Marsh Richard

The Crime and the Criminal

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Marsh R.

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Содержание

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BOOK I. – THE CRIME

(The Story according to Mr. Thomas Tennant.)

CHAPTER I
THE OPEN DOOR

I ran down to Brighton for the Sunday. My wife's cousin, George Baxendale, was stopping there, with the Coopers. The wife and I were both to have gone. But our little Minna was very queer-feverish cold, or something-and Lucy did not like to leave her with the nurse. So I went down alone.

It was a fine day, for November. We drove over to Bramber-Jack Cooper and his wife, Baxendale, and I. When we got back to Regency Square it was pretty late. I was to go back by the 8.40. When we had dined I had to make quite a rush to catch the train. Jack and George both came up to see me off. As the Pullman carriages all seemed full, I got into the compartment of an ordinary first-class carriage.

"You'll be better in there," said Jack. "You'll have it to yourself."

I did, till just as the train was off. When the train had actually started, a woman came hurrying up the platform. A porter threw open the door of my carriage, and she got in. I let her have the seat by the door through which she had entered. I went to the other end of the compartment. I did not feel too much obliged to the porter who had shown her in. Although it was not a smoking carriage, as I had expected to have had it to myself, I had intended to smoke all the way to town. In fact, I was smoking at that moment. I hardly knew what to do. The train did not stop till it reached Victoria. There would be no opportunity of changing carriages. I did not relish the idea of not smoking, while I scarcely knew if I might venture to ask permission to smoke of the new-comer.

I made up my mind that I would. I had only just lighted a cigar. I had not looked at her as she came up the platform, to notice what kind of person she was. I had been too much engaged with Jack and George. I turned to her, raising my hat as I did so.

"May I ask if you object to-"

I had got so far; but I got no farther. She looked at me, and, as she did so, and I saw her face clearly, and met her eyes, my blood went cold in my veins.

The woman at the other end of the carriage was either Nelly, or Nelly's ghost. If she was her ghost, then she was the most substantial ghost I had ever heard of. And yet I had to stare at her for some moments in stupefied silence before I could believe that she was not a ghost. Before I could believe that she was genuine flesh and blood.

She struck me as being as much surprised at seeing me as I was at seeing her-and, at first at any rate, not much better pleased. We stared at each other as if we were moonstruck. She was the first to find her voice-she always was quicker, in every sense of the word, than I am.

"Tom!" she said. Then gave a sort of gasp.

"Nelly!" It was all I could do to get her name to pass my lips.

I am not going to enter into details as to what I said to her, and as to what she said to me. Nothing pleasant was said on either side. When a man meets a woman, even after a separation of seven years and more, who has wronged him as Ellen Howth, as she was named when I first knew

her, had wronged me, he is not likely to greet her with sugared phrases, especially when he has had every reason to suppose that his prayers have been answered, and that she is dead. When I saw that she had tricked me, for the thousand-and-first time, and that she was not dead, as I have written, my blood went cold. When it warmed, it was not with love for her.

We quarrelled, as we had done many and many a time before. She had been drinking. She was always bad enough when sober; when not sober she was infinitely worse. Every moment I expected her to assail me with personal violence. She threatened to, over and over again. I feared that there would be some outrageous scene in the railway carriage. Fearing this, and the scandal which such a thing would necessarily entail, I formed a wild resolution. I determined that, even while the train continued to fly through the air, I would leave the compartment in which she was, and at any and every risk seek refuge in an adjoining one.

The resolution was no sooner formed than I proceeded to put it into execution. There was no necessity to lower the window; the handle was inside the carriage. Turning the handle, I rose from my seat. Whether she mistook or designed to frustrate my purpose, I cannot say. No sooner did I rise, than she came rushing at me. The violence of her assault took me by surprise. The handle escaping from my grasp, the door swung back upon its hinges. She had me by the shoulders. I endeavoured to wrest myself free. There was a struggle. In the struggle, unconsciously certainly to me, we must have reversed our positions, because, suddenly loosing her grasp of me, before I had the faintest suspicion of what was about to happen, she had fallen backwards through the open carriage door, out into the night, and the train was going at express speed to town.

It was some moments before I realised what had actually occurred. When I did do so, I sat down on the seat in a sort of stupor. I was roused from it by the banging of the carriage door. It was being swung backwards and forwards by the momentum of the train. I shut it, almost mechanically; as I did so I noticed that the glass was shattered. It might have been broken by the banging of the door, or she might have broken it by striking it in her frantic efforts to clutch at something.

What was I to do? My eyes wandered to the alarm-bell. Should I ring it and stop the train? To what purpose? She might not be dead. Indeed, the probabilities were that she was, at least, not quite dead. In such a case I knew her well enough to be aware that nothing was more likely than that she would at once denounce me as her attempted murderer. Then in what a plight I should be! To the best of my knowledge and belief she had brought her fate upon herself. I had nothing to do with it. Undoubtedly, I had not opened the door to hurl her through. It is easy enough after the event to say that at all hazards I ought at once to have stopped the train, and explained what had occurred. I should have done so had I been able to foresee the events which followed. I should have been willing to have given a great deal to have saved myself from bearing what I actually have borne. But, at the moment, I foresaw nothing. My wits were woolgathering. I was confronted by the thought that, in face of her allegations of my guilt, my protestations of innocence might avail but little. I had suffered too much on her account already to have any desire to suffer more.

As I sat there thinking, something struck me a severe blow in the face. It was a piece of glass from the broken window which had been loosened, and which had been forced out of its place by the pressure of the wind. I lowered the window, lest the remaining fragments should also be driven from their places. The sharp edge of the piece of glass had come into contact with my cheek. It had cut me to the bone. I put up my handkerchief to stop the bleeding. As I did so I noticed that my overcoat seemed to have been torn open in the struggle; the top button appeared to be missing.

The blood flowed freely from the open wound. The piece of glass seemed to have cut me like a knife. My handkerchief was quite inadequate to stop the flow. It was becoming soaked with blood. While I was wondering what I should do if the bleeding did not shortly cease, the train drew up at Victoria.

The distance between Brighton and town had never before seemed to me to be so short.

CHAPTER II
THE MAN WITH THE SILK HANDKERCHIEF

Now that I had reached Victoria I did not know what to do. I continued to sit in a sort of bewilderment, wondering. Should I speak to the guard, or should I not? Should I walk out of the station as if nothing had happened? I was, or it seemed to me that I was, between the devil and the deep sea. Whichever path I took was the path, not of safety but of danger.

While I sat hesitating and apparently incapable of anything but hesitation, the carriage door was opened. I supposed that, seeing me, a porter had opened it for me to alight. But it was not a porter who stood there looking in-looking in, as it struck me, with eager curiosity. It was an individual in a top hat and an overcoat ornamented with fur cuffs and collar. Even in my state of confusion, and in that imperfect light, I was at once struck by the fact that both hat and overcoat were the worse for wear. The face under the hat was also the worse for wear. The cheeks were ruddy, with a ruddiness which suggested alcohol. The moustache and whiskers were too black for nature. The eyes, which were at once both impudent and shifty, in colour almost matched the whiskers. There was something about the man which reminded me of some one I had seen before. Who it was, at the moment, I could not think.

He addressed me with what he probably intended for an ingratiating smile, "This is Victoria." I told him I was aware of it. "All get out here." I added that I was also aware of that.

His eyes, which had been travelling round and round the carriage in an eager, searching fashion, which, for some reason, made me curiously uneasy, finally rested on my face. He at once noticed the blood-stained handkerchief which I still was holding to my cheek.

"Nose bleeding?"

"No; I've cut my cheek."

I don't know why I sat there speaking to the man as I did.

"Permit me to offer you my handkerchief; yours seems soaked with blood."

Taking out a red silk handkerchief, the corner of which had been protruding from the outside pocket of his overcoat, he held it out to me. I was reluctant to take it. One is reluctant to accept the loan of a silk handkerchief from a perfect stranger, more especially, perhaps, from the sort of stranger he appeared to be. But what was I to do? I was in want of a handkerchief. My own was worse than useless. It was reeking wet. Great gouts of blood were commencing to drop from it. My cheek was bleeding as profusely as ever. I was beginning to wonder if a blood-vessel had been severed. One cannot buy handkerchiefs on a Sunday night. I should have to borrow from some one. So I borrowed from him. Unwillingly enough, I admit. As I applied his handkerchief to my cheek, turning, I threw my own through the open window at my side.

