been found; and that it was in doing so that I got myself in the condition you describe."

"Hayter!—Great—great jimini! Then—you knew the old girl was dead, and—you never told me."

This remark of course emanated from Mr. Fortescue.

"I did know; and I did not tell you for reasons which I hope to be able to make you understand. You have been telling me things this morning which I didn't know. They will assist me, I trust, in putting two and two together; a process which I have been endeavouring to perform since I put her in

the shed; and may perhaps lead to my knowing something which I don't know yet.—With your kind attention I'll explain the part I took in the matter."

He told them how he had found the woman lying on the pavement, and—what he had done with her. They listened open-eyed; one might say open-mouthed as well. Miss Cawthorne said—

"And you came straight from—doing that—to me?"

"I did not come to you; at least that was not my intention. If you will remember I came to see Miss Olive; and—stuck at nothing in the hope of seeing her. Can't you see what was in my mind when I found that woman lying on the pavement?"

Apparently she did see something; because, clenching her fists she drew away, as if from the sight of some unpleasant object.

"You don't mean——?"

"I do.—I knew that woman had gone to see Miss Olive; to torture her afresh. When I found her lying there the most essential thing seemed to me to be to gain time; to prevent her being discovered; to hide her away,—until I had seen Miss Olive."

"You thought——?"

"I did.—If she had done it she would not have been unjustified. You recollect that,—speaking in ignorance of what had happened, you yourself said that, in her place, you would have done it?"

"I—I don't think I meant it."

"I'm not so sure. At the time you meant it; as, in the first heat of the madness engendered by her sense of injury, she might have meant it; though, afterwards, she would have repented with tears of blood. The thought that she might have done it has been with me—horribly with me—continually since. But, as I listened to what Mr. Fortescue has been telling me, another thought has been shaping itself instead.—Fortescue,

doesn't it occur to you as being at least possible, that your respected uncle, or one of his respectable friends, may have had a finger in the pie?"

"What pie?—Are you hinting that my uncle killed my aunt?—Whatever should he do that for?"

"That I cannot tell you, at present. The estimable gentleman has been a puzzle to me ever since I first encountered him,—of a remarkable calibre. You admit that he is a puzzle to you."

"That's right enough; but—when it comes to cooking her goose!"

"I say that, as yet, the matter's obscure; but consider the facts.—You saw him dogging her footsteps, shadowing her, under circumstances which, to put it mildly, were odd."

"Yes; but she went into the house; and he went on."

"And you went on. You don't know that he didn't presently return; he, or one of his friends; and wait for her to come out.—One thing seems to me to be obvious;—when, first, Messrs. Jarrow and Rice, and then Lord Sabin, departed, in such haste, and in such unusual fashion, from Paris, they knew that she was dead;—and doesn't everything suggest that their knowledge was a guilty one? Why didn't they wait for her to return to the hotel? why did they make no attempt to find out what had become of her? why did they institute no inquiries?—to the extent, even, of asking a simple question? Mind,—she was dead. Doesn't it look as if they did none of these things because they knew she was dead? And, if they knew, how did they know? If they knew that she was dead, and had any reason whatever to suppose that she had died at the hand of some third person, why didn't they raise the hue and cry? They knew she hadn't!—Again, most damning fact of all;—and the more I think of it, so remarkable a fact does it seem, that I'm inclined to believe that at the back of the whole business there is something which we don't understand; of which we

have not even the dimmest perception; when we do understand we shall see that there is nothing remarkable about it after all; that, given the circumstances, it was precisely what might have been expected;—Lord Sabin packed not only his own luggage, he packed his wife's as well, and took it with him. Why should he have done that? She was dead. Isn't the only conceivable solution that he knew it, for the best of reasons?"

"You must remember that he packed Crowden's luggage also, and took that; and that nothing has been seen or heard of Crowden."

"I'm not forgetting it; on that I found a hypothesis;—here it is; I give it for what it's worth. Criticisms are invited.—Let us first of all get the facts clearly, so far as we know them. It's no use blinking matters; what we want is the whole truth; when we have it we shall at least know where we are; even if it doesn't pan out as we might wish.—Miss Cawthorne, you're the first witness on the stand. You say that Miss Olive must have—vanished, how long—or how soon—after Lady Sabin's departure?"

"She might have been right on her heels. As I told you, she ran into her room as Lady Sabin went. I knocked at her door, thinking that a word from a friend might do her good. I got no answer; so, for all I can tell, she might have already gone,—right after Lady Sabin."

"On the other hand, she mightn't. For all the certainty you have she might have been in her room all the time."

"That's so. I didn't even suspect she'd gone until you came."

"She might, for instance, have been putting some of her things together;—and that would take time. Have you looked to see if she has taken any of her things?"

"I have not. I have looked at nothing. I have left everything just as she did; having had a kind of feeling that she might return at any moment; when she wouldn't feel obliged to

me for prying into what she might think—and properly—was no business of mine."

"When you get back just glance round and see what she has taken ;—she'll forgive you."

"I will.—If I get the chance."

"What do you mean,—if you get the chance? who's to stop you?"

"The police. I fancy that it is not unlikely that when I do get back I shall find the police in charge of everything; and myself, as a free-born American citizen, in a pretty awkward fix."

"The deuce! However, we'll talk about that afterwards. What we have to do is to satisfy ourselves.—Unfortunately the facts—as we know them—point to the remote possibility that Miss Olive did follow Lady Sabin down the stairs, and that she was responsible for what ensued."

"Don't think it; she's not that kind of girl. I say this; that if she had done it she wouldn't have bolted. She might have done her best to get even with her ladyship; and I say small blame to her; but she wouldn't have run away,—she'd have faced the music."

This was Mr. Fortescue; with whom Miss Cawthorne found herself in agreement.

"That's what I say. I've been her chum long enough to know that she wouldn't show the white feather. Whatever she might do she wouldn't be afraid of having to pay. Don't tell me that after doing a thing like that she'd run away, knowing the fix that, by running away, she'd be leaving me in. That's not Dollie. She's a Quixote, from the tips of her pretty toes to the top of her sun-crowned head."

Mr. Hayter was on the same side.

"You're right enough there, about her being a Quixote; I know it to my cost. I don't believe that she had a finger in the death of this woman; but—the French police may be more credulous; unless we show them good and sufficient cause to

the contrary. If she did it why should Lord Sabin and his friends have rushed away from Paris? From what we know of them they would have been only too glad to crucify her; and would probably have been delighted to stay in Paris on the off-chance of doing it. If they had even seen a remote possibility of fastening the guilt on her; by dint, say, of perjured oaths; I believe they would have stayed to do it. But they saw not the faintest chance of their being able to do anything of the kind, so they fled.—Here comes my hypothesis; which brings in Crowden.—What's the betting that the murder wasn't interrupted? The thing must have been done within a very few seconds of the woman leaving No. 19. My theory is that the assailant was hidden in the opening into the yard into which I afterwards conveyed the body. When I found her she was lying within perhaps a couple of feet of it; just far enough from the door of No. 19 to make it difficult for anyone in the house to see what had happened. She must have been there when Miss Olive came out of the house; that seems to me to be incontestable. Then follows one of three things; either she did it, —which we deny; or she must have seen her lying there,—I doubt if she could have come out of the house without seeing her, and, realising what had happened, walked off, in silence. Is that likely? Is it credible? I think not. It seems to me to be inconceivable that she could have come, with such awful suddenness, on that woman, done to death at her own doorstep, and yet not make the slightest attempt to give anyone information of what had happened."

"I agree," interposed Mr. Fortescue. "I'm pretty nearly dead sure she's not that kind of girl."

"I am dead sure," amended Miss Cawthorne. "She could no more have done it than I could. I should have started shrieking if I'd done nothing else; if I hadn't had a fit right off. But she's sense enough for two of me,—though it goes against my American grain to say it. She'd have telephoned in one

direction for the ambulance; in another for the doctor; in another for the police; there's only one thing she would not have done,—she would not have left her there."

