

Marsh Richard

The Chase of the Ruby



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CHAPTER I

GHOSTS IN AFRICA

'Upon my word, this is-' He hesitated, then chose another form of words with which to conclude his sentence. 'This is extraordinary.'

He allowed the paper to flutter from between his fingers, stood staring at nothing, then, stooping, picked up the sheet of blue post from where it had fallen at his feet.

'Extraordinary!' he repeated.

He regarded it and handled it as if it had been some uncanny thing-though, on the face of it, it was nothing of the kind. It was a formal letter addressed to 'Guy Holland, Esq., 37A Craven Street, W.C.' It began 'Dear Sir,' and ended 'Yr. obedt. servant, SAML. COLLYER.' Between the beginning and the end it informed him that his uncle, George Burton, had died at Nice on February 23, and that the writer would feel obliged if he would call upon him at his earliest possible convenience.

'I wonder if I saw him die?' Mr Holland knit his brows as he asked himself the question. 'How could I, when I was in Mashonaland and he was in Nice? Absurd!'

He laughed, as it has been written, 'hollowly'; the laugh of uneasiness rather than mirth.

Then he went and saw the lady.

She was waiting on a seat by a certain piece of water in Regent's Park. She must have had eyes behind, because, although she was sitting with her back to him, directly he stepped upon the grass she sprang up, and, as if she had been observing him all the time, went to him at something very like a run. He advanced at quick step. They met in the middle of the grass plot, contrary to regulations, which forbid people to walk upon the grass. They each gave two hands, and that with an air which suggested that if that had not been a public place they would have given each other something else as well.

'Guy!' she exclaimed. 'I thought you were the other side of the world. What a time you've been!'

'Coming from the other side of the world? or from Craven Street? It is some distance from Craven Street to Regent's Park.'

'You are in Craven Street, are you? What's it mean? You're looking well-sort of coppery colour; it suits you.'

'That's the air of the veldt; it burnishes a man's skin. You're looking sweet. I say, it's awfully hard lines that I can't kiss you. Mayn't I-just a little one?'

'In broad daylight, in Regent's Park, with a hundred pairs of eyes observing us from Hamilton Terrace? Thank you; some other day. When I had your note-what a note! "Meet me at the old place at noon" – I wondered who I was to meet, you or your ghost. As a matter of fact, I had a most important engagement-just at noon; but I put it off on purpose to come and see.'

'That was very dear of you. I'm not my ghost, I'm me.'

'But-Guy, have you made your fortune? You didn't seem as if you were going to make it at quite such a rate when you wrote last.'

He shook his head.

'Came back with less in my pockets than when I left.'

'Then-what does it mean?'

'My uncle's dead.'

'Mr Burton?'

He nodded.

'Has he left you his money? Oh, Guy!'

'As to that, I can't say. At present I know nothing. The fact is, Letty, it's-it's a queer business. You won't laugh?'

'What at?'

'Well'-he held out an envelope-'if I hadn't found this letter awaiting me telling me of the old man's death, I should have accused myself of softening of the brain, or something of the kind. As it is, I believe I've had a vision.'

'A vision! You? Guy, fancy your discovering that there are visions about.'

'You're laughing at me now.'

'I'm doing nothing of the kind. How can you say such a thing? I'm the soul of gravity. Do I ever laugh?'

As a matter of fact, there was a twinkle in her eyes even as she spoke, which he perceived.

'All right; laugh it out. I don't mind. All I can say is that it's gospel truth, and seems queer enough to me, though I daresay it's extremely comic to anybody else.'

'What seems comic? You haven't said a word.'

'Let's find a seat, and I'll say a good many.'

They found a seat-not the one she had been sitting on, but one which was sheltered by a tree. It was, perhaps, because it was in the shade that they temporarily ignored the fact that they were yet in Regent's Park. They were still pretty close together when he began to tell his tale.

'On the 23rd of February I had had a long day in the open. It was broiling hot, and in the evening I was glad to get back under cover. As I sat at my tent door, too tired even to smoke, I saw, right in front of me, my uncle.'

'Your uncle? Mr Burton? Where was this?'

'Perhaps three hundred miles north of Buluwayo.'

'But-what was your uncle doing there?'

'I told you it was a queer business, and so it was. Let me try to explain. Straight in front of where I was sitting the plain stretched for heaven knows how many miles right away to the horizon. There were no buildings; scarcely a bush or a tree was to be seen; just the monotonous level ground. All at once I perceived, certainly within a hundred feet of where I was, a flight of steps.'

'A flight of steps?'

'Well, I had a sort of general idea that there was a building in connection, but my eyes were fixed upon the steps. I seemed to know them. There was a wide open door at top. I felt that I was well acquainted with what was on the other side of that door. On the steps my uncle was standing. Mind, I saw him as well as I see you, and, thank goodness, I can see you pretty well. I can't tell you what he wore, because I'm no hand at describing clothes; but I've an impression that he had on a suit of tweeds and a bowler hat. He was apparently lounging on the steps, watching the passers-by. He did not see me-of that I was sure. On a sudden someone else came towards him up the steps. He was a stranger to me, though I think I should know him if I saw him again. He was taller than my uncle, and, I imagine, younger. Anyhow, he was altogether a bigger and a stronger man. He had a walking stick in his hand, with a horn handle. Directly he got within reach, without, so far as I could judge, uttering a word of warning, with this stick he struck my uncle with all his force across the face. I suspect that my uncle had seen him coming before I did, and, for reasons of his own, had stuck to what he deemed his post of vantage on the steps, being unwilling to go and meet him, and ashamed to run away. That he was not so taken aback by the suddenness of the attack as I was I felt persuaded. He put out his hand to guard himself, and, I fancy, at the last moment was disposed to turn tail and flee. But it was too late. The blow got home. He staggered back and would have fallen had not the stranger gripped him with his left hand, and commenced to belabour him

with the stick which he held with his right. People came streaming out of the open door above and up the steps from the street. My uncle made not the faintest attempt at resistance. When the people came close enough to hamper the free action of his arm, the stranger, giving his victim a push, sent him head foremost down the steps. In an instant the whole thing vanished.'