He rushed forward, as if to stay my arm. He was too late. The handkerchief had gone. "Good God!" he exclaimed, "what have you done?"

He seemed unnecessarily excited, considering that, in any case, the handkerchief was mine.

"I've thrown it away. You don't suppose that, in that condition, I could carry it home." He looked at me with his eager eyes.

"Was your name upon it?"

"I believe so; why?"

Leaning over, he laid his hand upon my shoulder. He spoke in a tone of voice which, in spite of myself, sent a thrill all over me.

"Man, supposing they find it? It may be a question of life or death. Let's get out of this-come!"

It was time that we left the carriage. I had noticed a porter staring in, as if wondering why we remained its occupants. But that was no reason why the stranger, thrusting his arm through mine,

should have almost dragged me out on to the platform. As he continued to cling to me when we were on the platform, I remonstrated-"Be so good as to release my arm."

Paying no attention to my request, he made as if to hurry me on.

"Come to a little place I know near here. I am a bit of a doctor. I'll soon make that cut of yours all right."

I did not budge. I repeated my request-

"Be so good as to release my arm. I am obliged to you for your suggestion. I, however, prefer to go straight home."

"Quite right; there is no place like home. Let's go and find a cab."

Not at all nonplussed, he again made as if to hasten on. I still declined to budge.

"Thank you. I can perform that office for myself. If you will give me your address, I will forward you your handkerchief. Or, if you prefer it, I will deposit with you its value."

"Sir, I am a gentleman." He drew himself up with an assumption of dignity which was so overdone as to be ludicrous. The two last words he repeated-"A gentleman!"

"I do not doubt it. It is I who may not be a gentleman."

"I, sir, can tell a gentleman when I see one." He laid a stress upon the personal pronoun, as if he wished me to infer that such clearness of vision might be a personal peculiarity. "I will give you my address in the cab."

Willing to humour him, I suffered him to stroll up the platform at my side. I held out my hand to him when we reached a hansom.

"Your address?"

"I said I would give you my address in the cab." Leaning towards me, he spoke in that curious tone which had impressed me so unpleasantly in the railway carriage. "Get into the cab, man; I travelled from Brighton in the next compartment to yours."

I was foolish. I ought, even at the eleventh hour, to have addressed myself to an official, to have made a clean breast of it, to have told him of the accident, the unavoidable accident, which had happened on the line. I know that now too well. I knew it, dimly, then. But, at the moment, I was weak. The fellow's manner increased my state of mental confusion. In a sense, his words overwhelmed me. I yielded to him. I got into the cab. He placed himself at my side.

"Where shall I tell the man to drive?" he asked.

"Anywhere."

"Piccadilly Circus!" he shouted. The cab was off.

We sat in silence, I in a state of mind which I should find some difficulty in making plain. I will not attempt it. I will only say that I should have dearly liked to have taken my friend, the stranger, by the scuff of his neck and to have thrown him out into the street. I did not dare.

When we were clear of the traffic I asked him, in a voice which I scarcely knew to be my own, it was so husky and dry-

"What did you mean by saying that you travelled from Brighton in the next compartment to mine?"

"Mean? My dear sir, I meant what I said. It was a coincidence-nothing more." He spoke lightly; impudently even. I felt incapable of pressing him for a more precise explanation. He added, as a sort of afterthought, "I'm a detective."

I turned to him with a start. "A detective?"

He pretended to be surprised by my surprise.

"What's the matter, my dear sir?" He paused. Then, with a sneer, "I'm not that sort. I'm the respectable sort. I'm a private detective, sir. I make delicate inquiries for persons of position and of means." He emphasised "means." "Have you a cigar?"

"I gave him one; he proceeded to light it. I was conscious that, since I had admitted him to a share of the cab, a change had taken place in his bearing. It was not only familiar, it was positively

brutal. Yet, strange though it may appear-and I would point out that nothing is so common as that sort of wisdom which enables us to point out the folly of each other's behaviour-I found myself unable to resent it.

"I've been down to Brighton on business; to make inquiries about a woman."

"A woman?"

"A woman who is missing-women are missing now and then-Louise O'Donnel. I suppose you never happen to have heard the name?"

"Louise O'Donnel?" I wondered what he meant; there was meaning in his tone. Indeed, every word he uttered, every gesture he made, seemed pregnant with meaning. The more I saw of him, the more uncomfortable I became. "I do not remember to have heard the name Louise O'Donnel."

"Yes, Louise O'Donnel. You're quite sure you never heard it?"

"So far as I remember, never."

"Perhaps your memory is at fault; one never knows." He puffed at his cigar-or, rather, he puffed at my cigar. "I don't think I'll give you my address. I'll call for the handkerchief at yours. What is your address?"

I hesitated. I was quite aware that to give him my address would be to commit a further act of folly. But, at the same time, I did not see how I could avoid giving it him without a row or worse.

"My office is in Austin Friars?"

"Austin Friars? You don't happen to have a card about you?"

I did happen to have one of my business cards in my letter-case. Taking it out, I gave it to him. He looked at it askance, reading the name on it out loud.

"Thomas Tennant. Rather an alliterative kind of name. Almost like a pseudonym." I sat in silence. "However, there may be some one about with such a name." He slipped the card into his waistcoat pocket. "I shall have pleasure, Mr. Tennant, in calling on you, for my silk handkerchief, in Austin Friars; possibly to-morrow, possibly next week, or the week after-but that I shall call for it, sooner or later, you may rest assured." He looked at me with a grin. "Now that we have transacted that little piece of business, I don't think there is any necessity for me to inflict my company upon you any longer. I may as well get out."

I was thankful for the prospect of a prompt deliverance. But I was not to be rid of him so easily, as his next words showed. He was drumming with his finger-tips on the front of the cab.

"By the way, you were good enough to mention something about a deposit for my handkerchief. I think that, after all, I will trouble you for one."

I advanced my hand towards my pocket.

"With pleasure. If you have no objection, I will buy the handkerchief right out at a liberal price?"

His reply was a sneer.

"Thank you; I am obliged; the handkerchief is not for sale. I prize it too greatly-as a present from my late lamented greatgrandmother. But something on deposit I don't mind."

"How much shall we say?"

"Say-we'll say ten pounds."

"Ten pounds!" I stared at him. The fellow's impudence was increasing. "You are jesting."

He turned on me quite savagely-his black eyes glared.

"Jesting? What do you mean by saying I am jesting?"

"I shall certainly deposit with you no sum approaching ten pounds."

He continued to regard me as if he were taking my measure. I met his glance unflinchingly. I wished him to understand that I was not quite the simpleton he seemed to take me for. I think he grasped something of my meaning. His tone became sullen.

"Make it five pounds, then."

"I am more likely to make it five shillings. However, under the peculiar circumstances, as I don't know what I should have done without your handkerchief, I don't mind going as far as half a sovereign, which is about four times its value."

His reply, though scarcely a direct answer to my words, still was sufficiently plain.

"You and I, Mr. Tennant, will spend the night together."

"Again, I ask you, what do you mean by that?"

The fellow smoothed his clean-shaven chin and grinned.

"I mean, Mr. Tennant, that I am beginning to suspect that it may be my painful duty to thrust myself on your society until I have ascertained what became of the woman who got into your compartment at Brighton, but who was not in it when we reached Victoria."

A creepy, crawly feeling went all over me. This came of not having told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, directly the accident had happened. Already I was suspected of the worst. And by such a fellow! Already, to a certain extent, I was in his power.

I did not give him the five pounds he asked. I did not make quite such an idiot of myself as that. But I gave him much more than his ancient rag was worth. He rattled the coins, gold coins, together in the palms of his hands; he chuckled at the sound of them; he called out to the cabman, "Stop!" Standing on the pavement, he took off his hat to me with a sweeping flourish, saying, with a laugh-

"The handkerchief itself-that priceless relic of my late lamented greatgrandmother! – I will call for at your office in Austin Friars."