"Unless she was prevented—which is the third of my three alternatives. Suppose the chief actor was still upon the scene when she appeared, in such a position that the part which he had played was unmistakable;—what may not have happened? She, it is known, was in a state of painful agitation; of great mental stress. What she meant to do we cannot certainly say; but it is at least possible that she meant to do what she had done before,—try to hide herself from her remorseless pursuer. What must have been her feelings when, in that condition of acute distress, she saw her enemy murdered before her eyes;—or having just been murdered, with the murderer still at work? Wouldn't her first feeling probably have been one of stupefaction? of something approaching paralysis? And the murderer,—what of him? What would he do, on finding himself confronted—detected—caught red-handed—by an unprotected girl? By this girl, of all the persons in the world? When he saw her silence, the amazement which held her dumb and motionless, wouldn't he—do something?—while he had the chance? I suggest that he did do something, while he had the chance. He could only hang once; if he could postpone the unpleasant moment by doing something to this uninvited spectator—why not? What he did do I don't know."

"Don't say that; say he killed her. You're piling it up, Hayter;—why stick at a trifle? I'd no idea that you'd this imaginative gift. Doesn't he talk, Miss Cawthorne, as if he'd seen it all?"

Gilbert Hayter replied before Miss Cawthorne had a chance.

"You've developed qualities this morning, Fortescue, of which I never suspected you; and you lacked the something which inspired me. I'm fighting for the woman I love; when a man does that he fights for all he's worth. She's been in a bad

hole before, and I couldn't get her out of it; somehow my hands were tied. Now she's in another; and this one I'll get her out of; or——"

"Or what?"

"There is no or; this time I'll get her out.—No, I don't fancy that he killed her; I've a fancy she's alive; but I daresay he knocked her out,—the brute! A man who'd done what he'd just done would think nothing of knocking out a girl;—he'd do it in a flash, before she suspected his intention. The puzzle is,—what did he do with her afterwards? He left Lady Sabin lying on the pavement; but what did he do with Miss Olive? The one was dead; the other wasn't;—or he'd have left her also; that's how I look at it. And this is where I believe that Crowden comes in."

"For all you know he may have been performing the whole jolly bag of tricks."

"That's so; but I doubt it. My theory is that, being free from any actual complicity, he had no immediate cause to fear the pother which would probably ensue. Therefore to his keeping Miss Olive, still, for some cause, in a helpless condition, was entrusted, till the others had got safely away. It's possible that he's still in Paris with her."

"You missed your vocation, Hayter; they ought to have had you at Scotland Yard; you might have shown 'em how it's done. You've reared a pretty tall building with a jolly few bricks. Are you seriously hinting that my dear and venerated uncle has seriously gone in for the wholesale butchering?"

"What have you been saying they told you at his hotel? Didn't you hear some curious stories about him there?"

"But—there's a difference—when it comes to blue murder."

"Fortescue, when I first encountered him there was murder done; the mystery of that I've never solved. But I learnt enough to know that I'd run against a very remarkable man;—yet it's dawning on me more and more that he's remarkable in a

sense, and a degree, of which none of us has ever guessed; and I think I'm going to prove it to you before very long. I'm leaving for London by the afternoon boat-train; you're going with me." He glanced at his watch. "No; there's time to catch the eleven-twenty if we hurry; and, as minutes are precious, we're going to hurry;—and we'll interview Lord Sabin on the other side; and this time neither bolts nor bars shall prevent our having just the kind of interview we want.—Good-bye, Miss Cawthorne."

The lady's countenance bore an expression of dismay.

"But what's to become of Dollie—and me—and everything—while you are gone?"

"Miss Cawthorne, those police will be wanting to lock up someone quick; it's a way they have; and if they learn—as is possible—the part I played in conveying that woman to the shed, they may want to lock me up; and that won't suit my book at all."

"They may want to lock me up."

"I don't see on what grounds; but anyhow they're not likely to detain you long."

"You're nice and sympathetic. About how long do you think will be more than enough for me?"

"Don't you understand that I'll be able to help you—and Miss Olive—better on the other side than on this? Here, if the police do arrest me—and they're fools enough!—I'll not be able to move a finger; the Lord knows what will happen to all of us. There I'm going to bring the criminal to book; I don't know how as yet; but I'm going to;—and that's the first thing we've got to do. Afterwards, comparatively, it will be all plain sailing. We'll find out where Miss Olive is,—if you haven't learnt before; and we'll learn where Crowden is,—though it's possible I shall run across his tracks the way I'm going. In the meantime you must keep me posted in all that's happening here;—this is the address which will always find me."

He handed her a card.

"And if they lock me up, is that a piece of news in which I'm to keep you what you call posted? They do tell such tales of these French police that it has always seemed to me that the more innocent you are the more sure they are to find you guilty;—which is a nice look-out for me, for I certainly am as innocent as any lamb."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN THE HOUSE AGAIN

THEY had knocked and rung certainly half a dozen times. If there was anyone in the house their knocking must have been heard; in that case plainly there was no intention to open. On the other hand, if the house was empty it was useless continuing to call attention to their presence without. Hayter wanted to commit what amounted to burglary there and then. Mr. Fortescue was, for once in a way, the more cautious of the pair. He pooh-poohed Mr. Hayter's impetuosity.

"Break into the place at this hour of the day? Why, it isn't properly dark. And how are you going to do it anyhow?"

"Beggars can't be choosers; I'm going to get in somehow; the area steps will do for me."

"It's easy talking; but the window looking out into the area is barred; the beastly gate opening on to the steps is locked; how are you going to get over the railings?"

"You give me a leg up,—I'll soon be over them. I'll engage that that back door shan't present many difficulties,—even if it's locked and bolted."

"Yes, but you'll want some sort of a tool. You can't batter it down with your fists; or kick it in with your feet."

"I'll admit that something in the shape of a cold chisel might be useful."

"Of course it would. Let's go and get one; and something decent to eat and drink as well. Afterwards, when there aren't

quite so many people about, we'll come back and do all the burgling you like."

"It's the something to eat and drink you're after."

"Well,—what's wrong? Don't an Englishman fight better when his belly's full? You put me outside a couple of bottles of the best and I'll burgle Buckingham Palace; as I'm feeling now I wouldn't break into a chapel."

Reluctantly enough, so far as Hayter was concerned, they were about to take their departure from the immediate proximity of Lord Sabin's house, and were already two or three doors away, when a hansom passed. Hayter caught his companion's arm.

"Do you see who's in that cab?"

"I was thinking of that feast we had at Paillard's, and only wishing I was in front of it now."

"Damn your feast!—It's that brute in the brown tweed suit!—the man you say calls himself Rice! If he's calling on Lord Sabin I call with him;—the cab's stopped!—in front of the house!—Get a move on you!"

Hayter turned right-about-face; Mr. Fortescue did likewise, though not with quite so much alacrity. The man had paid the driver; and was confronting the hall door with the evident intention of opening it with a latchkey which he had taken from his waistcoat pocket. Whether he had noticed the two strollers on the pavement was not clear. Possibly if he had he had decided that the most effectual way of escaping their attentions was to make a rapid entry into the house. Certainly his movements were characterised by considerable alacrity. He already had the key in the keyhole, and the door open, and, if Hayter had not put on a flying spurt, in another second he would have been safe inside. That spurt was against him. As if realising the position, and feeling that it would be better that he himself should remain outside, rather than that anyone else should go in with him, he made as if to pull to the already open door. But Hayter was too quick. He flung himself at the other with such

violence, at the mathematical moment, that the door was flung wide open, the man driven through, with Hayter clinging like a limpet to his back. Close at their heels came Mr. Fortescue; to whom the immediate prospect of something to eat—and drink—suddenly became a diminishing quantity. Hayter issued his instructions.

"Take the key out of the door and shut it; then lend me a hand if this brute means fighting."

Apparently the "brute" referred to did not mean fighting; he expostulated instead; his voice and manner suggesting an affability which, under the circumstances, did him credit.

"If you'll take your arms away I shall be happy to afford you an opportunity of explaining what you mean by these curious proceedings."

Gilbert Hayter was not by any means so affable. He still addressed his companion.

"If you go on to the end of the hall you'll find on your right a switchboard; switch everything on; let's have as much light as we can."