Mr Holland ceased. The lady had been regarding him with wide-open grey eyes.

'Guy!' she said.

'Wasn't it odd?'

'Odd? You must have been dreaming.'

'I was as wide awake as you are. It was a mirage, or vision, or something of the kind. The queerest part of it was that it was so amazingly real, and so near. When the thing had gone I kept asking myself why I hadn't jumped up and interfered. I could have got there in a dozen strides.'

'Then what happened?'

'I sat for a long time half dazed, half expecting the thing to come again, or to continue from the point at which it had left off. Then I went and told a man with whom I was chumming what I'd seen. He said the sun had got into my eyes, advised me to have a drink-made fun of it altogether. But I knew better; and, as it turned out, I was haunted by my uncle all through the night.'

'Awake or sleeping?'

'Awake. I couldn't sleep. I was haunted by a feeling that he was dying. The stranger had not killed him; but in consequence of the thrashing he had received he was struggling with death, and kept calling out to me to come to him; and I couldn't.'

'Poor Guy!'

The lady softly stroked the hand of his which she held between her two.

'I wondered if I was on the verge of an attack of illness or going mad, or what, though personally I felt as fit as a fiddle all the time, with my senses as much about me as they are now. I kept hearing him call out, over and over again, "Guy, Guy!" in the voice I knew so well and wasn't particularly fond of. There was something else which he kept repeating.'

'What was that?'

""The ruby.""

'The ruby?'

'I haven't a notion of what he meant or what the whole thing meant, but at least a dozen times that night I heard him referring to a ruby, – the ruby, he called it. Long and seemingly involved sentences I heard him utter, but the only two words I could distinguish were those two-"the ruby"; and, as I have said, those two I heard him pronounce certainly a dozen times. And in the morning I was conscious of an absolute conviction that he was dead.'

'How very strange.'

'I'm not one of your clever chaps, so I don't pretend to be able to suggest a sufficient explanation, but the entire business reminds me of what I've heard about second sight. Although in the body I was out there on the veldt I seemed to know and see what was taking place heaven knows how many thousand miles away. In spite of the persuasion which was borne in upon me that he was dead, every day, and sometimes all day, I heard him calling out to me, "Guy, Guy!" and every now and then, "The ruby!" It was as if he were imploring me to come to him.'

'So you came.'

'So I came. The truth is I couldn't stand it any longer. I should have gone off my head if I had had much more of it. I was good for nothing, my nerves were all anyhow, everyone was laughing at me. So I slipped off by myself without a word to a creature; got down to Cape Town, found a boat just starting, and was off on it at once. Directly the boat was away the haunting stopped. My nerves were all right in an instant. I told myself I was an ass; that I ought to have wired or written, or done something sensible. Since, however, it was too late I tried to make the best of things. I ran

up to London so soon as we reached port, meaning, if it turned out that my imagination had made a fool of me, to go straight back without breathing a word to anyone of my ever having come.'

'Not even to me?'

'Not even to you. You wouldn't have liked me to turn up with nothing but a bee in my bonnet.'

'So long as you turned up, I shouldn't have cared for forty thousand bees. The idea!'

'That's very sweet of you. As it happened, no sooner did I appear at my old quarters than Mrs Flickers produced a letter which had arrived for me-she did not know how long ago, and which she had not known what to do with. It turned out to be an intimation from Collyer that that my uncle had died on the 23rd of February, the very day on which, out on the veldt, I had seen him assaulted by that unknown individual upon that flight of steps.'

'Guy, is this a ghost story you have been telling me? I don't want to be absurd, but it really does look as if it were a case of the hand of destiny.'

'I don't know about the hand of destiny, but it does look as if it were a case of something.'

'I shouldn't be surprised if, after all, the old reprobate has left you some of his money.'

'Nor I. Oh, Letty, if he has! We'll be married on Monday.'

'As this is Friday, couldn't you make it Sunday? Monday seems such a long way off. My dear Guy, first of all interview Mr Samuel Collyer. Then you'll learn the worst.'

'I am going to. Of course I had to see you first-'

'Of course.'

'But I wired to him that I'd call this afternoon.'

'Then call.'

And Mr Holland called.

CHAPTER II

THE QUEST ORDAINED

Mr Collyer's offices were in Pump Court, first floor front. Mr Samuel Collyer was a somewhat short and pursy gentleman of about fifty years of age, with a clean-shaven face, and a manner which gave such a varying complexion to the words he used as to cause it sometimes to be very difficult to make out exactly what it was he meant; an extremely useful manner for a solicitor to have. As with alert, swinging stride Mr Holland entered, Mr Collyer rose, greeting him with his usual stolid air, as if he had just looked in from across the road, instead of from the wilds of Africa.

'Good morning, Mr Guy. You're looking very brown.'

'Yes, I-I'm feeling very brown.'

The words seemed to come from him almost before he knew it, on the spur of the moment, as if the presence of a third person lent them a special significance. Reclining in the only armchair the room contained was a young gentleman of about Mr Holland's own age. He was well dressed, good looking, very much at his ease, and he regarded Mr Holland with a suggestion of amusement which seemed somehow to be very much in character.

'In questions of feeling is brown the equivalent of blue?'

Mr Holland's bearing was not so genial as the other's.

'I did not expect to see you here.'

'Nor, my dear Guy, did I expect to see you. I did not even wish to.'

'That I can easily believe.'

'It is Mr Collyer's fault that I am here, not mine. I should have been content never to set eyes on you again; and as for being in the same room with you-'

He left his sentence unfinished, with a little airy movement of his hand, which seemed to round it off with a sting. He continued to smile, although Mr Holland regarded him for a moment with eyes which were very far from smiling. The newcomer turned to the solicitor.

'I have your letter.'

'I presume, Mr Guy, that you had my letter nearly three months ago.'