CHAPTER III
THE NAME ON THE SCRAP OF PAPER

I was quite conscious, as I drove home the rest of the way alone, that I had made of myself, doubly and trebly, a fool. But, if possible, still worse remained behind.

How the African gentleman, of whom I read the other day, manages with 999 wives, I, for one, am at a loss to understand. When a man is on good terms with one wife-and I had rather be on good terms with one wife than on bad terms with 999-occasions do arise on which he experiences little difficulties. For instance, I had been in the habit of telling my wife everything-or, perhaps, it would be more correct to write, practically everything. It would have been well for me if there had been no reservations. As a matter of fact, I had said nothing about two or three little incidents of my pre-nuptial existence. Notably, I had said nothing about Ellen Howth-though that, perhaps, was rather more than an incident.

The result was that when I reached home I was in something of a quandary. The wife plied me with the usual questions, to which I was unable to supply the accustomed copious and satisfactory answers. She wished to know how my face came to be cut in that terrible fashion. I rigged up some cock-and-bull story about a broken window-a window had been broken, but not altogether in the manner I led her to infer. Then she found that a button was missing from my overcoat. Another cock-and-bull story had to be manufactured to account for that. It did not require a woman's keen eyes to discover that there was something amiss about my general demeanour-that I "wore a worried look." In endeavouring to satisfactorily account for that I blundered fearfully. We went to bed with a shade of coolness perceptible on either side. I felt that I had been ill-used generally, and Lucy felt that I had ill-used her.

The wife had bound up my face with a sticking-plaster. In the morning the sticking-plaster was much in evidence. I had not had a good night's rest. I should like to know who would have done, after my adventures of the evening! I got up, not so much in a bad temper as oppressed with gloom. Lucy, as a matter of course, plied me with her questions all over again. We had a fencing match while dressing. The match was continued at breakfast, till the buttons almost came off the foils. I had resolved, in the small hours of the morning, to screw my courage to the sticking point, and to make a clean breast of it to some one. I told myself that the first plunge would be the worst, when I had taken that all would be well. But, by the time I started for the City, I had become so aggrieved with Lucy that my resolution, as it were, had assumed a different hue. It was irresolution again.

I bought all the papers. I searched them to learn if anything or any one had been found upon the Brighton line. I did not see very well how there could have been, in time for the fact to have been printed in the morning papers. But a morbid anxiety constrained me to the search. Pilbeam, who always travels with me to town, displayed almost as much interest in the papers as I did. He wanted to know why I had bought them. He became facetious in his way-which is his way, and, thank Providence, his way only. I listened to Pilbeam's facetiæ while I was mentally asking myself if it would be better-for me-for her to be found living or dead. In the one case I knew that she would denounce me at once to the police, and I should sleep that night in gaol-and then, what could I say or do? In the other, the odds might be slightly in my favour. Under the circumstances, I naturally enjoyed Pilbeam's jokes. They were so funny, and so suited to my mood.

That was a dreadful day. There was no business doing. Had there been I might have been saved from thinking-and from drinking. As a rule, I never drink anything in town. But that day I had to. I was too invertebrate to keep going without it.

Soon after midday I was sitting in one of the City bars-one of those in which men play chess and draughts and dominoes. I was leaning on one of the little marble tables scribbling aimlessly upon a sheet of paper. Some one, standing in front of me, addressed me by my name. I looked up.

It was a man with whom I had occasionally done business-a man named Townsend, a tall, well-built fellow, with what one sometimes hears called the "beauty of the devil." He had always been something of a mystery to me. Although I had done a good deal for him at one time or another, he had never given me an address at which, in case of necessity, I could find him. His reference, which hitherto had been a sufficient one, had been a City bank. He used to give me instructions, and then would call at the office to see what I had made of them. He certainly seemed to get hold of reliable information, principally about mining securities; but that he was no City man I was persuaded. There was about him an indefinable something which irresistibly suggested the West End. He struck me as some butterfly of fashion with opportunities and tastes for punting of various kinds. That he confined his transactions to me I never for a moment believed, and in spite of his being the best dressed and the handsomest man I ever saw, whenever he gave me anything like a large line, before I operated I was always careful to have an eye for cover.

"I've been looking for you," he said, as I glanced up at him. "They told me at the office I should probably find you here. I want you to do a little deal for me." He dropped into a chair on the other side of the table. "What's this you've been scribbling here; anything private?"

He referred to the piece of paper on which I had been allowing my pencil to scrawl, I knew not what. "It's nothing; only rubbish."

He picked the piece of paper up; I was watching him as he did so. As his eyes fell on it, not a little to my surprise a most singular change took place in his countenance. Although his face was clean shaven, and, therefore, as one would have thought, likely to give visual evidence of any passing shades of feeling, it had always seemed to me the most inscrutable of masks. Neither success nor failure seemed to make the slightest difference to him. His expression was ever the same. The change which now took place in it therefore, was all the more surprising. In an instant there came into his face a look of the most unmistakable terror. His eyes dilated, his jaw dropped open. He sat staring at the paper as if paralysed by horror.

"What the devil's this?" he gasped, when his attitude and his continued silence were beginning to make me conscious of discomfort, and, goodness knows, I had been, and was, uncomfortable enough without his help!

I had not the faintest notion what it was which had had on him so singular an effect. I took the paper out of his momentarily nerveless hands. So soon as I saw what was on it, I too had something like a fit of the horrors. "Goodness gracious!" I exclaimed.

It showed in what sort of groove my mind had been working. Unconsciously I had been scribbling the name of the woman whom the stranger, when we had been together in the cab the night before, had told me he had been searching for in Brighton. There it was, "Louise O'Donnel, Louise O'Donnel," scrawled all over the paper, perhaps fifty times.

"What an extraordinary thing," I murmured.

And, indeed, it seemed to me to be a very extraordinary thing; and by no means a pleasant thing either. Very much the other way. It showed what I was capable of doing without being aware of it. I did not like it at all.

By the time I had regained some of my composure Mr. Townsend appeared to have regained some of his. He had called the waiter, from whom he was ordering brandy. I ordered brandy too-a shillingsworth; what they give you for sixpence would have had no effect upon me. We both drank before anything was said. Then Mr. Townsend looked at me over the top of his glass.

"May I ask, Mr. Tennant, what you know about Louise O'Donnel?"

The effect which the discovery of that name upon the sheet of paper-my sheet of paper-had had upon me was sufficiently capable of explanation. Only too capable. Why it should have affected Townsend surpassed my comprehension. I hardly knew what to answer when he put his question.

"Know! I know nothing."

"Is that so? Then how came you to write the name upon that scrap of paper?"

"I know no more than the man in the moon."

"Indeed. Then are you suggesting that its presence there is an illustration of the new kind of force which promises to be the craze-telepathic writing, don't they call it?"

This was said with a sneer. Something about the tone, the manner in which it was uttered, reminded me forcibly of some one I had heard quite recently elsewhere. The resemblance was so strong that it came to me with the force of a sudden shock. To whom could it be? It came to me in a flash; the stranger of the night before. Directly he had appeared at the carriage door he had reminded me of some one. Now I knew of whom. He was sitting in front of me at that moment-Mr. Townsend. His tone was the stranger's, his manner was the stranger's; even his face, in some strange fashion, was the stranger's too. The stranger wore side-whiskers and a moustache, he was older, he was not nearly so good-looking, he lacked Mr. Townsend's peculiar air of polish, but in spite of the differences which existed between them, there was the resemblance too. The more I stared-and I did stare-the more the resemblance grew. Mr. Townsend leaned towards me across the table. The attitude was the stranger's.

"Are you trying to think of where you heard the name before? I see that you have heard it."

"Yes; last night."

"Last night!"

He was holding the glass in which the waiter had brought his brandy in his hand. As he echoed my words he brought it down upon the marble-topped table with a crash. It was strange that it was not splintered.

"Last night, as I came from Brighton."