Mr. Fortescue again obeying instructions, presently the hall, and staircase, seemingly up to the top of the house, was flooded with light. Hayter, keeping his captive in front within the encircling grip of his arms, steered him into the room, whose acquaintance he had made on the night of that never-to-be-forgotten third of May, when he had sallied forth in quest of adventures. Once more he directed his associate.

"Fortescue, you'll find the switch just inside the door; I know this room. Let's have some light on the subject; then I'll talk to this blackguard." The shadows passed; the room was light as day. "Now," said Hayter, "I'll let you loose. And if you feel like playing any monkey tricks, play 'em, and you'll do me a favour; because, maybe it'll give me a chance to break your infernal neck; and by ——! I'll be glad to have it."

Judging from his attitude, the gentleman to whom this somewhat emphatic language was addressed, seemed to regard it as the light-hearted display of a pleasant humorist. He faced Mr. Hayter with an air of easy self-possession, from which a shrewd observer might have inferred that it was not the first time he found himself in a delicate situation.

"If," he observed, with a pretty insolence, "you wish to break my neck, or, for the matter of that, anybody else's; let's hope that a good-natured providence won't interfere with the gratification of so natural an inclination."

Hayter favoured him with a look which hardly suggested appreciation of his sense of humour.

"Nice gift for talk, haven't you? I've noticed it before. Before I've done with you I hope to prove it." He turned to Fortescue. "This is the room in which I saw your uncle, or your uncle's double, with his throat cut; someone with his throat cut sat in that chair. Before I leave this house I hope to come across something which will give me some sort of idea as to who that someone was, and how the trick was played; I am even hopeful that, in pursuit of that knowledge, this—gentleman may favour me with his assistance. On that table was the heap of sovereigns which represented, at any rate in part, the forty thousand sovereigns which Lord Sabin had drawn from the bank that afternoon; it is possible that this—gentleman may again assist us to, at least, some dim notion of what became of that heap. What do you say, Mr. Rice? I am told that is one of the many names under which it has been your pleasure to play the blackguard."

"What can I say? Except that it will always be a sheer delight to do anything to gratify such a hero of romance as Mr. Hayter?"

"You shall have a chance to gratify me now. Mr. Rice, where's Lord Sabin?"

"So far as I was able to follow your allusion to the gentle-

man who sat in that chair with his throat cut, you should be able to say better than I."

"Think so?—Fortescue, do you mind overhauling the room while I keep an eye on Mr. Rice? I fancy that it's just possible that this is a sort of trick apartment."

The two elder remained motionless, while the younger pried and peered into everything that could be pried and peered into; even to the extent of opening all drawers and cupboards and turning chairs and tables upside down. Hayter never removed his eyes from the man in front of him; though Mr. Rice scarcely glanced his way. Instead he observed Mr. Fortescue with a half-smile upon his face, as if he found his proceedings both interesting and amusing. At last the young gentleman announced that his search for the abnormal had been futile.

"There's nothing funny about this room, you may take my word for that. I used to know it very well once upon a time, and you may take it from me that it's just like any other room."

"All the same those long curtains would serve as a very efficient screen; and I think it's extremely probable that once they did. Throw them open."

"I've looked behind them already, but I'll throw them open if you like." He suited the action to the word. "It's a bit sniffy behind them; dead rat, or something,—there used to be rats in the place, I know; but beyond that there's nothing.—Hollo!—what's that?"

"What's what?"

"I think, Hayter, if I were you, I should ask Mr. Rice to keep his hands out of his pockets."

Mr. Rice had slipped his hands into his jacket pockets. When the young gentleman called attention to the fact he withdrew them with a laugh.

"Always willing to oblige."

Gilbert Hayter had a revolver in his hand, and was pointing it straight at the gentleman in question.

"Hold your arms up, Mr. Rice; and if you move you'll get badly hurt. You'll find—too late—that I'm as good a shot with a thing of this kind as you have lately met.—Fortescue, run the rule over Mr. Rice. If you find he's in possession of anything of a dangerous nature don't allow him to run any more risk than you can help."

Mr. Rice, who was holding his arms extended above his head, as Mr. Fortescue approached him volunteered a statement.

"I've a gun in my pocket; and why shouldn't I have one as well as you?"

"There are reasons, Mr. Rice, though I don't propose to enter into them now.—Relieve Mr. Rice of that gun he mentions."

"It's in my right-hand jacket pocket." Fortescue took a revolver from the pocket referred to; its owner favouring him with a little advice as he did so. "You had better take care of that. It's a magazine, and fully loaded, but you may find that it's got no more in it than you'll want."

Mr. Hayter commented on the speaker's words.

"It is very kind and considerate, Fortescue, of Mr. Rice to talk to you like that; so while you're at it you may as well go all over him. He may have another gun or two hid somewhere which he's forgot to mention."

This time Mr. Rice was silent; he only regarded Hayter with a smile which had become a little forced. Fortescue did go carefully over the motionless gentleman, who showed not the slightest sign of resentment; but without further result.

"Been searched before,—eh, Mr. Rice? Possibly by a prison warder's gentle hand.—Now, Fortescue, if you'll go into the next room, and see if there's anything curious there; and if you'll leave the lights full on when you come out, I shall feel obliged. So many odd things happened to me in this house once before that I've a strong feeling that I should like to take as many precautions as I possibly can against their happening again; or anything like them."

Without a word Mr. Fortescue went off to do his bidding. A brief parley took place between the two men who were left together.

"If you'll let me carry that gun," said Mr. Rice, "I'll give you my word, on which you may rely, that it shall not be used against you, or against your friend."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Rice; but I'm not taking your word."

"I carry it simply for the purpose of self-defence."

"Do you? Mr. Fortescue will do all the defending you that's wanted."

"You won't regret letting me carry it; you're more likely to regret it if you don't. You're a smart man, Mr. Hayter, but you don't understand what it is you're running up against; and when you do it will be too late,—both for you and for me."

"It's very nice of you to have this nice friendly way of talking, Mr. Rice; I'm sorry I can't reciprocate. I'll be sorry if it turns out to be too late for you, though I don't at all know what you mean; and don't want to either. But as for me, don't you worry; and as you're not likely to, it doesn't seem much worth mentioning."

Fortescue reappeared in the doorway.

"This next room's the dining-room; there's nothing wrong there. It doesn't look as if anyone had been in it for ages; the dust's half an inch thick on everything. I've left the lights all on."

"Good.—Now, Mr. Rice, will you turn right round, and walk upstairs to the first floor; and remember that I'm close behind, with a revolver in my hand, and that it won't take very much for it to go off." Attempting no remonstrance, Mr. Rice did precisely as he was told. As they ascended Hayter said to Fortescue, who was carrying the leader's revolver in the rear, "What is the front room on the first floor?"

"It used to be the drawing-room; but if it's in anything like

the same state as the dining-room, it won't look very drawing-roomy now."

The procession paused on the landing. Mr. Fortescue went on in front, to open the door of the apartment in question, and to switch on the lights. Then, in obedience to orders, Mr. Rice went in, with Hayter close behind. It was a spacious chamber, and once, no doubt, had been a handsome one. It presented a curious spectacle then; as if, on the occasion of its last occupation, it had been the scene of some wild revel. The appointments of the room were in the utmost confusion. Chairs, tables, couches, were anywhere and anyhow; some had been overturned, some were broken. The rich satin covering had been ripped off a Louis XIV. settee. A Buhl cabinet had been smashed, as it seemed, by the blows of a mallet; the valuable contents lay scattered on the floor;—miniatures, gems, ivories, odds and ends in the precious metals. Pictures had been dragged from the walls; vases thrown to the ground. A magnificent mirror was starred in half a dozen places, as if by bullets. If the room had been sacked by a drunken mob, it could hardly have suffered more.

Mr. Fortescue gazed on the ruin which had been worked with a look on his face of almost grotesque astonishment.

"Well, I am!—I really am!—of all the capers! Why, the things in this room are worth more than fifty thousand pounds;—who the devil's been jiggering them up like this?"

He strode up to Mr. Rice.

"Did you have a hand in this? Who did it?"

Mr. Rice smiled; though there was something in his smile which suggested that he certainly did not smile because he was merry.