'I had it this morning. I only came back from Africa last night.'

'From Africa? I was not aware you had gone so far.'

'Dear Guy is such a gadabout.'

The interpolation came from the young gentleman in the arm-chair. The solicitor went on.

'The only address I had was the one in Craven Street. As my letter did not come back I supposed it had reached you safely; but that, for reasons of your own, you chose to take no notice of it. You know, Mr Guy, that in such matters you are a little erratic.'

'I know. You needn't remind me. So my uncle is dead. Of what did he die?'

'The immediate cause was apoplexy, brought on, it is to be feared, by something which happened on the afternoon of his decease.'

The young gentleman in the arm-chair struck in.

'He was thrashed within an inch of his life, and very properly he was served.'

'Thrashed! Where? On a flight of steps?'

'On the steps of the Hôtel des Anglais at Nice.'

'Good God! I thought I knew the place; of course it was the Hôtel des Anglais; it's-it's past believing.'

The solicitor misapprehended the cause of Mr Holland's excitement.

'It does seem almost incredible; none the less it is a lamentable fact.'

The young gentleman put in his word.

'How incredible? The dear man misbehaved himself with another man's wife, as was his invariable custom when he had a chance. The other man thrashed him for it. What could be more natural? or simpler?'

Mr Holland ignored the inquiry.

'What is it, Mr Collyer, which you wish to say to me?'

'It is not so much that I have anything to say to you as that I have a duty to perform. I have to read to you your uncle's will. His instructions were that it was to be read only in the presence of both his nephews, his sole remaining relatives.'

'He has probably left all his money to found a hospital for cats, and wished us both to be present, my dear Guy, so that we might enjoy each other's discomfiture.'

Mr Holland said nothing. Mr Collyer was taking some papers out of a metal box which stood against the wall, and on the front of which was painted in white letters the name, 'George Burton.' Reseating himself behind his table he held up a large white linen envelope, such as is used in England for registered letters.

'I will read you the endorsement which is on it. "This envelope, which he told me contained his will, was delivered to me by Mr George Burton, on the 22nd of June 1899, and was then and there sealed by me in the presence of my two clerks whose names are undersigned." Then follow my own signature, and the signatures of the clerks in question, both of whom are still in my employ, Ferdinand Murpeatt and Benjamin Davis. Would either of you gentlemen like to see them?'

'My good Mr Collyer, we don't want to see your clerks. Your clerks be sanctified. Why all this form and fuss? Make an end of it. Let's know if it's cats or dogs Uncle Burton's favoured.'

'And you, Mr Guy, are you content that I should proceed at once to the contents of this envelope?'

Mr Holland said nothing; he simply nodded. The solicitor, taking a penknife, began to cut open the top of the envelope with a degree of care which perhaps erred on the side of overcaution. He addressed them as he did so.

'I may say that, beyond Mr Burton's own statement that it holds his will, I have no notion what this envelope contains. I have no knowledge of the purport of the will; Mr Burton never gave me the faintest hint as to what were his testamentary intentions. You are aware that your uncle was a man who did what he liked, in his own way; and I say this, therefore, in order to give you to understand that whatever form the will may take, I am not to be held responsible.'

The young gentleman in the arm-chair laughed.

'My dear Collyer, do cut the cackle, and do let's come to the 'osses.'

Mr Collyer took out from the envelope a single sheet of paper. Without further preamble he commenced to read what was written on it, in a slow, monotonous, sing-song voice, as if it were something sacred which he almost felt it his duty to intone.

"I, George Burton, of Hyde Park Terrace, London, W., do hereby announce that this is my last Will and Testament, as written with my own hand on June 17, 1899."

"I have only two relatives living, viz., my two nephews, Horace Burton, my brother's son, and Guy Holland, the son of my sister; and, since I love them equally well, I desire to do them equal justice."

The reading was interrupted by prolonged laughter from the young gentleman in the arm-chair.

'The dear man!' he cried.

Mr Collyer continued.

"I therefore give and bequeath all that I die possessed of, in real and personal estate, to my nephew, Guy Holland--"

'Good Lord!' exclaimed the young gentleman in the arm-chair.

Mr Holland's lips might have been closed a little tighter. The lawyer went on unmoved.

"Absolutely, to do with as he pleases, on condition that he recover from May Bewicke, the actress, whom he knows, my ruby signet ring, which she obtained from me by means of a trick on the 27th of this last May. The ring is well known to him, and to Horace, and to my lawyer, Samuel Collyer. The ring is to be delivered to Samuel Collyer, whom I hereby appoint my sole executor, by my nephew, Guy, within three months of the day of my death. Should he do so within the period mentioned, then I do hereby name him as my sole heir and residuary legatee. In default, however, of such delivery within the time stated, for any cause whatever, then my whole estate, without any deduction whatever, is to become the absolute property of my other nephew, Horace Burton."

"Since the chances that Guy will obtain the ring from Miss Bewicke are not very large, that young woman preferring to keep tight hold of anything she has once laid her hands on, in making this will I am doing Horace even more than justice."

"In the improbable case of the delivery of my ruby signet ring by Guy to Samuel Collyer, within the aforementioned three months of my decease, it is to be held by the said Samuel Collyer, and not to pass out of his possession until his death, when it is to be sold, and the proceeds devoted to form a Society for the Reformation of Actresses."

"As witness my hand and signature this seventeenth day of June, Eighteen hundred and ninety-nine. George Burton."

"Witnesses-"

"John Claney, 13 Porchester Terrace, W."

"Augustus Evans, 83 Belgrave Row, S.W."

The reading was followed by silence, broken by a question from Mr Holland.

'And pray what is the plain English of it all?'

'The will is plain English. You are to obtain a certain ring from a certain lady and deliver it to me within a certain time. If you do so you are your uncle's heir; if you do not, Mr Horace is.'

'Within three months of his death. He died on the 23rd of February. This is the 19th of May. I have four days in which to get the ring.'