Mr. Townsend must have been in an oddly clumsy mood. As I spoke it seemed to me that he deliberately knocked his glass off the table on to the floor. When he bent over it, it was to find it shivered into fragments. From the waiter, who came to remove the broken remnants, he ordered a fresh supply of brandy. I had my glass replenished too.

"Have you a double, Mr. Townsend, moving about the world?"

He was raising his glass to his lips when I put the question. He spoke before he drank. "A double? What on earth do you mean?"

"Because it was from the lips of your double I heard the name of Louise O'Donnel."

"My double?" He put down his glass, untasted.

"I came up with him in the same train last night from Brighton."

"You came up with him in the same train last night from Brighton? With whom?"

"Your double."

His face was absolutely ghastly. He had gone white to the lips, and a curiously unnatural, sickly white. I could not make him out at all. I suspected that he could not make me out either. I know that something about him had for me, just then, a dreadful sort of fascination.

"I do not know, Mr. Tennant, if you are enjoying a little jest at my expense. I am not conscious of having a double, nor am I conscious of having come up with you last night in the same train from Brighton. By what train did you travel?"

"By the 8.40 express."

"By the train, that is, which leaves Brighton at 8.40?"

"Yes; and which arrives in town at ten."

Unless I was mistaken, a look of distinct relief passed over his face.

"Oh, then, you certainly never came from Brighton with me. It occurs to me, Mr. Tennant, that you are not looking well. You almost look as if you had had a recent serious shock. I trust that it is only my fancy."

He looked at me with eager, searching eyes, which reminded me very acutely of the stranger's.

"I am not feeling very well to-day, and that's a fact."

"You don't look very well. By the by, how came this double of mine to mention the name?"

Mr. Townsend nodded towards the sheet of paper, almost, as it seemed to me, as if he were unwilling to pronounce the name which was upon it.

"He merely mentioned that he had been down to Brighton to look for a woman named Louise O'Donnel."

Mr. Townsend's glass came down on to the table with the same startled gesture as before. If he was not careful, he would break a second one. And, since he glanced our way, so the waiter seemed to think.

"Been looking for her? What had he been doing that for?"

"That is more than I can tell you."

Mr. Townsend sat and stared at me as if doubting whether I spoke the truth.

"May I ask you, in my turn, what you know about this mysterious Louise O'Donnel?"

He looked down, and then up at me. He smiled, his smile striking me as being more than a little forced.

"That is the funny part of it. I, too, know nothing of Louise O'Donnel-no more than you do."

"It seems odd that you should take so great an interest in a person of whom you know nothing."

"Does not the same remark apply to you?"

"Not at all. I heard the name mentioned last night, casually, for the first time. It seems to have lingered in my memory, and I appear to have scribbled it, in a fit of abstraction, and, certainly, quite unconsciously."

Taking out a cigar, Mr. Townsend commenced to light it with an appearance of indifference which was, perhaps, a trifle too pronounced.

"Very odd, very odd indeed, that both you and I should seem to evince so much interest in a person whose name we have merely heard casually mentioned. It occurred to me that, when you found the name confronting you, you appeared-shall I say startled? – as if it or its owner was connected in your mind with disagreeable associations. Perhaps, however, that was simply a consequence of the general ill-health from which you say you suffer. And, I must say myself, that you don't look well. I hope that, next time I see you, you will be better."

He carried it off with an air. But I did not believe him. I felt persuaded that he knew more of Louise O'Donnel than he chose to confess. What he knew was more than I could say. But I felt equally persuaded that he wished that he knew less. He went off without saying anything further about the little deal which he had said that he wanted me to do for him. It had, apparently, escaped his recollection. I, too, had forgotten it till after he had gone. I had never felt less inclined for business in my life.

Scarcely had I returned to the office than the door opened, and, wholly unannounced, the stranger of the night before came in. He might, almost, have been waiting and watching for my return.

CHAPTER IV
BLACKMAIL

Again I was struck by the man's resemblance to Mr. Townsend. It was obvious even in the way in which he advanced towards me across the room. It was almost as if Townsend had slipped on some costume of a masquerade, and reappeared in it to play tricks with me. The fellow, going to the centre of the room, crossed his arms, in theatrical fashion, across his chest, and stood and stared at me-glared at me would be the more correct expression. Not caring to meet his glances, and to return him glare for glare, as if we were two madmen trying to outstare each other, I fumbled with the papers on my table.

"You have called for that handkerchief of yours? I am obliged to you for the loan of it; but I had to leave home for town so early this morning that my wife was not able to get it ready in time for me to bring it with me. If you will give me your address I will see that it is sent to you through the post."

There was a considerable interval before he answered me-an interval during which he continued to glare, and I to fumble with my papers. When he did speak, it was in one of those portentous and assumed bass voices, which one inevitably connects with the proverbial "Villain at the Vic."

"I have not called for my handkerchief."

"Then, may I ask to what I am indebted for the pleasure of your presence here. I have only just come in, and I have some rather pressing business which I must do."

"Your business has nothing to do with me."

"Probably not; but it has with me."

He came a step nearer, still keeping his arms crossed upon his chest. This time he spoke in a sort of a hiss. It seemed obvious that at some period of his career he must have had something to do with the stage.

"Do you not know what has brought me here. Does your own conscience not tell you, man?"

I began to suspect that he had been drinking. I looked up at him. He was eyeing me with a scowl which, to say the least of it, was scarcely civil.

"How should I know what has brought you here, if it is not a desire to regain possession of your property? I take it that you hardly intend to suggest a further deposit."

I do not think that he altogether relished the allusion. His scowl became less theatrical, and a good deal more natural. He seemed, for a moment, to be at a loss as to what to say. Then a word came from between his lips which startled me.

"Murderer!"

That was rather more than I could stand. I sprang to my feet.

"What do you mean, sir, by addressing me like that? Are you mad?"

My assumption of indignation did not seem to impress him in the least. He returned to the basso profundo.

"Have you seen the evening papers?"

At the question something began to swim before my eyes. I had to lean against the edge of the table.

"No; what is there in the evening papers to interest me?"

"I will show you."

He began to unfold a paper which he took from his pocket. Laying the open sheet before me on the table, he pointed to a column of leaded type.

"Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest that, if you can."

The heading of the column was enough for me. It was headed, "Tragedy on the Brighton Line." I could read no farther. I dropped down into my chair again. The stranger continued to regard me with accusatory eyes.

"What's the matter with you? You don't seem well."

"I've not been feeling well all day."

"So I should imagine. Else you had been more or less than human. Since you are not able to read the paper yourself, at which I am not surprised, I will read it for you. The paper says that the body of a woman has been found on the up side of the Brighton line, just before Three Bridges Station."

"Dead?"

"Dead-murdered."

I was speechless, tongue-tied. The whole hideous folly of which I had been guilty rose in front of me, and paralysed my brain. I saw, too clearly, and too late, the dreadful nature of the error I had made. I realised the awful something which, owing to my own cowardice, now stared me in the face. It might have been bad enough if I had played the man; but it would have been better than this.

The stranger kept his eyes fixed on my countenance. I have no doubt that on it was seen some of the horror which racked me. His voice sounded to me like an echo from far away.

"That explains how it was that I saw a woman get into your carriage at Brighton, and that she was not there when we reached Victoria. You had left her on the line."

I made an effort to shake off the stupor which oppressed me. It was out of the question that I should continue to sit there passively, and allow this fellow to jump, in his own fashion, at his own conclusions. Better late than never! There might still be time for me to play the man. I took out my handkerchief to wipe away the moisture from my brow. I looked at the man in front of me.

"May I ask you for your name, sir?"

"My name is immaterial."

"Excuse me, but it is not immaterial. You thrust yourself upon me last night, you thrust yourself upon me again to-day. If I am to have anything to say to you, I must know with whom I am dealing."

"You are dealing with the witness of your crime."

"That is not the case. I have been guilty of no crime."

"Why do you lie to me? Don't you know that I could go straight from this room and hang you?" He raised his voice in a manner which told upon my nerves. I looked furtively about the room. I had to wipe the moisture from my brow again.

"Is it necessary that you should speak so loudly, sir! Do you wish to be overheard? There are clerks in the adjoining room."