"How am I likely to be able to give you information on such a point? What position do you suppose I hold in Lord Sabin's household?"

"That's what I want to find out; and, by gad, that's what

I mean to find out before I've done with you.—Why, Hayter, there's hardly a thing in this room which isn't an heirloom. My old uncle has no more right to play these hanky-panky tricks with them than the first organ-grinder you meet in the street. And as for anybody else,—if anybody else has done it, my hat! they shall smart. I'm the next heir——"

He left his sentence unfinished;—to stare at someone who came in through the folding-doors, apparently from the room adjoining;—someone who said—

"You are?—I didn't catch what you are;—and didn't I hear someone mention Lord Sabin's name?"

CHAPTER XXXIX

LORD SABIN'S REPRESENTATIVE

THE new-comer was an unusually tall man; probably six feet three or four; at whose age it was difficult to guess,—he might have been anywhere between forty and sixty. But though he was no longer in his first youth, he was of such magnificent physique that he conveyed the impression of exceptional strength. He was not ugly; yet one felt, as one looked at him, that it would have been almost better if he had been; one certainly could not regard him with pleasurable sensations. It was not only that the dominant note of his face was insincerity; it was insincerity of an unusually disagreeable kind. One had only to look at him to feel that under no circumstances could one ever put one's trust in him. He might dominate; and probably would; he could never inspire affection. In his fine eyes there was something more than cruelty; there was something uncomfortably reminiscent of the wild beast which is continually seeking for prey; at any moment, unless you were perpetually armed and on your guard, you might look for him to turn and rend you;—what was more, he inspired a feeling that when he did attack no watchfulness, and no armour, would avail against him.

This singular-looking person had entered the room so silently that it was not until he was actually in it that either Hayter or Fortescue had the least suspicion of his propinquity. That Mr. Rice might have been aware of it was possible;—

though one felt that the stranger's advent on the scene had not pleased him. He recognised Mr. Rice, with a smile which, for once in a way, that gentleman did not return; advancing towards him with outstretched hand which the other seemed very willing not to notice.

"My dear Rice!—you here?—So glad!—Won't you give me your hand?"

Mr. Rice had to; whereupon the stranger, gripping it in his huge palm, subjected it to a pressure which caused its owner to give utterance to some quite unparliamentary language.

"Damn you!—what did you do that for?"

The stranger smiled.

"My dear Rice!—Do what?"

Mr. Rice said nothing. Nursing his right hand with his left, he drew back;—with a look upon his face which made one think of a trainer of wild beasts, who, uncertain of his control over his animals, and of their tempers, is desirous, before all things, to give them no cause for irritation. That the stranger perceived his friend's disposition and enjoyed it, was plain. His whole attitude, through the scene which followed, towards the man, Rice, suggested a tiger which is only waiting till it pleases him to spring upon his prey; and is aware that his prey knows it. He turned, with a little gesture.

"And who, my dear Rice, are your friends? I may be unpardonably remiss, but I cannot flatter myself that I have the honour of their acquaintance."

Since the moment of the stranger's appearance both Hayter and Fortescue had been evidently at a loss, as if neither of them knew what to make of him. So far as Hayter was concerned this feeling was perhaps heightened by the curious demeanour of Mr. Rice; had that individual evinced the slightest inclination to fraternise with the new-comer his action would not impossibly have been sharp and sudden. But it needed only a moment's glance for him to realise that the man's inclination was nothing

of the kind; that, for some reason of his own, he regarded the stranger not only with detestation, but with positive awe;—and this was the more surprising since Gilbert Hayter was convinced that Mr. Rice was certainly not a man to be easily frightened. Therefore, because he was puzzled, Hayter let the revolver fall to his side, and waited for the situation to develop.

A shrewd observer might have said that the stranger's coming had had almost the same effect on Mr. Fortescue as on the man Rice. When he first turned and saw him he started;—then continued to stare at him as if he had for him some singular fascination;—the more he stared the more the fascination seemed to grow. It seemed as if he could not take his eyes from off the stranger's visage; as if something which he saw on it cast on him a spell.

Since the hint he had thrown out had not been acted upon the stranger expressed himself in plainer language.

"My dear Rice"—it was unpleasant to notice how he persisted in coupling the man's name with the endearing adjective; so varying his utterance that each time he gave it some fresh undesirable meaning—"you have not given me your friends' names;—pray make them known to me."

Hayter, finding himself, for some subtle cause, almost on the man's side, did not wait for Rice to answer. He put a question of his own.

"Who are you?" he asked.

As he spoke he moved a step forward.

"I?—I?" The stranger, as he repeated, in an interrogative form, the personal pronoun, raised his eyebrows;—in a manner which had something of the effect which is produced by the elongation of an india-rubber mask; it transformed his countenance. He seemed to become all eyes, and nose, and mouth; like one of the devils of Notre Dame. He referred the solution of the problem of his identity to Mr. Rice; as if it were beyond his own powers. "My dear Rice, who am I?"

Mr. Rice's response was odd;—he drew back before he made it, as if he wished to place himself out of the other's immediate reach.

"How the devil am I to know?"

Again the stranger's face was changed; one realised that it was, in fact, a mask of an extraordinary kind; capable, like the india-rubber one, of almost endless mutations; each seeming to reveal an entirely different identity.

"How are you to know?—That's true;—how are you? My dear Rice, in your sense how is anyone to know who anyone else is? Despite that injunction which was set up in the temple, no man shall ever know himself; how then are his friends to know him? That is most true; since the answer is, how are they?" He turned to Hayter. "Yet, sir, I will make myself known to you,—as Lord Sabin's representative."

"His representative?—in what sense?"

"Ah!—there you place me in a quandary. It is an inquiry which I have, on occasion, addressed to myself.—My dear Rice, in what sense am I Lord Sabin's representative?" Rice was silent; wearing an air of sullenness; as if appreciative of the fact that the other's questions were being aimed at him, like so many missiles which he was unable to return. "You perceive?—my dear Rice is still! Like myself, he finds it not easy to explain in what sense I am Lord Sabin's representative."

"Where is Lord Sabin?"

Again an amazing change in the man's face; and not one only, but several, following quickly one after another, as if he were afflicted with some uncanny muscular disease. Once more he passed the question on.

"My dear Rice, where is Lord Sabin?"

Extending his arm, he touched Mr. Rice on the shoulder with the tip of his finger.

"Don't touch me with your infernal finger!—take it away."

Springing back, the man retreated, as if the stranger had the

power of transferring unimaginable horrors by mere physical contact. The stranger resented the implied insult in a fashion of his own; hunching his shoulders, drawing back his body while he protruded his head, like some wild beast about to leap.

"My dear Rice!—my dear Rice!" was all he said.

The entire vocabulary of an expert in bad language could hardly have conveyed a more sinister significance. While Hayter, impressed in a manner he himself was at a loss to understand, by the stranger's personality, stood still and watched, Mr. Fortescue approached close to the stranger's side, as if with the intention of addressing him; but, before he could speak, Rice shouted—

"You fool!—get the gun out of his way!"

The interpolation was so startling, and so unexpected, that neither of the three men who heard seemed to know quite what to make of it. Then Fortescue, as if instinctively, rather than of set intention, whipped the "gun" in question—which, by the way, was Rice's own revolver—into his jacket pocket, and withdrew a step; while Hayter, on his side, advanced a little. But the stranger was the first to speak;—breaking what was a sufficiently awkward pause;—hesitatingly, as if his utterance was affected by physical causes which were beyond his own control.

"My dear Rice,—what an extremely—unfortunate—uncalled-for—unfriendly——" His mouth opened and shut, as if threatening tetanus; he seemed to find it impossible to bring his sentence to a close. A shiver seemed to go all over him; with an obvious effort he regained his self-control. Holding himself upright, he turned towards Fortescue. "You were, I believe, about to say something to me;—I trust you will do me the honour of letting me hear what it was."

His bearing had become courtliness itself; but what had just occurred had left an impression it was not easy to efface. Mr. Fortescue had lost, at least temporarily, all his natural ease and assurance; he was awkward; like Mr. Rice almost sullen.