'Apparently that is the case.'

'Supposing this lady refuses to give me the ring when I ask for it, as, so far as I can perceive, she will be perfectly justified in doing.'

'Perfectly!'

The murmur came from Horace.

'How am I to get it from her within four days? Where is Miss Bewicke now?'

'In London. She is acting at the Modern Theatre. I am afraid I am unable to assist you with any advice as to how you are to procure the ring should she refuse to hand it over.'

Mr Holland stood up.

'Is that will a good one?'

'You mean in a legal sense. I should say so, perfectly. It is just the sort of will I should have expected your uncle to make. It is distinctly characteristic of the man.'

'My uncle was a most delightful person. Then, if I do not succeed in jockeying this lady out of her property inside four days I'm a pauper.'

'At least you will not inherit under your uncle's will.'

As Mr Holland stood with knitted brows his cousin gave him a friendly pat upon the back. Mr Holland whirled round to him in a manner which was distinctly not friendly.

'How dare you touch me, sir!'

'My dear Guy! May not a cousin give a cousinly salutation to a cousin? My congratulations, my dear boy. You're sure to be the heir. You always were so clever at diddling a woman.'

The blood showed even through Mr Holland's bronzed cheeks; his clenched fists twitched. The other, however, paid no heed to these signs and portents.

'I believe you managed to diddle Miss Bewicke once before, eh, Guy?' He turned upon his heels, with a little movement of his shoulders. 'Let's hope you'll succeed the second time as well as I've been given to understand you did the first. Good-bye. Good luck, dear boy. Collyer, I'll look in on you again.'

Mr Horace Burton strolled from the room. Presently Mr Holland followed him.

'I, also, Mr Collyer, will talk things over when I look in again. I don't feel equal to the task just now.' He said to himself as he was going down the stairs, 'Nice to have to rob your old sweetheart to keep yourself out of the gutter. He knew very well there had been passages between us; so he set me the dirtiest job to do which he could think of. The brute! I'd better have stayed in Africa than have come back to this. I wonder what Letty'll say.'

The solicitor, left alone, leaning back in his chair, stroked his chin with his hand as if to discover whether it wanted shaving.

'They don't know that Miss May Bewicke is Mr Samuel Collyer's niece. I fancy that there are only one or two persons who are aware that he has a niece upon the stage. George Burton certainly was not.'

He smiled as if his own thoughts tickled him.

CHAPTER III

MISS BROAD COMMANDS

They were in Regent's Park again; at the same place; on the same seat. She said to him as he came up, -

'I told papa that you were here. I'm of age, and I suppose I'm entitled to do as I please; but I made up my mind that I'd have no secrecy. It's degrading.'

'Well, degrading's strong. And what did papa say?'

'I mentioned, at the same time, that your uncle was dead, and under the circumstances he perhaps thought it advisable not to say much. At anyrate he didn't.'

'He might have done; and he will do soon.'

Something in his tone caught her ear.

'Guy! What's the matter? You don't mean-?'

'Not exactly, though I'm not sure it isn't worse.'

She half rose from the seat.

'Has he left you nothing?'

He told her the purport of his uncle's will; she listening eager-eyed and open-mouthed.

'Do you mean to say that you're to get this ridiculous ring out of Miss Bewicke's possession in four days, by fair means or foul?'

He nodded.

'But it's monstrous.'

'It is a pretty tall order?'

'What do you propose to do?'

'I propose to call upon Miss Bewicke.'

In a moment, without any warning, she was standing up beside him stiff and straight.

'I see. Now I understand. That's the idea. I've no doubt that Miss Bewicke will find you a most persuasive person.'

'My dear Letty!'

'Weren't you and Miss Bewicke once engaged to be married? Pray don't trouble yourself to explain. I know all about it. You need have no fear of losing your uncle's inheritance. You are quite sure to understand each other. She'll be delighted to give you the ring in exchange for another. Would you like to give her mine?'

She actually began to unbutton her glove. He groaned.

'It's worth while seeing ghosts in Africa for this!'

'And what do you propose to say to Miss Bewicke when you call upon her?'

'That's what I want you to tell me.'

'I tell you! As if you didn't know! After the stories I have heard of her I had hoped that you would have had no more to do with Miss Bewicke. But, of course, my wishes do not count.'

'If the stories you have heard are to Miss Bewicke's discredit, you may take my word for it that they are libels.'

'You are sure to know. I am glad you have such a high opinion of her. When you have seen her you might let me know what she says. That is, if she should say anything which was not spoken in the strictest confidence.'

She actually walked away. He went after her.

'My dear Letty, don't you want me to try to get the ring?'

'By all means act in accordance with the dictates of your better judgment. You are so much wiser than I.'

'But, Letty, if I don't get the ring, I-I won't say I lose you, because God knows I hope I never shall do that; but it means that I shall have to wait for you, the Powers above alone can tell how long. While getting it means getting you at once.'

'Guy, weren't you once engaged to be married to Miss Bewicke?'

'Yes, I was.'

'And I suppose you loved each other?'

'Letty, it's not like you to rub it in like this.'

'My dear Guy, let us look the situation fairly in the face. This person, from whom you are going to ask this weighty favour-in effect you are going to ask her to bestow on you a fortune-is the woman whom once you loved, and who was once your promised wife. I don't like it; it's no use pretending to you that I do.'

'My dear Letty, do you think I like it? If it weren't for circumstances I'd let the ruby and the fortune go together. Listen, the decision shall be in your hands. Shall I try to fulfil the old man's preposterous and malignant condition? or shall I throw the whole thing up at once, let the money go to Horace Burton, return to Africa, and keep on pounding away in the hope of making enough to win you in the end? Now, which is it to be? You shall say.'

'It's not fair to place the entire responsibility upon my shoulders.'

'Since this is a matter in which you are primarily interested, my one desire is that your views should be treated with the utmost possible deference.'

'Then get the ruby.'

'But how?'