"Then send them away; or don't try to hoodwink me-me!" He struck his hand against his chest, accentuating the second "me," as if he were an individual altogether separate and apart. "If I were to follow the promptings of my bosom, I should go at once to the police, and leave you to dangle on the gallows."

"You are under a misapprehension, sir. I give you my word of honour that you are. I may have been guilty-I have been guilty-of an error of judgment, but not of a crime."

"Do you call murder an error of judgment?"

"There has been no murder-I swear it!"

He held up his hand to check me. "Let me tell you how much I know about the business before you go out of your way to lie to me." Seating himself on the edge of my writing-table, he brought his right hand down upon it now and then to emphasise his words. "Directly the train started I heard two voices in the compartment next to mine-in your compartment. The voices were raised in quarrelling. I had, by the purest accident, seen a woman get into your compartment just as we were leaving Brighton, and I knew that the voices were yours and hers. The quarrelling got

worse and worse. I feared every moment that something dreadful would happen. I was just going to sound the alarm, when there was silence. Immediately after a door banged-the door of your carriage. I was afraid that something dreadful had happened. And yet, I told myself, if nothing had happened I should look foolish if I stopped the train. Unable to make up my mind what to do, I did nothing. When on reaching Victoria I made a bolt for your carriage and found that the woman was not there, I saw that my worst fears were realised. Then I understood the sudden silence, and the banging of the door."

"She had fallen out."

"Fallen out?"

"Yes."

"Who opened the door for her to fall?"

"I did." Seeing the slip I had made I endeavoured to correct myself. "That is, I opened the door with the intention of leaving the carriage, in order to escape her violence. In trying to prevent my leaving she herself fell out."

"If, as you say, the whole thing was an accident, why did you not sound the alarm?"

"I ought to have done; I know I ought to have done. I can only say that it was all so sudden and so unexpected that I lost my head."

"To whom have you mentioned a word about the-accident, until this moment I have charged you with your crime?"

"To no one. My reticence, unfortunately, is the error of judgment to which I referred."

"You call that an error of judgment! Then, let me tell you, it was an error of judgment of a somewhat peculiar kind. A mere outsider would say that reticence was the best course you could possibly pursue."

The fellow's way of looking at the matter made things look blacker and blacker. The moisture accumulated upon my brow so fast that I could scarcely keep it from trickling down my cheeks.

"It might have been the best course to pursue had I been guilty, but I am not guilty; I swear it. I am as innocent as you are. It was my misfortune that there were peculiar circumstances connected with the matter which I wished to keep private. I feared to be misunderstood."

"You were not misunderstood by me, I do assure you. I understood, and understand you only too well. The point is that you still seem unable to understand me. You still appear to be unable to realise that I was in the next compartment to yours, that the divisions between the compartments are thin, and that you shouted at the top of your voice. I distinctly heard you threaten to kill the woman-yes, and more than once, and in a tone of voice which sounded very much as if you meant it."

He was wrong, and he was right. That was the worst of it. Undoubtedly, there had been strong language used on either side, uncommonly strong language. A listener who was not acquainted with all the circumstances might have supposed that some of it was meant. I can only protest that, so far as I was concerned, I had never meant what I had said half so much as she had meant what she said. No, nor a quarter as much. Nor, for the matter of that, an eighth. She had aggravated me to such an extent that I undoubtedly had said something-and perhaps in rather a loud tone of voice-to the effect that I should like to kill her. But I said it metaphorically. Every one who knows me knows that in practice I am the least bloodthirsty man alive. I never could kill a cat. Even when there are kittens to drown I have to leave them to my wife. Instead of the woman having killed herself I would infinitely rather she had killed me.

But it was no use trying to explain these things to the man in front of me. I saw that plainly. So far as he was concerned, my guilt was as if it were written in the skies. Taking up a position in front of the fire, he assumed what he possibly intended to be a judicial air, but which struck me as being a mixture of truculence with impudence.

"When a man threatens to kill a woman, and she is killed immediately afterwards, one asks who killed her. I do not ask, simply because I know. My impulse is to let the world know too. When I do get into the witness-box my evidence will hang you."

I thought it possible, nay, I thought it probable. If I had only made a clean breast of it when the scoundrel had first accosted me the night before!

"The thing now is, what am I to do?"

"I should have thought," I gasped, "that the thing now is what am I to do."

"Nothing of the sort. You have placed yourself outside the pale of consideration. It is myself I must consider." He said this with a lordly wave of the hand.

Crushed though I was, I found his manner a little trying.

"It is my misfortune that my ears are ever open to the promptings of mercy."

"I had not previously supposed that a characteristic of that kind was a misfortune."

"It is a misfortune, and one of the gravest kind. It is one, moreover, against which I have had to battle my whole life long. The truly fortunate man is he who can always mete out justice. But the still, small voice of mercy I have ever heard. It is a weakness, but it is mine own. My obvious duty to society would be to take prompt steps to rid it of such a man as you."

That was a pleasant sort of observation to have addressed to one.

"It strikes me that you take rather a strained view of your duty, sir."

"That would strike you. It doesn't me. But I will be frank with you. Why should I not be frank-although you are not frank with me. Though perhaps I can afford to be frank better than you can."

He threw his ancient overcoat, faced with ancient mock astrachan, wide open. He tilted his ancient silk hat on to the back of his head. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his ancient trousers.

"The plain fact is, Mr. Tennant, that I am a victim of the present commercial depression."

He looked it, every inch of him. Though, at the moment, I scarcely cared to tell him so.

"The depreciation in landed property, and in various securities, has hit me hard."

"To what securities do you allude?"

I fancy he made an effort at recollection, and that the effort failed.

"To South American securities, and others. But I need not particularise." He repeated the former lordly gesture with his hand. "The truth is that my income is not only seriously crippled, but that I am, at this present moment, actually in want of ready cash." I believed him, without his protestations. I judged from his looks. "Now, if I do something for you, will you do something for me?"

"What will you do for me?"

"Keep silence. I am not compelled to blurt out all I know. If I show mercy to you, what return will you make me for my kindness?"

I did not quite like his way of putting it. But that I had to stomach.

"What return will you require?"

He looked at me; then round the room; then back again to me. He was evidently making up his mind as to what it would be advisable for him to say.

"I should require you to make me an immediate, and, of course, temporary advance of £100-in gold."

"A hundred pounds? I am not exactly a poor man; on the other hand, I am emphatically not a rich one. To me a hundred pounds are a hundred pounds. Say ten."

"Say ten! I'll be hanged if I say ten! And you'll be hanged if you try to make me."

"Twenty."

"Nor twenty."

"I'm afraid I could not go beyond thirty."

"Then the discussion is at an end."

"Suppose-I only say suppose, mind-that I was able to find fifty."

"I won't take a penny less than a hundred pounds-not one centime."

"Would you undertake to go abroad?"

"Go abroad! I'll be shot if I would. You might go abroad. I have my business to attend to. You forget that I am a private detective in a very extensive way."

"For how long will you keep silence?"

"A month."

"Then, in that case, I must decline to advance you even so much as a hundred pence."

"Two months."

"No-nor in that case either."

"Three months."

"If you will undertake to keep silence until you are compelled to speak, I will give your suggestion my most careful consideration."

"Give it your most careful consideration! Oh, will you? It strikes me, Mr. Tennant, that you are as far from understanding me as ever. If you don't put the money down upon that table at once I go to the police."

He straightened his hat. He began to button up his overcoat. He looked, and, it struck me, sounded as though he meant it. I hesitated. If the woman who hesitates is lost, so also is the man. I was lost before; I was lost again, because I hesitated. I was conscious that still the bold part was the better part; that I should be wise to go to the authorities and tell them the whole plain truth, although so tardily. I knew that this man was a mean bloodsucker; that he would spend my money, and then come to me for more and more, and, after all, would hang me if he could. But I dared not face the prospect of being handed, there and then, to the police; of being delivered by him into their clutches, with his evidence to hang me. I wanted to see my wife, my child, again. I wanted, if I could, to prepare them for the cloud which was about to burst in storm upon their heads. I wanted breathing space; time to look about me; to make ready. I wanted to postpone the falling of the hammer. So I gave him the hundred pounds which he demanded, bitterly conscious all the while of what a fool I was for giving it.