"I was only going to say that I've seen you somewhere before."

"Have you? This is interesting; because, in that case, it seems to follow that I have seen you; but where?"

"That's what I can't make out; I've been wondering ever since you came into the room;—I'll be hanged if I don't believe that I've seen you in a nightmare."

The words, which certainly were not courteous, produced an extraordinary effect on the person to whom they were addressed. He turned quickly round on his heels; as if to prevent the young gentleman seeing the convulsion which deprived his features almost of the semblance of humanity; he grinned and gibbered as some huge baboon might have done, when beside itself in a paroxysm of rage. But if Fortescue did not see, Gilbert Hayter did; with the result that he glanced over his shoulder to see how near he was to the door. Nor was he more agreeably impressed by the effort which the man made to regain his self-possession; though the effort was a violent, it was a short one; being presently crowned with an uncanny degree of success. He turned to Mr. Rice with a smile; but Hayter told himself that he should see his face as he had seen it then, always; though he continued to smile for ever and aye. As he watched and listened he was conscious that something curious was happening about the region of his own spinal cord. He was one of those fortunate persons who are temperamentally incapable of being afraid; yet—he would have given a trifle to have been able to sneak out of the room just then, and refresh himself with something out of a bottle. Nor was he rendered any easier by the perfectly obvious fact that Mr. Rice was regarding the stranger with emotions which were becoming more and more undisguised. When the stranger began to address him he edged farther and farther away from him, as if, shortly, he would be endeavouring to edge his way through the wall.

"You hear what this gentleman says, my dear Rice;—he

thinks he must have seen me somewhere in a nightmare;—in a nightmare;—in a nightmare." He repeated the words three times, as if it carried a meaning to the man whom he addressed, as well as to himself, which was improved by repetition. "Do you think that anyone else has ever seen me in a nightmare?—for instance, have you ever seen me in a nightmare, my dear Rice?"

Mr. Rice's response was not an answer to the question; it took the shape of a remonstrance which showed more irritation than dignity.

"What the devil's the use of going on like this?—Why don't you drop it?"

"Why don't I drop what, my dear Rice?—drop what? Why don't you come closer, my dear Rice? Quite close;—so that I can have my hands upon your shoulders;—I like to have my hands upon your shoulders."

When the speaker showed a tendency to approach him, Rice broke into a yell;—which was part rage, but more fear.

"Don't you come near me!—don't you try to come!—Mr. Hayter!"

With what idea he called on Gilbert Hayter; whether he intended to invoke his interference or protection, or simply meant to create a diversion, was not apparent. If the latter was his purpose he succeeded. So soon as he pronounced his name, the stranger stood still; seemed for an instant to hesitate; then, wheeling round, moved towards Gilbert Hayter with what he possibly intended to be an air of the utmost cordiality.

"Hayter?—Surely I have heard that name before;—it is one whose bearer I have long hoped to have the pleasure of meeting.—Mr. Hayter, let me bid you welcome,—as Lord Sabin's representative."

As if he did not notice the other's outstretched hand, Hayter kept his own by his side; asking a question rather to avoid the man's advances than for the sake of gaining information.

"From whom have you heard my name?"

"From whom?—Just so; from whom?—My dear Rice, from whom have I heard Mr. Hayter's name?"

"How should I know?"

"Exactly;—how should you?—How should you know anything, you man of infinite ignorance?—I rather fancy, Mr. Hayter, that I have heard your name.—My dear Rice, haven't I heard Mr. Hayter's name mentioned by Lady Sabin?"

"I daresay."

"You daresay?—at last!—an answer of sorts!—By the way, my dear Rice, how is—dear Lady Sabin?"

There was, considering the circumstances, something about the significance with which he managed to charge his question, which was almost appalling. It was followed by a gruesome silence. Mr. Rice, one felt, had a hideous answer on the tip of his tongue. The other two men looked at the questioner with what were evidently complicated sensations. As if suddenly realising the singular nature of the scrutiny to which he was being subjected, shrugging his shoulders, holding out his hands palm upwards, he exclaimed—

"You are not a very agreeable set of persons;—you do not constitute too pleasant a society. I find myself in an atmosphere in which I am not at home; an atmosphere of I do not know what. I do not like it. And what I do not like, my dear Rice, I dislike very much indeed. Therefore—" he drew himself up to his full height; seeming to tower above them with an insolence which was sinister—"it is better I should leave you."

Crossing the room with huge strides he passed through the folding doors by means of which he had entered. For two or three seconds neither of the trio spoke; then Hayter demanded—

"Who is he? What does he want? Where has he gone?" Before any could answer the lights went out; the room was plunged into darkness. "Who did that?" cried Hayter.

"Switch them on again," responded Fortescue. "The switch is in the corner by the door."

Hayter could be heard manipulating the switches one after another; but nothing happened.

"Someone's played some damn trick with them; they won't switch on."

Then Rice's voice came through the blackness.

"He's severed the connection; it's one of his pretty devilries; I thought he was up to something of the kind.—Ssh!" In the stillness they could hear footsteps in the street without. Mr. Rice's voice sank to a whisper; which, while it was sufficiently audible, had in it the suspicion of a tremor. "If he comes back in the darkness one of you let fly at him; I'd have done it myself if you'd left me my gun; that's all I wanted it for, as a protection against him;—I know he means to do for me if he gets the chance. He's a homicidal lunatic; and lately has been stark staring mad; he'd think as little of doing for the lot of us as if we were so many rats.—My God!"

Rice's voice rang out through the room with the cry as of a soul in agony. Coming, as it did, unexpectedly, out of the sheer darkness, it was not a comfortable sound. It seemed, while the two momentarily sightless men stood there trembling, in spite of themselves, that some heavy body had fallen with a thud on to the floor. Then there was a swish of air, as someone came rushing past;—the folding doors were opened and shut with a bang. Hayter and Fortescue made a simultaneous dash towards them; only to come in contact with each other.

"Is that you, Hayter?"

"Yes;—where's that door?"

"I've got hold of the handle; it's locked."

"That brute came back again."

"And he's fastened the door against us."

"Rice!" No answer; Hayter called again. "Rice!—What's the matter with you, man? why can't you speak?

what's the game you're playing?" Still silence. "Fortescue, strike a match! The last time I was in this house I had a nice time; it seems that this time I'm going to have another." Mr. Fortescue lit a match. By its aid they could see that Mr. Rice was lying on the floor, face forward, quite still. Hayter went to him. "Rice, what's wrong?—Fortescue, he's dead!—That fiend's killed him!"

The match went out.

CHAPTER XL

THE TELEPHONE

IN the darkness which ensued Fortescue said—

"Hayter, that was the man I saw in the Rue de l'Ecu."

"When?—what are you talking about?—what man?"

"That night. You remember I watched Lord Sabin following his wife; and that when she entered the house I went up to him, and that he then and there turned into another man entirely. The man he turned into is the man who's been in this room. I said I believed I'd seen him in a nightmare; I have;—that was the nightmare I saw him in."

"I don't understand."

"I don't, quite; but I'm beginning to."

"Strike another match." By its light they leant over the man on the floor. "Rice!—Whatever his sins are he's paid for them; and at the hand of his associate. He's lying just as that woman was lying on the pavement in the Rue de l'Ecu. The same hand's responsible for both."

"That's the incarnate fiend who has been masquerading as my uncle."

"What are we to do now? Can't we get some light on the subject? Matches aren't of much use when we're dealing with a homicidal lunatic of the type who's just done this. He must have cat's eyes and be able to see in the dark. He may be on us at any moment;—he may be in the room now without our knowing it.—What the——!"

The sudden unfinished ejaculation was caused by the fact that even while he had been speaking the room had leaped into radiance. Springing to their feet the two men turned and saw, standing with his back against the folding doors, a flaming electric torch held above his head,—Lord Sabin.

"Great Scott!" cried Mr. Fortescue. "My uncle!"

The figure broke into an unpleasant giggling laugh;—the laugh of a drunkard, or a madman.

"Beaumont!" he sniggered.

As he spoke the light vanished; the same instant there was a flash, a puff of smoke, the sound of a pistol shot.

"Hayter!—Was that you?"