'Tear it from her if you like; knock her down and steal it; I don't care. Only don't make love to her under the pretence of doing me a service. Guy, if you're even civil to her-'

She left the sentence unfinished; the air with which she spoke was eloquent enough.

'My dear Letty, as if I should! Then do you suggest that I should go and see her?'

'Of course. To-night.'

'To-night?'

'At once. And get the ruby from her somehow; I don't care how, but get it. And meet me here in the morning with it in your hand.'

'But, dearest, Miss Bewicke goes to the theatre.'

'I don't care where she goes.'

'Exactly, but I can hardly interview her in the theatre; and, in any case, she would scarcely have the ruby with her there.'

'Then see her after.'

'After the theatre?'

'Oh, Guy, don't keep asking me questions! If you only knew how I hate the notion of your seeing her at all, especially to solicit a favour at her hands. But since I suppose you must, you must get it over. Only I know what took place between you before; papa knows and everybody knows-heaps of people have told me.' A curious something came into her voice, a sort of choking sound. It frightened Mr Holland. 'Guy, you must see her to-night-to-night-and never again. Get the ruby from her if you have to fight her for it, and meet me here to-morrow morning with it in your hand.'

Without a word of warning she scurried from him down the path. He called after her.

'Letty!'

'Don't try to stop me. I don't want to speak to you when you're going to see that woman.'

There was that in her voice which caused him to deem it advisable to take her at her word. He let her go. He remained behind to objurgate fickle fortune and other things. He told himself, not for the first time, -

'It really was not worth while to see ghosts in Africa for this. If spectral visitations all tend this way I bar them. The next ghost I see I'll decline to notice it. It shall lead somebody else into

a mess, not me.' He began to stroll towards the gate, kicking every now and then at the pebbles on the path. 'Never thought Letty was such a little spitfire. Bless her heart! I love her for it all the more. Who can have told her about the mess I made of things with May? I'll swear I didn't. These things will out.' He groaned. 'It's past seven. I'll go and get something to eat. Then if food screws my courage to the sticking point I'll go and interview Miss Bewicke a little later. But as for taking that ruby from her *vi et armis*-oh, lord! If ever there was a forlorn hope, I'm down for one to-night.'

Miss Bewicke had a flat in Victoria Street. A little after half-past eleven Mr Holland addressed himself to the hall porter with an inquiry if she was in. There was that in his bearing which suggested that the food which he had consumed had not exhilarated him to any appreciable extent. In fact, so melancholy was his air that one would not have been surprised to learn that it had injuriously affected his digestion. The porter regarded him askance.

'Do you know Miss Bewicke?'

'I have that honour.'

'Sure?'

'Tolerably sure.'

'You'll excuse my asking you, but such a lot of people, perfect strangers, come hanging about and annoying her that my orders are not to let anybody go up if I can help it who isn't a friend of hers. I understand you to say that you are a friend.'

'A friend of some years' standing.'

Mr Holland sighed. The porter observed him with dubious glances, being possibly doubtful as to the meaning of the sigh.

'I suppose it's all right if you're a friend of hers; you ought to know best if you are. I can only say that you'll do no good if you're trying it on. I don't know if Miss Bewicke is in; I don't think she's returned from the theatre. But you can go up and see. I'll take you up in the lift if you like.'

The porter took him up in the lift. On the way Mr Holland asked a question.

'Do Miss Bewicke's unknown admirers allow their admiration to carry them as far as her private residence?'

'I don't know about admiration. Idiots I call them; and sometimes worse. People hang about here all day, and sometimes half the night, trying to introduce themselves to her, and I don't know what rubbish. Why, I've known half-a-dozen cabs follow her from the theatre to the very door.'

'Empty cabs?'

'Not much; a fool, and sometimes two fools, in each.'

'Ah!' Mr Holland reflected. 'If Miss Bewicke had been destined to be my wife I wonder how I should have enjoyed her being the object of such ardent admiration. Under such circumstances a husband's feelings must be worth dissection.'

In reply to Mr Holland's modest knock, the door of Miss Bewicke's apartments was opened by a young gentleman well over six feet high, who appeared to be in rather a curious frame of mind.

'What the deuce do you want?' was his courteous salutation.

'I want Miss Bewicke.'

'Oh, you do, do you? then just you come inside.'

He took Mr Holland by the shoulder, and that individual, although a little surprised at the young gentleman's notion of the sort of reception which it was advisable to accord a friendly visitor, suffered him to lead him to an apartment which was beyond. This was apparently a sitting-room, prettily furnished, particularly with photographs, as is the manner of ladies who are connected with the theatre, and contained a table which was laid for two. The young gentleman still did not release Mr Holland's shoulder. He glared at him instead, and put to him this flattering question, -

'Are you the blackguard who has been making himself a nuisance about the place this last week and more?'

Mr Holland's reply was mild in the extreme.

'I hope not.'

'You hope not? What do you mean by that? Don't you know you are?'

'I do not. I think the mistake, sir, is yours. May I ask who you are? You have your own ideas of how to greet the coming guest. Does Miss Bewicke keep you on the premises in order that you may mete out this kind of treatment to all her friends? You should be popular.'

'You're no friend of Miss Bewicke's. Don't try to bounce me, sir. I'll tell you in two words who I am. My name's Dumville-Bryan Dumville. Miss Bewicke is shortly to be my wife. As her affianced husband I consider myself entitled to protect her from the impertinent attentions of any twopenny-ha'penny bounder who chooses to think that because she condescends to appear upon the stage of a theatre he is at liberty to persecute her when and how he pleases.'

'Your sentiments do you credit, Mr Dumville.'

'Don't try to soft-soap me, sir. You can speak smoothly enough to me; but I will give you ten seconds, before I throw you down the stairs, to explain the meaning of your presence here.'

'I think, Mr Dumville, that, if I were you, I should make it a little more than ten seconds before, as you put it, you throw me down the stairs. I have come to see Miss Bewicke. I am afraid I can only explain myself to her.'

'No, you don't. That trick's been played before! It's stale; out you go!'