He would not take my cheque. Nothing would do for him but gold. I had to send a clerk to the bank to get it. He thrust the washleather bag in which it came, as it was, into his pocket. He was good enough to say that he would not insult me by counting it; he would treat me as one gentleman should always treat another. Then, with a triumphant grin, and an airy raising of his hat, he left me to enjoy my reflections-if I could.

CHAPTER V
THE FACE IN THE DARKNESS

I did not go home even when he had left me, though shortly afterwards I started to. As I was going along Throgmorton Street I met MacCulloch. He was jubilant. He had pulled off a big stake over some race or other-upon my word, I forget what. It was one which had been run that day. He asked me to have a small bottle with him. While we were having it three other fellows joined us. Then MacCulloch asked the lot of us to go and dine with him. I knew that I ought not to, but I didn't care. I seemed to care for nothing. The moral side of me seemed dead, or sleeping. I was aware that, instead of plunging into dissipation with MacCulloch and his friends, duty, not to speak of common sense, required that, without further loss of time, I should prepare Lucy for the worst. Instead of following the path of duty, I went to dine, and that without sending to Lucy a word of warning not to wait for me. When the usually good husband does misbehave himself, it strikes me that he is worse than the usually bad one. I speak from what seems to me to be the teachings of my own experience.

We went down, all of us, in two hansoms to the West End. I rode upon MacCulloch's knees. We began by playing billiards at some place in Jermyn Street. I know that I lost three pounds at pool. Then we dined in a private room at the Café Royal. I have not the faintest recollection of what we had for dinner, but I am under a strong impression that I ate and drank of whatever there was to eat and drink, and that of both there was too much. My digestion is my weak point. The plainest possible food is best for me, and only a little of that. I was unwell before the dinner was half way through. Still I kept pegging away. I never did know why. By the time it was over I was only fit for bed. But when I suggested that the next item on the programme should be a liver pill or a seidlitz-powder and then home, they wouldn't hear of it. Their idea of what was the proper thing for men in our situation was another couple of cabs and a music-hall.

I am not certain what music-hall it was. Something, I can scarcely say what, leads me to believe that it was one at which there was a ballet. So far as I was concerned, as soon as I was in my stall I fell asleep. They wouldn't let me sleep it out. Some one, I don't know who, woke me, as I understood the matter, because I snored. When sleeping my breathing is a trifle stertorous perhaps; at least, so Lucy has informed me more than once. Then we went for a turn in the promenade. So far as I am able to recollect, MacCulloch who, I suspect, in common with the other men, had been since dinner making further efforts to quench his thirst, wanted to introduce me to some one whom he didn't seem to know, and who certainly didn't seem to want to know me. I fancy Kenyan, one of the fellows who was with us, trod upon somebody else's toes, or somebody else trod upon his. At any rate there was an argument, which in an extraordinarily short time began to be punctuated by blows. Some one hit me, I don't know who, and I hit some one-I am disposed to think MacCulloch, because his back was turned to me, and he happened to be nearest. Then there was a row. The next thing I can remember was finding myself on the pavement in the street-sitting down on it, if I do not err. They did not lock us up; personally, I should rather have preferred their doing so; it would have relieved me of a feeling of responsibility. Having, I believe, helped me up, MacCulloch, slipping his arm through mine, suggested that we should go upon the spree. I did not, and do not, know what he meant, nor what he supposed we had been doing up to then. Anyhow, I strenuously objected. I insisted upon a cab and home. He, or some one else, put me into one, and off I went.

The presumption is that directly the cabman started I fell asleep. When I awoke I found him bending over me, pulling at the collar of my coat.

"Now then, sir, wake up; this is Hackney."

I stared at him. I did not understand. "Hackney! What do you mean?"

"The gentleman told me to drive you to Hackney, and this is Mare Street. What part of Hackney do you want?"

I supposed the man was joking. I had never been to Hackney in my life. I did not even know, exactly, in what part of town it was situated. My house is in West Kensington. Why he imagined that I wished to pay a first visit to Hackney at that hour of the night I was at a loss to understand. I told him so. In return, his bearing approached to insolence. He wanted to know if I was having a lark with him. I, on my side, wanted to know if he was having a lark with me. He declared that the gentleman who had put me into the cab had instructed him to drive me to Hackney. Then it dawned on me that MacCulloch, or his friends, might have been having a little joke at my expense, and not the cabman.

When I desired to be taken to West Kensington in the shortest possible space of time, Jehu did not altogether appear to see it. He observed that his horse was tired, that he ought to have been in the stable before now, and that the stable was on the Surrey side of Waterloo Bridge. We compromised. He was to drive me to the Strand. When there, I was to find another cab to take me the remainder of the distance. When we did reach the Strand the man demanded a most extortionate sum for his fare. But, as I did not feel in a fit frame of mind to conduct another heated argument, I gave him what he asked, none the less conscious that I was enjoying myself in a most expensive kind of way, as I was aware that Lucy, if she ever came to hear of it, would think.

I was wide awake during the remainder of my journey. Having found another cab, I made a point of seeing that its driver did not go wrong. I did not want this time to find myself, say, at New Cross or Hampstead Heath. When he drew up in front of my house-at last! – I was looking forward, with a morbid sense of expectation and a bad headache, to the sort of greeting I might expect to receive inside. But-I repeat it-I was wide awake.

Directly the cab stopped, I got out. As I stepped upon the pavement, something came at me, through the darkness-a woman. It was a dark night-it all happened very suddenly. The details of the figure and the costume I could not, or at least I did not, make out. That I own. But about the face I have not the slightest doubt. I saw it as plainly as ever I saw a face in my life. It looked at me with wide, staring eyes. There was a look in them which I had never seen before. The lips were parted-I saw that the teeth were clenched. It was very white, and it struck me, just in the moment during which I saw it, as looking strangely white.

But it was none of these things which made my heart stand still, which made me, with a gasp of horror, reel backwards against the cab. I cared nothing for what the face looked like. What I did care for was that I should have seen that face at all. That it should have come to me, like an accusing spirit, all in an instant, out of the darkness of the night. For it was the face of the woman whom, like a coward, I had left lying dead on the Brighton line. It was the face of Ellen Howth.

CHAPTER VI
A CONFESSION

"He will be all right now."

The voice seemed to come to me out of the land of dreams. I seemed to be in a dream myself. What I saw, I seemed to see in a dream. It was some moments before I realised that the man bending over me was Ferguson, our doctor; that I was lying undressed in bed; that my wife was standing by the doctor's side. When I did realise it, I sat up with a start.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Have I been ill?"

It struck me that, as he replied to my question with another, the doctor's eyes were twinkling behind his glasses.

"How are you feeling?"

I felt, now that I was once more conscious of any sort of feeling, very far from well. My head was splitting. Everything was dancing before my eyes. I sank back on my pillow with a groan. The doctor laid his hand upon my brow. It felt beautifully soft and cool. He said something to my wife; then he went. Lucy went with him, I presume, to see him out.

Presently my wife returned. She did not even glance at me as she passed. Going straight to the other side of the room, she began busying herself with something on the dressing-table. I might not have been there for all the notice she took of me. I could not make her demeanour out at all. Indeed, the whole proceedings were mysterious to me. She was wont to be so solicitous when I was ill.

"What's the time?" I asked.

"Half-past four."

That was all she said. She never turned her head to say that. The silence became oppressive. "How long have I been lying here?"

"It's an hour since the cabman rang the bell."

"The cabman?" It all came back to me with a rush. The appearance of the apparition-the face I had seen gleaming at me through the darkness; the sudden blank which followed. I half rose in bed. "Has she gone?" I cried.

Then Lucy did turn round. Words came from between her lips as if they were icicles.

"Mr. Tennant, to whom are you alluding as 'she'? Have you not yet grasped the fact that you are in the presence of your wife?"

Then I perceived that I was misunderstood. I lay down again. Seldom had I felt so ill. I closed my eyes; even then I saw things dancing about. This unkindness of Lucy's was the final straw. I could have cried.