"It was; and I hope I've hit him."

Silence followed; the two men stood and listened;—until the younger whispered—

"Were you popping at my uncle?"

"That was not your uncle. That's the quick-change artiste who did for Rice."

"No!—I could have sworn—it was my uncle!"

"I doubted; until he spoke; and then I knew. Unless he's the devil himself I've winged him; but I hear nothing; and if I haven't it's quite on the cards that he'll wing us. This darkness isn't nice; let's have another of your matches."

Fortescue held up the flickering light.

"There's nothing and no one there; it seems you haven't hit him." He moved to the folding door; Hayter covering his advance with his revolver. "He's fastened it against us again. If he's locked the other we're trapped. Just see if it's open."

Hayter proved that it was by opening it wide. As he did so there was heard the tinkling of a bell.

"The door's all right, but—what's that?" The light went out. "Confound those matches of yours; they're not much good. This darkness is trying. Isn't there any way we can get a decent light?"

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The young gentleman brought it off again; he proceeded to carry on a conversation with the instrument in a voice so like Rice's that, if he had not been warned, Hayter might have fancied that the dead man had come to life again.

"Yes, I'm Rice;—who are you?"

That the person at the other end was deceived by the imitation was shown by the reply which promptly came back; and which was of course inaudible to Gilbert Hayter.

"I'm Jarrow, you fool; don't you know my voice? I've been trying to ring you up I don't know how long. I was beginning to think I was too late and that he'd done for you already."

"What do you mean?

"A little bird's just whispered in my ear that it's just likely that that hell-hound's somewhere about where you are."

"What hell-hound?"

"Why, Blackstaffe, of course;—what other hell-hound is there? What's the matter with you? I'm told, by someone who knows, that it's probable that he's lying low somewhere in the house. If he is, and comes on you, which he will do if you don't make yourself scarce, it will be a case of someone drawing your club money in the morning; as you're aware;—so I thought I'd give you the tip.—There's another thing; I've just had a message from Paris. Crowden's dead."

"No!—Old Crowden!—Where did he die?"

"At 33 Rue Herbôt;—where else do you suppose? So the game's up there; and up all round; thanks to the devil who'll make cold meat of you if you're not spry. Crowden dead will want a bit of explaining. I don't know what they're doing with the girl, but they're all of them off; and so am I. You'd better be off if you want to keep your health. I'm off to-night; this is our farewell talk."

"Where are you off to?"

"That's tellings;—somewhere where I shan't be found till

it suits me. If you get out of where you are alive, and you'll have to hustle to do it, we may meet again some day; though I can't say that I'm in any particular hurry."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm at a public call office;—why do you ask?"

"I only wondered."

"Have you any special message? You know this is the last time we may ever speak to each other, so if you have anything to say, say it."

"About that Osborne girl?"

"What about her?"

"Is she still at 33 Rue Herbôt?"

"For all I know;—and for all I care.—Chuck it!—Here's someone wants the machine.—Good-bye!"

Mr. Fortescue said to Gilbert Hayter—

"He's rung off."

"Who was it?"

"Jarrow; you know,—the fat man we saw with my uncle at Paillard's."

"I know;—what was that he said about Miss Osborne?"

"He seems to think that she's in Paris at 33 Rue Herbôt; where, also, he seems to think Crowden's lying dead."

The young gentleman recapitulated the brief, but pregnant, conversation he had had with the unknown speaker at the other end of the wire. What had been said of Miss Osborne moved Gilbert Hayter to the heart.

"I've a mind," he declared, "to return to Paris to-night."

"You can't do that; anyhow you'll have to wait till the morning; but you can send a telegram if you like.—I've an idea!"

Mr. Fortescue had struck another match.

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to use the telephone to get into communication with the nearest copper-shop; otherwise police-station. There's

the call book; look out the number of the nearest, and I'll give you a light while you do it."

"I'll look up Vine Street," said Mr. Hayter, with grim recollection of his transactions with officials of that establishment on a former occasion. He gave the requisite number to his companion, who presently found himself switched on to it.

"Is that Vine Street police-station?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm the Honourable Beaumont Fortescue. I'm at my uncle, Lord Sabin's, house in Mount Street. I'm here with Mr. Hayter. There's a homicidal lunatic in the house; he's just killed a man named Rice. We're expecting him every moment to attack us. Please send us assistance at once."

"One moment;—wait a bit;—hold the wire."

Mr Fortescue held the wire. He heard another voice,—a peremptory one.

"You there!—Who are you?"

"I'm the Honourable Beaumont Fortescue,—as I just now told somebody else. Who are you?"

"I'm Inspector Innes. Do you mind repeating the message you just now sent?"

Mr. Fortescue repeated it.

"You say Mr. Hayter is with you;—is that Mr. Gilbert Hayter?"

"It is. He's seen you before; and if you'd listened to him when he did see you you'd have saved a good deal of mischief which has happened since;—so perhaps you'll hurry up before more mischief happens. And bring something with you in the way of lamps or candles. Something's gone wrong with the electric light, and the place is all in darkness;—and when you're hanging about in the darkness, waiting for a homicidal lunatic to pounce out at you when you most don't want him, it isn't nice."

"I'll be with you inside ten minutes."

"Inspector Innes," said Fortescue to his companion, a moment later, "wants me to keep on talking to his subordinate till he himself turns up, but the notion don't appeal to me. I'd sooner wait for him on the doorstep; I told him so. This darkness is giving me the fidgets. I keep on thinking that I can hear things; and that I can feel the point of a knife between my shoulders. It isn't pretty.—What's that?—Isn't it someone coming down the stairs?—Look out, Hayter!"

He struck a match, with rather shaky fingers. There was no one on the staircase.

"As you say, Fortescue, you've got the jumps. I'm not feeling at a premium. That was a great notion of yours to ring up Innes; and, as you say, we can await his coming as well outside as in. I vote we do it."

They groped their way to the front door. When they had it open, and were on the doorstep, Fortescue drew a long breath.

"That's better; a great deal; you can breathe out here. There's a charnel-house feeling in there which was getting on my nerves.—Hollo! what's that I see over the road? It's a dear, dear bobby; I never thought I could love a bobby, but I'm beginning to feel I can—Officer!" The constable crossed the road. Mr. Fortescue explained. "Officer, there's a homicidal lunatic in this house, and he's just killed a man in the drawing-room upstairs. I've telephoned to Inspector Innes at Vine Street, and he's coming as fast as ever he can; but, in the meantime, that lunatic may try to make a bolt for it; and, if he does, we want you to help us stop him;—you'll find he'll take some stopping."

Judging from his manner, and questions, the constable was in doubt as to whether the young gentleman was not a lunatic himself; or whether he merely proposed to make a butt of him. He was still pelting Mr. Fortescue with inquiries when the Inspector drove up, with two other policemen, in a hansom; and three more policemen, in a second hansom, close behind.

CHAPTER XLI

A NOVELTY IN CRIME

THEY searched the house, Inspector Innes and his constables, from roof to basement, as thoroughly as they could, with the aid of hand-lanterns they had brought, and of various candle-ends, which were found about the premises; Gilbert Hayter and Beaumont Fortescue looking on. An extraordinary condition the place was in; dirt, disorder, destruction everywhere. Evidently no proper domestic staff had been kept; the kitchen and servants' offices were in a state which suggested that no one had been near them for years. Such occupants as the house had recently had must have confined themselves to the upper floors; there was nothing to show that anyone had penetrated to the basement;—there could be no more conclusive proof that no one had done so than the fact that the staircase which led down to it was a network of cobwebs. Such cooking as had been done appeared to have been done by the occupants themselves; in the rooms in which they happened at the moment to be. There was a kettle on the empty grate in the dining-room; various cooking utensils in more than one of the principal bedrooms. Glasses and empty bottles—principally ale and whiskey bottles—everywhere. In the room which had once been known as Lord Sabin's dressing-room there were dozens of empty whiskey bottles.