'Don't be an ass, sir!'

'Ass!'

The epithet seemed to add fuel to the excitable Mr Dumville's flame. Throwing both arms round Mr Holland, trying to lift him off the ground, he proceeded to hustle him towards the door. Mr Holland, unwilling to be treated in quite such unceremonious fashion, displayed a capacity for resistance for which, possibly, the other was unprepared. There was every prospect of a delightful little bout of rough and tumble, when an interruption came.

'Bryan! what are you doing?'

The interruption came from a young lady who was standing at the open door.

CHAPTER IV

MR HOLLAND FAILS

A Small young lady, daintily fashioned, with a child-like face. She was charmingly dressed; a big feather boa was round her neck. As she stood there, in spite of the perfection of her attire, she looked more like a child than a woman. The men released each other. Mr Dumville explained.

'I was only going to throw the fellow down the stairs.'

'Is that all? And what has'-there was a little hesitation; then the word was softened by a smile-'the fellow done? And who may the fellow be?'

'I don't know. Some bounder, I suppose.'

Mr Dumville seemed slightly disconcerted, as if the situation had not quite shaped as he had expected. Mr Holland's hat and stick had fallen to the floor. He stooped to pick them up. When he turned there came an exclamation from the little lady at the door.

'Guy!'

'Miss Bewicke.'

'Whoever would have thought of seeing you? Why, this is Mr Holland, a friend of my childish days.'

She advanced with a tiny gloved hand held out to him. Mr Dumville, whose hands were in his trouser pockets, seemed disposed to be grumpy.

'It wasn't my fault; he should have told me.'

'You hardly gave me an opportunity.'

'My dear Bryan, I believe you're a little mad; that is, I believe you're a little madder even than I thought you were. Guy, this is Bryan Dumville, a gentleman who thinks that he has claims on me. Bryan, this is Guy Holland, who was a friend of mine when I was quite a little child; and that-how long ago that is!'

'I don't see how I'm to blame. The porter was talking about the fellow who has been such a nuisance, saying that he has been making himself particularly objectionable to-day, trying to force his way upstairs, and I don't know what; and he added that he was hanging about at that very moment, and if he turned his back he shouldn't be surprised if the blackguard made another try to get at you. I made up my mind that if he did I would give him what for. So, when someone knocked at the door, and I found it was a man, I went for him.'

'Nothing could be more natural.'

If Mr Holland's tone was a little dry Mr Dumville did not seem to notice it; but the lady regarded the speaker with laughter lighting all her pretty face.

'Guy, you must sup with us.'

'Thank you, I have not long dined.'

'That doesn't matter; you must eat with us again.' She rang the bell. A maid appeared. 'Bring another plate; Mr Holland will join us at supper.' Miss Bewicke proceeded to remove her outdoor things, handing them to Mr Dumville one by one, talking as she did so. 'Someone told me that you were at the other side of the world-at the North Pole, I think.'

'Not the North Pole; but I have been to Africa. I only returned last night.'

'And you came to-day to see me? How perfectly delightful of you.'

Mr Holland winced. He was conscious that the lady might misapprehend the situation.

'The fact is, I have something rather important which I wish to say to you.'

'Indeed? How interesting! I like people to say important things to me. Say it while we're at supper. That is, if it's something Bryan may be allowed to listen to.'

'If I'm in the way I'll go.'

Mr Holland was silent. He felt that Mr Dumville was in the way, but that he himself was hardly in a position to say so. Miss Bewicke spoke for him.

'My dear Bryan, when you're in the way we'll let you know. Now, people, will you please sit down?' They seated themselves at table. 'What is this very important thing? – must it out? – or will it keep?'

Mr Holland reflected. He thought of Letty, and other things. Miss Bewicke seemed disposed to be friendly. Perhaps it was as well there was a third person present. He decided to make the running.

'It's this way. My uncle's dead.'

'Your uncle? Mr George Burton? I hope you won't think me dreadful, but I cannot say I'm sorry. He was not a person for whom I entertained feelings of profound respect.'

'He-he's left rather a peculiar will.'

'I'm not surprised. I should be surprised at nothing he did which was peculiar. I never knew him do anything which wasn't. Or worse.'

Mr Holland resolved to plunge.

'He says you have a ruby ring of his.'

'He says? – who says?'

'My uncle-in his will.'

Miss Bewicke laid down her knife and fork. 'Mr Holland, do I understand that you intend to suggest that I have in my possession another person's property?'

'It's like this. He had a ruby ring, I know it very well. In his will he says you have it. He may have given it to you for all I know; he did queer things-'

'Thank you.'

'I don't mean that.'

'It doesn't matter. Go on.'

'Anyhow, it's a condition of his will that I'm to get it back from you, and if I don't get it back within three months of his death I'm to lose his money.'

'I don't in the least understand you. Will you please be so good as to make yourself quite clear.'

He made himself as clear as he could, though he did not find it easy. Nor was his explanation well received.

'Then am I to gather that you have come to me at midnight, hot-foot from Africa, in order to get from me-a ring; a ruby ring?'

'It doesn't sound very nice, but that's the plain truth of it.'

'It's very flattering.'

'Very!'

The chorus came from Mr Dumville, and was accompanied by a glare.

'I can only throw myself upon your mercy, Miss Bewicke, and implore you to let me have this ring to save my inheritance.'

Miss Bewicke resumed her knife and fork, which had all this time been lying idle. There was a change in her manner, which, though subtle, was well defined to Mr Holland's consciousness.

'By the way, Mr Holland, the other day I heard your name associated with a person called, I think, Broad. Was it merely idle gossip, or do you know anything of a person with a name like that?'

'I do. I know Miss Broad, and very well. I hope she will be my wife. She has promised that she will.'

'Ah, you and I know what is the value of such promises, don't we, Mr Holland? Is she any relation to Broad, the teaman, in Mincing Lane?'

'She is his daughter; his only child.'