"My dear, why do you speak to me like that? What has happened?"

"I will tell you what has happened. I can quite understand how it is you do not know. You came home, Mr. Tennant, in such a condition that when you got out of the cab which brought you, you could not stand. Had the cabman not been a good Samaritan you might have lain in the gutter till the milkman came. If the milkman had found you it would, of course, have been pleasant both for your wife and family. I thought you were dead. I sent for Dr. Ferguson; but, when he came, he informed me that you were only" – what a stress she laid upon the adverb! – "drunk."

I knew that she misjudged me-that she had not even an inkling of the situation I was in. But at that moment I could not even hint at it. She went on-

"I don't know, Mr. Tennant, how much money you went out with. You have come back with 1s. 3d. in your pockets."

That "Good Samaritan" of a cabman must have robbed me. I felt sure that I had more than 1s. 3d. when I got into his cab.

"You have broken your watch; you have spoiled your clothes, and you appear to have either given away or lost your hat. The cabman said that you were not wearing one when you engaged him."

That I could hardly believe. What could I have done with it? It seemed incredible that I could have driven to Hackney and back without a hat.

"I may add that, if you take my advice, at the earliest possible moment you will have a bath." She moved towards the door. "I am going to try to get some sleep in the spare room."

I could not bear to think of her leaving me like that. I called to her, "Lucy."

"Well?"

"You are hard on me. I have been dining with MacCulloch."

"I don't know who MacCulloch may be, but next time you dine with him if you give me warning I will keep a doctor waiting on the premises ready for your return."

"Lucy! You would not speak to me like that if you knew all. I am in great trouble."

Her tone changed on the instant. She came towards the bed.

"Tom! What do you mean!"

"I know that I have been a fool, and worse. Even you don't know how great a fool I have been. To-night I have been trying to drown thought."

She knelt on the floor beside the bed, stretching out her hands to me across the coverlet.

"Tom! You're not playing with me, as they say some husbands do play with their wives? Tell me what you mean?"

I found this tone harder to bear than the other. A shudder went all over me. I closed my eyes. What did I mean? How could I tell her? My throat went dry and husky-a condition which was not owing to the potations of the night.

"I've been a good husband to you, haven't I? I've tried to be."

"My darling, you've been the best husband in the world. That's what makes this seem so strange." She alluded to the events of the night. "Why have you been so silly?" Putting her arms about my neck, she drew me towards her.

"You have no conception how silly I have been."

She laid her cool cheek against my fevered one. "Tell me all about it. Is it money?"

"Money would be nothing."

Her voice sank. "What is it?"

"It is something which happened last night."

I felt her shiver. "I knew it. I felt there was something wrong when you came in, although you would not own there was."

"I was afraid to tell you."

She drew closer to me. Again her voice dropped to a whisper. "What was it, Tom?"

"It was something which happened in the train." I paused. My tongue seemed to stick in my throat. "When we left Brighton a woman got into my carriage."

"A woman?" She withdrew herself a little. Then I felt that I could not tell her who the woman was; at least, not then.

"She had been drinking. At least, so I suppose. As soon as the train started she began to quarrel."

"To quarrel?"

"Yes. I was afraid there would be a row. You know the express does not stop between London and Brighton. I did not know whether to pull the alarm-bell or not. I made up my mind to try to leave my carriage and get into the next."

"Do you mean while the train was moving?"

"Yes. I thought it better to run the risk than to stop the train, and have a scene, and, possibly, a scandal. One never knows what may come of being mixed up in that sort of thing with a woman."

"Well?"

"She tried to stop me leaving the carriage, and in trying she fell out."

"Tom!" Taking her cheek away from mine, Lucy looked me in the face. "Fell out?"

"Yes."

"While the train was moving?"

I nodded.

"How awful! She might have been hurt! What did you do?"

"That's where my folly began. I did nothing."

She continued to stare at me, evidently not comprehending. My task was getting more and more difficult. After all, I almost wished that I had not begun it.

"It was all so sudden, and I was so bewildered that I lost my head."

"Then don't you know what became of her?"

"I did not know till the evening papers appeared. She was killed."

"Killed!" Lucy's arms were still about my neck. I felt them give a convulsive twitch. "What did you do when you knew she was killed?"

"Went with MacCulloch to dine. You see, it seems that the body was found on the line. They appear to have jumped to the conclusion that there has been murder done. It struck me that if I went and told my story the odds were that I should be arrested as her murderer. I had not the courage to face the situation, and so by way of a compromise I went with MacCulloch to dine."

Lucy removed her arms from about my neck. She put her hand to her forehead as if perplexed.

"Tell me, plainly, just what happened. How did she fall out? Was there a scuffle?"

"In a sense there was. To prevent my leaving the carriage she took me by the shoulder. In trying to maintain her hold she got her back to the open door. She must have stepped backwards before either of us realised how near to the open door she really was, because, before I had the faintest suspicion of what had happened or was about to happen, she had disappeared."

There was silence. I did not feel equal to meeting Lucy's eyes, but I felt they were on my face. At last she spoke.

"I see. No wonder I saw that something had happened. No wonder that you found it difficult to tell me what it was." Rising to her feet, she went to the fireplace. Leaning her elbow on the mantelshelf, she stood in such a position that her face was turned away from me. "Is there any probability of their being able to connect the affair with you?"

"Given certain conditions, there is an absolute certainty. To my shame be it said, that is really the reason why I went with MacCulloch to dine."

Then I told her about the fellow who had been in the adjoining compartment. How he had forced himself upon me at Victoria; how he claimed to have overheard all that had taken place; how he had arrived at his own conclusions; how he had levied on me blackmail. Lucy listened quietly, putting a question now and then, but never looking at me all the time.

"And am I to understand that this person believes that you committed murder, and is prepared to go into the witness-box and swear it?"

It was not only the question, it was, more than anything, the way in which she asked it, which made me shiver.

"The fellow is a scoundrel."

"Is that why you gave him the hundred pounds? If he is such a scoundrel as you say, why did you not show him the door, and defy him to do his worst?"

The calmness with which she spoke made me writhe. My tone became dogged.

"I have no excuse to offer. I was, and am, quite conscious of my folly."

"I don't wish to say anything unkind to you; I quite realise how you stand in need of all the kindness one can show you; but I don't at all understand your story as you tell it. Why did you quarrel with this woman?"

"I did not quarrel with her; she quarrelled with me."

"But it takes two to make a quarrel. Why did she quarrel with you?"

"I tell you, she had been drinking."

"But, even then, what did she say to you, or what did you say to her, which could have caused such a disturbance? Because, I can see, from your own statements, that both of you had lost your tempers."

I was silent. I knew not what to answer.

"I suppose that the woman was a stranger to you-that you had never seen her before?"

What could I say? I felt that if I did not tell the truth then it would come out afterwards. Better, while I was about it, make a clean breast of everything.

And yet I found it hard. Lucy's ideas are narrow. She has her own views of things, and strong views some of them are. She thinks, for instance, that there ought to be the same standard for a man as for a woman: the same moral standard-that a man ought to come to his wife with clean hands, in the same sense in which a woman ought to come with clean hands to her husband. I am afraid that I had been rather in the habit of finding favour in her eyes by endorsing her opinions. It seemed hard that the only real peccadillo of which I had been guilty should be cropping up against me after all this lapse of time. I had repented of it, and put it behind me, long ago; and yet here it was, as fresh and vigorous as ever, rising to confront me from its tomb.

Lucy seemed struck by my continued silence. She repeated her question in an altered form. "Had you seen her before?"

"Many years ago."

"Many years ago? You knew her, then?"

"I used to know her, to my sorrow, once upon a time, long before I knew you, my dear."

The final words were intended as a sort of propitiation-I saw that she was getting roused at last-but they failed in their effect. She stood straight up, facing me, her fists clenched at her sides.

"Who was she? What was her name?"

"Her name was Ellen Howth. I assure you, my dear, that there is no necessity for you to get warm. I have heard and seen nothing of her since I married you. Indeed, these many years I have thought she was dead."

"Why did you think she was dead? What did it matter to you if she was dead or alive? What did you know of her?"