At one time that had been one of the most comfortable rooms in the house; having been used by its eccentric owner

as a living as well as a dressing room. The walls had been lined with books, prints, pictures; everywhere had been articles of bric-à-brac of all sorts and kinds; his lordship had been a virtuoso after his fashion. Now the apartment was in hideous disorder. No attempt could have been made to tidy it for months; dirt and confusion reigned supreme. The appearance of the room hinted that it must have been the scene of some very singular proceedings. Someone had been guilty of acts of the most wanton mischief. Rare books had been dragged out of costly bindings, and their torn leaves scattered on the floor. Pictures, prints, had been mutilated. Pranks had been played with some instrument like a red-hot poker; walls and furniture had been scarred with it. It seemed as if full whiskey bottles had been used as weapons, or as missiles. Broken fragments lay on the floor; their late contents being still visible to the nose and eye. From the look of it the room might have been in the recent occupation of some drunken hooligan.

But it contained things which pointed to something more than the mere extravagance of mischief. On the white enamelled wall over the fireplace were roughly sketched, in outline, two full-sized masculine heads; as it seemed, with the tip of a red-hot poker. Under one were the initials "B.B."; between that and the other were the words "In His Famous Impersonation of"; under the second head was the name, "Lord Sabin";—as if the intention was the whole should read as one sentence,—"B.B. in His Famous Impersonation of Lord Sabin." In a corner was a pile of what had once been feminine clothing, all torn to rags; fragments of silks, satins, cloths, laces, cambrics, ribbons; apparently representing all that was left of a fine lady's fine wardrobe. There were even remains, in plain sight, of corsets, stockings, shoes, hats, furs, gloves; while crowning the summit, as if in derision, was a liberal display of those aids to beauty with which a fine lady seeks to conceal the ravages of time;—false hair, false teeth,

false complexion, false everything. Seemingly an attempt to make a bonfire of the heap had failed. There were traces here and there of partial incineration; but the pile of ruins remained practically intact, an object for the curious to wonder at.

They found the body of the man Rice on the floor of the disordered drawing-room; quite dead. Some sort of long-bladed, keen-pointed knife had been driven into his back under his left shoulder-blade by the strong hand of an expert; who had a singular capacity for seeing in the dark. Death must have been instantaneous; he was dead before he reached the floor. But that was the only trace of humanity they did find. The man—or devil—who had laid him there, had vanished. They were unwilling to admit it; ransacking, methodically, every nook and corner before they did admit it; but they had to in the end.

How he had vanished was, and, indeed, still is, a moot point. He had had the darkness on his side; and the fact that Hayter and Fortescue had been unwilling to chase too closely, in the darkness, an individual of his kind, who had such a serviceable knife in his possession, and who had shown such willingness to use it. When, after his last appearance as Lord Sabin, after Gilbert Hayter had had his shot at him, having disappeared in the darkness, he had fastened the folding doors against them. The presumption was that as they wrestled with the locked door, he had passed from the room beyond, down the staircase, and so out into the night. It was true that they had heard nothing; but for that it was not difficult to account. In the first place, the person in question had, in a remarkable degree, the gift of noiseless movement. Under ordinary circumstances he might have eluded the keenest hearing; but the circumstances were not ordinary. The revolver shot was still ringing in their ears; they were a little excited, disturbed, unhinged; Fortescue made a noise fumbling with the handle of the door; they talked to each other;—it

was easy for him, moving swiftly and quietly, to have left the house without their hearing a sound.

Where he went to remains unknown. Indeed there is still only presumption to show who he was. Jarrow, supposing himself to be talking to Mr. Rice, had spoken of the "hell-hound, Blackstaffe"; under the first of those two examples of poker-work in the dressing-room were the initials "B.B." Investigations have shown that there was, a few years ago, a person in circles which were more or less theatrical, who was known as Benjamin Blackstaffe. Whether he ever actually appeared on the stage is not certain. What is certain is that he was always proclaiming, in and out of season, his powers of impersonation. At that time there was an influx, at various music-halls, of what were known as "quick-change artistes";—*i.e.* of persons who represented several different characters in almost instantaneous succession. Blackstaffe used to declare that their powers in that direction were as nothing compared with his; that if he had a chance he could outshine them all. It is stated that, in support of that claim, he did do things which proved that his powers were, at any rate, above the common. It is alleged, for instance, that he used to appear in drinking-bars, where he was a well-known frequenter, as a perfect stranger; and that then he used to amaze the habitués by the revelation of his identity. But he was a person whom nobody liked; whom nearly everyone avoided; of whom not a few were positively afraid;—and not without cause. He was a heavy drinker; an inordinate egotist; easily ruffled; subject to fits of monstrous passion. As his physique was abnormal; and in his outbursts of fury he was as irresponsible as a wild beast; it is not surprising that his society was not sought; and that he made no headway in the profession to which he professed to belong. Uncomfortable tales were told of acts of which he had been guilty. He began to be known as the Madman,—behind his back. It was asserted, with some show of reason, that the paroxysms of fury which would come

upon him sometimes, all in a moment, without perceptible predisposing cause, were not ordinary displays of temper, but symptoms of morbid disease which really placed him within the category of the mentally deficient. As these frenzies were becoming more frequent, a strong disposition was growing up to make application in the proper quarter for his incarceration as a lunatic, when—he disappeared. What became of him afterwards is mere surmise; supported by circumstantial evidence only; but circumstantial evidence of a sort which would not impossibly convince a judge and jury.

The presumption is that he was an acquaintance of the notorious woman who was known as the second Mrs. Osborne; a position which it was quite easy for anyone to have. That she formed an illicit attachment with the eccentric Lord Sabin; whose relations with infamous women were not the least of his eccentricities. That the fact was known to Blackstaffe. As always was the case where Lord Sabin was concerned, the association came to a sudden and, as regards the woman, an undignified end. In her rage she told the tale to Blackstaffe; who, either there and then, or afterwards, suggested a scheme of revenge which could only have been conceived in a disordered brain. But bluntly, his proposition probably was that he should murder Lord Sabin, and conceal the crime by taking his place. One can understand how such a proposition would commend itself to that most dangerous of all characters, a homicidal lunatic; and here was one—fortunately—of an unusual type. The proposition would commend itself to the woman, not only because it offered revenge; for which, probably, being indurated, she cared little; but on much more solid grounds;—Blackstaffe probably offered to share with her Lord Sabin's entire estate; which, as she was aware, was something very well worth having. Crowden, it is supposed, only came into the scheme at the last moment; though he doubtless already had a guilty knowledge of it;—and it was his association with it which made the whole thing possible.

What Lord Sabin told Gilbert Hayter on that eventful night of the third of May was true; he had that day dismissed his entire domestic staff, including Crowden;—whose dismissal sealed his fate. The valet, cast adrift, cognisant of the fact that his late master had, that very afternoon, drawn forty thousand pounds from the bank in gold—a last display of eccentricity which cost him his life—instantly threw in his lot with Blackstaffe and the woman. When Hayter followed the woman, after her seemingly meaningless assault on the half-intoxicated peer, the conspirators were already in the house, waiting for their victim; —possibly Blackstaffe, at any rate, was all the while in that small back room, hidden in the recessed window; which was shaded by the heavy curtains. Hayter left it to execute the errand on which the wounded, and tipsy, man had sent him. So soon as he had gone, Blackstaffe, with the effrontery of the madman, and the lust of the homicide for blood, almost severed the peer's head from his body;—as Hayter found when he returned. That must have been a delicate moment for Crowden and the woman;—it was doubtless the woman who lured him from the room on that wild-goose chase to the top of the house. When he again returned the body had been removed. The advent of the girl upon the scene was an example of that providential intervention which does play so large a part in the daily lives of actual men and women. It was, of course, the woman who served again as a lure, to get the girl, and the witness, out of the house.

By the time Hayter came back with Inspector Innes the second part of the scheme had been carried out; the murderer had become transformed into the semblance of his victim. So well was it done that Hayter, although it compelled him to doubt the evidence of his own senses, did not suspect it was an imitation. Confronted by the ocular proof that Lord Sabin was still alive, supported by his trusty valet, Crowden, Mr. Hayter's tale—as true tales have done before to-day, and will again—wore

such an air of the impossible, that the Inspector's incredulity was justified. Though had he pushed his researches a little farther, he would probably have stumbled on the dead body lying in the curtained recess. It was there they buried it, under the boards; where, at a later date, all that was left of the murdered man was found, clad as Gilbert Hayter had seen him last.