'Indeed! His only child? How delightful! Old Broad has bushels of money. How nice for you, of all men, to be received in such a family.'

The airy insolence of the tone was meant to sting, and did, though he endeavoured to conceal the fact.

'You haven't answered my question.'

'Haven't I? What was your question?'

'Will you let me have the ring, to save my inheritance?'

'It's such an odd question-isn't it, Bryan? So mysterious. Melodrama's not at all my line. They say I'm too small. Do you think that I'm too small?'

'I should imagine that you were better fitted to shine in domestic comedy.'

His words conveyed a meaning which this time stung her, although she laughed.

'But, my dear Mr Holland, what do you want with an inheritance when you are going to marry a rich wife-the only child of her father, and he a widower. I'm told that old Broad's a millionaire.'

'I'm not marrying her for her father's money; nor for her own. Nor do I intend to go to her empty-handed.'

'How chivalrous you are! So changed!'

'Am I to have the ring?'

'Really, Mr Holland, you speak to me as if it were a case of stand and deliver. You can hardly know how your uncle behaved or I do not think you would broach the subject to me at all. In any case it is not one which I can discuss with you. Talk it over with Mr Dumville. Whatever he wishes I will do. I always act on his advice; he is so very wise. Good-night, Mr Holland. So glad to have seen you. Come soon again. Goodnight, Bryan, dear.'

'But you haven't had any supper.'

'Mr Holland has taken my appetite away; he has caused my mind to travel back to events which I am always endeavouring to forget. But it doesn't matter. Hear what he has to say, and decide for me. King will let you both out when your discussion's finished.'

Mr Holland stood up.

'Miss Bewicke, I am very sorry if I have said anything which has given you pain or offence. Nothing could have been further from my intention.'

'Thank you.'

'But this matter which you treat so lightly-'

'Lightly!'

'Is to me almost one of life and death. I believe that my uncle has left something like a quarter of a million.'

'What a sum, Bryan! Doesn't it sound nice?'

'If I can hand this ring to Mr Collyer-'

'To whom?'

'To Mr Collyer, my uncle's solicitor, the money is mine. I have only four days left to do it in.'

'Four days! Just now you said three months.'

'The time appointed is three months after my uncle's death. He died on the 23rd of February. I have only just become acquainted with the terms of his will. So in four days it will be decided if I am to be a rich man or a pauper. You see, Miss Bewicke, that my fate is in your hands.'

'I really cannot discuss the matter with you now. It would make me ill. The strain would be too much for me. I refer you to Mr Dumville. Bryan, dear, I leave the matter entirely in your hands.'

'Miss Bewicke-'

Mr Dumville rose.

'Mr Holland, you have heard what Miss Bewicke has said. So far as she is concerned the discussion is closed. My dear, let me open the door for you.'

He opened the door for her. She passed out, with her handkerchief to her eyes. A fact on which Mr Dumville commented.

'You see what you have done, sir-affected her to tears.'

'To what?'

'To tears!'

'Oh!'

'Well, sir, what have you to say to me?'

'To you?'

'Yes, sir, to me. You have said more than enough to Miss Bewicke. Now, perhaps there is something which you would like to say to me, as her affianced husband.'

'There are one or two things which I should like to say to you, but I am inclined to think that I had better not say them to you here. Nor do I quite see my way to ask you to come outside, though I should like to.'

Mr Holland was savage, and unwise enough to show it. Mr Dumville, having polished his eyeglass, replaced it in his eye so that he might scan the speaker with a greater show of dignity.

'What on earth do you mean by talking to me like that? If that's the kind of remark you wish to make the sooner you get away the better.'

'I am quite of your opinion, Mr Dumville. I shall always remember with pleasure that I was able to get away from you.'

Mr Dumville strode forward.

'You be hanged, sir!'

'After you, Mr Dumville, after you.'

'You had better be careful; although I don't want to have a vulgar row with you here.'

'Would you mind mentioning a place at which you would? I will try to make it convenient to be there.'

Mr Dumville turned and rang the bell.

'What's that for?'

'For the servant to show you out.'

Mr Holland laughed, showing himself out without another word. He was conscious of two things—that he had not been particularly discreet, and that he would like to make his indiscretion greater by 'taking it out' of somebody. It was not often his temper gained the upper hand; when it did he was apt to be dangerous both to himself and others.

Nor was his mood chastened by a little incident which took place as he was about to descend the staircase. From a door which opened behind him Miss Bewicke addressed him in mellifluous accents.

'Oh, Mr Holland, will you give my fondest love to dear Miss Broad? It's true that I don't know her, but if you tell her what good friends you and I used to be I'm sure that she won't mind. I hope to make her acquaintance one of these days, and then I'll tell her how fond you and I were of one another. Good-night.'

Before he had a chance to answer the door was closed. He went down the stairs in a rage.

'The little cat!' he muttered. 'The little cat! who would have thought she had such claws?'

As he was going out into the street a woman, running against him, almost knocked him over. She was entering the house, apparently in hot, unseeing haste; putting up her hand as if to prevent his observation of her features; flying up the stairs as if danger was hard upon her heels.

Mr Holland adjusted his hat, which she had knocked almost off without offering the least apology.

'I wonder what mischief you have been up to? Women are beauties, real beauties!'

Having indulged himself in this very cheap piece of cynicism, he, metaphorically, shook the dust of the house from off his feet, but had not gone a dozen paces when he found himself face to face with his cousin, Horace Burton.

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN SCORNE

Mr Burton might have been awaiting Mr Holland. He did not seem at all surprised to see him there, even at that hour of the night, or, rather, morning, for midnight had long since chimed.

'How do, dear boy? So you haven't been letting the grass grow under your feet. That's where you beat me; you are so energetic.'