Possibly, if he had had his way, Crowden would have gone right off, with his share of the forty thousand pounds, to what he hoped would be a place of safety. But it is not improbable that from the first he and the woman realised that they had raised up for themselves a monster from whom there was no escape. One can fancy the scene in which he informed them that he intended to keep the forty thousand pounds, and everything else, in his own two hands, and to serve out doles as it suited him; their remonstrances, and the way in which he silenced them,—the way of the master; the moment in which it dawned on them that they were dealing with an actual madman, —one who would be held irresponsible by the law, while they would be held responsible; one who might butcher them with complete impunity,—and who certainly would butcher them if they objected too strenuously to his peculiar methods. Thenceforward their lives must have been an unending nightmare; their last state must have been much worse than their first;—afraid of being with him, afraid to go.

Probably, in this society of five, the men Jarrow and Rice, in the first instance, played the parts of what have euphoniously been called "penmen." Murder having been done, under the singular circumstances of the case it was necessary that forgery should follow. Lord Sabin being alive it was desirable that he should be able to write a cheque; and, on occasion, sign a document which meant money. The presumption is that Blackstaffe was no impersonator of another man's handwriting; that though he could kill, he could not forge; and that, for that purpose, neither the woman nor Crowden was available. The

man who called himself Rice was recognised by the police as a person who had been suspected of many forgeries, and who had suffered punishment for at least one. From the description which Hayter and Fortescue were able to give, Jarrow was placed by the same authorities in the first rank of known imitators of other men's signatures. No doubt these two men between them did all that was necessary in the way of forgery;—and a great deal had been done. Cheques and papers—important papers of all sorts and kinds — had been forged galore; excellently forged. It is not likely that either of them had had a direct hand in the killing of Lord Sabin; but it is certain that before long they must have had the best of reasons for—to put it gently—suspecting what had happened. And the moment in which they became Blackstaffe's conscious accomplices they also placed themselves at the mercy of a monster from whom there was no escape.

Which was why those five persons always travelled about in a single company; with "Lord Sabin" as the universal paymaster. It must have been with curious sensations that four of them watched the growing madness of the fifth; and the consequent increasing peril to themselves. It was only by unhesitating obedience that they gained for themselves some sort of peace. When "Lady Sabin" went on that errand to the Rue de l'Ecu the inference is that she went against the master's wish; and, since no one did that with impunity, and he was in an evil mood, as Mr. Jarrow phrased it across the telephone, "the game was up" — so far as she was concerned, for all eternity.

CHAPTER XLII

A DEVOUT LOVER

A TELEGRAM was sent to Paris that same night, and Gilbert Hayter recrossed by the morning boat. He learned that, as advised by the telegram, the police had paid a visit to No. 33 Rue Herbôt. There, in a room on an upper floor they had found Crowden,—dead. Judging from the state of his body he had recently been engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter with some wild beast. He was covered with lacerations and wounds, as if he had been nearly torn to pieces by some infuriated animal; and of them he died. There can be no doubt that the wild beast who had done his best to tear him to pieces was the madman, Blackstaffe.

In the room adjoining was Doris Osborne; she and the dead man were the only occupants of the floor. Bodily she was uninjured; that is, she appeared to have been subjected to no actual violence. But when they found her she was unconscious, —drugged. She had been under the influence of drugs for two days and nights; without nourishment of any sort or kind. They thought, at first, that she would remain under their influence unto the end;—had the discovery been delayed a little longer they would certainly have found her dead. But, by degrees, in skilful hands, their influence was removed, though it could hardly be said that consciousness returned;—the havoc which had been wrought was too serious for that. For weeks she was to all intents and purposes an imbecile. It was feared,

indeed, that she would always continue to be mentally deficient; but that fear has been falsified. She is sane enough now; and it is hoped that before long she will be herself again in every way. But the mystery of what happened to her that night in the Rue de l'Ecu; and of the part she played in the tragedy which was enacted; is probably one which will never be wholly lifted. An embargo has been laid on all allusions to the subject. She herself has never spoken of it; no one has ever spoken of it to her. The doctors hope that the whole thing has passed from her. She has endured much in her short life; the shock of what took place that night, and afterwards, strained her endurance almost to the breaking point. The one thing to be avoided is anything which may cause even the shadow of that shock to recur. It is not likely that anyone will ever question her upon the point. Since it is believed that, as matters are, her mind is a blank upon the subject, it is still less likely that she will volunteer a statement.

But Gilbert Hayter has his theories. He believes that the three men Jarrow, Rice, and Crowden were cognisant of Blackstaffe's murderous intentions towards the woman; and that at the last moment they resolved to do their utmost to make him stay his hand;—not for her sake, but for their own, because of the inevitable hubbub which must ensue. He also believes that they came on the scene just as Blackstaffe killed the woman; and that the girl came out of the house at the same moment. They rendered her unconscious there and then, before she had a chance to utter a sound; and between them they bore her off to the Rue Herbôt, which was close at hand. There a quarrel broke out, in the course of which Blackstaffe inflicted on Crowden the injuries of which he afterwards died. Probably Jarrow and Rice, preferring, for sufficient reasons of their own, to be non-combatants, left while the struggle was in progress,—which, of course, involved leaving Crowden to his dreadful fate—returned to their hotel, and at once quitted Paris. Blackstaffe,

having finished his work, returned more leisurely,—to pack Crowden's and the woman's luggage as well as his own.

This, in brief outline, is Gilbert Hayter's theory. How much of it is justified by fact probably never will be known. If the girl were able to tell all she ever knew, there would still be gaps in the story. But Gilbert Hayter would rather she never told. He wants the whole hideous episode to be cut out of her life; even the memory of it. If he could have his way, and might ask a boon of Heaven, it would be that by her all that has gone before might be forgotten, and that she might begin a fresh life to-day. She is yet little more than a child; her knowledge of that happiness which should be the birthright of a child has been so small that it is hardly worth counting. He would that she should begin to have more of it now.

She is with Miss Cawthorne in a small town on the shore of an Italian lake. There, as it were, she is coming back to a new world. She knows she has been ill; but of the cause of her illness she knows nothing. She knows that she used, as she puts it, "to make drawings for a living"; but now she seems content to draw for pleasure. Miss Cawthorne calls her Dollie; she is known to the people of the place as Dorothy Olive; she seems herself to be unaware that she ever bore another name. That unhappy chapter in which Doris Osborne played so piteous a part seems—for her—to have been cut out of the book of her short life. Gilbert Hayter hopes that it will continue missing; —hopes while he fears.

He has rooms close by. The three go for long walks and drives together; and row and sail on the lake. She is happy in his company; light-hearted; gay; content to leave things in his hands. And he? He is happy with her. Yet he fears; while he hopes. His consciousness of the singular delicacy of the position is sometimes so overwhelming that it unmans him. Suppose memory were to return; and she were all at once to find herself confronted by the nightmare past; to see it, in an

instant, as if illumined by a lightning flash;—what would happen then? He dares not endeavour to supply an answer.

And yet he is afraid to tell her what is in his heart for her; of his great longing to take her in his arms, and fold her to his breast, and to have the right to shield her from the world. If she were to give him all he wants; and, afterwards, in a few days, or after many years, that closed door in her brain were to open, and she were again to become Doris Osborne;—in what light would she consider him? Would she think that he had won her by a species of trick?—when she did not know what it was that she was giving?

So he says nothing. He waits; watches; hopes; prays;—he is that rare person, a devout lover. He would give all, and get nothing, rather than run the risk that at any time his lady might conceive that, having her at an advantage, he had taken her at an advantage. He does not believe that stolen kisses are the sweetest. Unless his lady gives herself to him, of her own free, understanding will, knowing full well all that she is giving him,—it is only in his dreams that he will know the sweetness of her kisses. But if she does!—if God is kind!—if!—if!

He is a singular sort of man. He is a servant in the service of love; counting, with some even wise folk, the world well lost—for love;—for love, if needs must, that is on one side only.

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