And Mr Burton smiled. That smile was his most prominent feature. It was always there. Not that it necessarily denoted mirth. Not at all. It might mean anything, or nothing. When he was in a rage he smiled, and when he was in the best of tempers; when he wished to be agreeable, and when he wished to be nasty-and he could be nasty. He was not a bad-looking man, in his way, though there was something about him a little suggesting the worst side of the Semite, which rather detracted from the general effect. It was difficult to say exactly what it was. Whether it was that his nostrils were unduly thick, or that so much of his mouth as his heavy moustache suffered to be visible was animal, or that his eyes, which were fine of their kind, had an odd trick of intently observing you when you were not looking at him, and of wandering away into space when you were, it would have needed an acute physiognomist to determine, and then that physiognomist might have been in error. Certainly there was something about Mr Horace Burton which nearly always caused an experienced man of the world, on first making his acquaintance, to glance at him a first, a second, and again a third time, and then start thinking. Perhaps it was that, in spite of his moustache, his chronic smile displayed his teeth, which were not nice ones; or because of his soft, purring voice, which, when he became excited, had a squeak in it; or because of his feline trick of touching a person, with whom he might be conversing, with his fingertips, and stroking him, when he got near enough to do it.

Mr Holland regarded his cousin in silence. The encounter did not appear to astonish him, nor to add to his pleasure either. Mr Burton continued.

'Well-have you got it?'

'Have I got what?'

'Ah-you've answered. You haven't. I see. Thanks. It was rather sharp work to raid the girl at this hour of the night, don't you think? But you always were so keen. Was she nice to you? She used to be, didn't she? You've been a lucky chap. I never could make out what women saw in you to like. A lot of them have seen something. There's Miss Broad, for instance-'

'Don't mention that lady's name.'

'Not mention her name? My dear chap!' Mr Burton placed the finger-tips of his right hand against Mr Holland's chest, to have them brushed aside as if they were some noxious insect. He went on unmoved. 'She's to be my cousin; so I'm told. Unless you've jerked her up. I hear her father kicked you out of the house; perhaps you anticipate more kicking; in a case like that you can't kick back again. So perhaps you're wise to chuck the girl. I tell you what, dear boy.' The finger-tips returned, again to be displaced. 'Marry the Bewicke girl. Get a special license to marry the girl out of hand. Then you'll get the ruby and the money too. It's the only way you will. Hearken to the words of a wise man.'

'Mr Burton, although I am so unfortunate as to be a relative of yours, I have on a previous occasion been compelled to inform you that I decline to hold communication with, or afford you recognition of any sort or kind. I repeat that intimation now. With my reasons you are well acquainted; their name is Legion. Have the goodness, therefore, to let me pass.'

'But, my dear Guy, how about our uncle's money?'

'What about my uncle's money?'

'Our uncle's; forgive the plural, Guy. Hadn't we better come to some friendly arrangement while there still is time. You'll never get the ruby out of the Bewicke woman; I know her; she's a daughter of the horse-leech; she'll see you damned first. Relinquish the chase at once-you'll have to in a few hours, anyhow-and throw yourself on my magnanimity. There's a suggestion, Guy! Give it up; withdraw at once from what you know is a lost game, and I'll present you with a thousand pounds. Push the thing through to the bitter end, and you'll get nothing.'

'A thousand? – out of a quarter of a million?'

'It would be a gift, Guy-a free gift. It isn't every man who'd present a cousin who'd used him as you've used me with a free gift of a thousand pounds.'

'Mr Burton, if the money is to be yours, I'll have none of it. I'm not disposed to be beholden to your charity, nor to you in any way, as you are aware. If it is to be mine, you'll have none of it; I know your tastes, and will not pander to their gratification. Let me pass.'

'See how different we are. If the money is to be mine-and it will be; it's as good as mine already-I'll give you a few coppers every time we meet; I'll even send you some occasionally through the post. Good-night! My love to both the ladies!'

Mr Burton hailed a passing hansom and was driven off. Mr Holland continued his promenade, but had not gone far before he was accosted from behind.

'Mr Holland! Mr Holland!' exclaimed a female voice, as if the speaker were in distress for want of breath.

'Who's that?' He turned to see. A feminine figure was hastening towards him. 'This promises to be a night of adventure. Has that little hussy become humanised and changed her mind?'

The caller approached, holding her hand to her side.

'I wish to speak to you. You know me?'

They stood close to a lamp. Mr Holland looked her up and down.

'I seem to have seen you before. You are the person who rushed into the house as I came out.'

'That is it; I rushed-from him!'

She threw out her hand with a dramatic gesture, pointing down the street.

'From whom?'

'From your cousin-from Mr Horace Burton. Oh, he is a nice fellow! If I had stayed with him much longer I should have killed him; so to save myself from killing him I rushed away.'

'My cousin's concerns are not mine. I cannot assume responsibility for anything he may do or have done. You are mistaken if you suppose I can.'

'I am not mistaken; I know all that. You men are all the same; you hang together. If your own brother drives a woman into the gutter, you say it is no affair of yours; you pass on, you leave her there. Before you open your mouth I know you cannot be responsible for what he has done. But you can make me to be revenged on him.'

'Even that I cannot do.'

'You can! I say you can!'

The woman spoke, not loudly, but with such passion and intensity of meaning that Mr Holland was conscious of a curious sensation as he heard her. She was tall and thin, about thirty, not bad looking, but precisely the type of woman the ordinary rake, seeking for a victim, would, if he had his senses about him, have left severely alone. She was distinctly not a person to be trifled with. Apparently a foreigner, because, although she spoke fluent English, there was now and then a slight accent and a curious idiom which betrayed her. Written large all over her was what, to a practised eye, was unmistakable evidence that she was of the number of those who take all things seriously, even rakes. One could easily believe that to her a promise was a promise, though it came from the mouth of a man; and since there are men who regard promises made to women as a sort of persiflage, one would have thought that gentlemen who take that standpoint would carefully avoid an individual who eyed matters of the kind from such an inconveniently different point of view. Mr

Horace Burton, however, was in some respects an unusual specimen even of his class. Possibly the consciousness that he ran the risk of burning his own fingers by playing tricks with this particular fire was the lure which drew him on.

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