"Really nothing, I am afraid, to her advantage."

"What do you mean? Tell me the truth, Tom, if you have never told me it before. What was she to you?"

"She was nothing to me. My dear, she was a person of indifferent character."

"Do you mean-" She paused. She came close to the bed. She leant over me. "Was she-"

I knew what she meant too well. My heart and my voice sank as I replied. I did not know how she would take it.

"I'm afraid that she was."

She stood straight up. She drew a long breath. She looked down at me. When she spoke her voice trembled-half with passion, half with scorn.

"I see! Now I understand your story very well, and just what happened in the train. And you are the man who has always held himself up to me as different to other men-as a model of what a man should be. And all the time you have had this story in your life; and how many more besides?"

"You are very hard on me, my dear. I assure you, this is the only one."

"So you tell me now. Not long ago you told me there was not one."

"I have always meant to tell you all about it."

"Indeed? Then how skilfully you have concealed your meaning! I suppose that, like other men, when you wearied of your light-o'-love you cast her from you. Years afterwards she meets

you in the train. She takes advantage of the opportunity-probably the first opportunity which has offered-to tell you what she thinks of you. Your coward conscience plays you such tricks that you try to flee from her, even at the peril of your life. She will not let you off so easily, so you threw her from the train."

"I did not. I never laid a hand on her. So far as I was concerned, it was pure accident. I swear it."

"Whether that is true or not can only be known to your God, and you."

Lucy turned on her heels. Without another word she left the room.

CHAPTER VII
A VISITOR

These might be a silver lining to the cloud. If there was, I should have liked to have had a peep at it. Just then it would have done me good. I could not see much promise of happiness either in the near or in the distant future. I had been reading a good deal lately about the "ethics of suicide." If my wife believed me guilty, I should find it difficult to convince a judge and jury of my innocence. I might as well commit suicide as hang. I should be the victim of a judicial murder if they did hang me; but I did not see how my situation would be materially improved by that.

Such reflections did not tend to make me sleep. As a matter of fact, I never closed my eyes. The consequence was that, when the time came for me to rise and start for the City, I was ill-really ill. My head burned. It felt every moment as if it would burst. I could not see out of my eyes. The paroxysms of indigestion from which I suffered bent me double. My wife came and found me in this condition.

"You are not looking well," she said.

I was aware of that without her telling me. I could not see how it could be otherwise, suffering as I was suffering then. If ever there was an object of pity, I felt that I was one. But there did not seem to be much pity either in her voice, words, or manner. I said nothing in reply to her remark. I only groaned.

"Will you have your breakfast in bed?"

"I don't want any breakfast, thank you."

"Shall I send for Dr. Ferguson? Though I don't know if he is an authority on dipsomania."

"Lucy! don't talk to me like that!"

"Why not? I merely made a statement of fact. And, of course, you are suffering from the after effects of overindulgence."

That was a charming fashion in which to endeavour to smooth the pillow of an invalid. I changed the subject.

"How is Minna?"

Minna is my little girl-a little fair-haired darling she is. With all her father's tender-heartedness; more-with, I hope, some of that father's power of forgiving injuries.

"I am going to send her away to-day."

"Send her away?"

"Certainly. I have not yet made up my mind whether I shall go with her myself or send nurse with her alone. Are you well enough to enter into a discussion?"

"No," I said; "I'm not."

Nor was I. At that moment I was neither mentally nor physically her equal. Since, at any time, Lucy has about nine-parts of speech to my one, I had no intention of measuring myself against her, conversationally and argumentatively, when I had none.

I was ill four days. So ill that I could not leave my bed. At least, I was clear upon that point, if no one else was. I am almost inclined to suspect that Lucy had her doubts; or she pretended to have them. I am disposed to believe that she would not have allowed me to have stayed in bed at all if she had had her way. She threw out hints about the necessity of attending to matters in the City; though I explained to her, as clearly as my illness would permit me, that in the City things were absolutely stagnant. Then she dropped hints upon more delicate subjects still; but to these I resolutely turned a deaf ear. I vowed that I was too ill to listen.

However, on the afternoon of the fourth day things reached a climax. Facts became too strong for me. I had to listen. Lucy came into the room with an envelope in her hand.

"There is some one who wishes to see you."

I supposed it was Parker, my senior clerk. He had been backwards and forwards bothering me two or three times a day.

"Is it Parker?"

"No. It is a stranger to me. I believe you will find his name in that envelope. He would not give it me."

I opened the envelope which she handed to me. It contained half a sheet of paper, on which was written, "The gentleman who travelled in the next compartment to yours." At sight of those words I sat up in bed-rather hurriedly, I fancy.

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed; "where is he? I hope you haven't let him in."

"Jane let him in. At present he is in the drawing-room waiting to see you."

"It's that blackmailing ruffian."

I gave her the sheet of paper.

"I guessed he was something of the kind. So this is the man who holds you in the hollow of his hand? I see."

She might see, but I didn't. There was about her vision a clearness and coolness which made me shudder. It was dreadful to hear her talk in that cold-blooded way about anybody "holding me in the hollow of his hand." She continued to regard me in a manner which I had noticed about her once or twice of late, and which, although I said nothing about it, I resented.

"Perhaps now I may be allowed to talk to you as if you were a reasonable man. During the last few days I have hardly known whether you wished me to regard you as a child."

"My dear!"

"You have been lying there, pretending to be ill, doing nothing, and worse than nothing, while your fate and my fate has been hanging by a hair. I had not thought that my husband could be so contemptible a thing."

"Really, Lucy, I wish you wouldn't speak to me like that."

"Possibly. I have discovered, too late, how you dislike to hear unpleasant things."

"I don't know that I am peculiar in that respect."

"I don't doubt that there are other backboneless creatures in existence besides yourself-unfortunately for their children and their wives."

"Lucy, I won't have you talk to me like that-I won't."

"Then get up and play the man! Do you know that the hue and cry is out all over England for you?"

"For me?"

"For the man who threw the woman from the train. 'The Three Bridges Tragedy,' they've christened it. The papers are full of it; it is the topic of the day. They have found the carriage from which she was thrown. It seems that it was all in disorder and stained with blood, and that the window was broken. You said nothing about that to me. They have found the porter who saw her into your carriage. Who was it saw you off from Brighton?"

"Jack and George. Why do you ask?"

"Because the porter who admitted her to your carriage declares that you were talking to two gentleman. They are looking for them now."

"Surely they will never make Jack and George give evidence against me."

"You may be sure they will. A porter has come forward who says he saw you in the carriage at Victoria. He has given a description of you, which is sufficiently like you to show that he will probably recognise you if he sees you again. It seems that the only thing they are in want of is your name."

I sank back in bed, appalled. The prospect, in my weak state, was too terrible for contemplation. It seemed incredible that a wholly innocent man could, by any possibility, be placed in such a situation.

My wife went on, her voice seeming to ring in my ears almost as if it had been a knell of doom-

"Play the man! I have been playing the part for you up to now. Now play it yourself. I need not tell you what it has meant to me to learn that my husband has been, as it were, a living lie. You know how I have believed in you, and what you have been to me because I believed in you. To have the object of one's faith collapse, like an air-pricked bladder, into nothingness, and worse than nothingness, is calculated to give one something of a shock. But I realise that this is not a moment for reproaches-that it is a time for deeds, not words. I realise, too, that I still owe my duty to you, as your wife, although, as my husband, you have failed in that which you owe to me. If you will take my advice, you will get up, and you will go at once to a first-rate lawyer; you will tell him the truth-the whole truth, mind-and you will place yourself entirely in his hands, even if he counsels you to surrender yourself to the police. I should do so without a moment's hesitation."

"It's all very well to talk about surrendering to the police. It's easy enough in theory. It's I who shall hang, not you."

"Tom, don't deprive me of all my faith in you; leave me something of my belief; try to be a little of a man. Don't add blunder to blunder-blunders which are worse than crimes-simply because you have not courage enough to be frank. As for the man who is waiting to see you in the drawing-room downstairs-"

She was interrupted by a voice speaking from behind.

"As for that man, is it not Paul Pry who says in the play, 'I hope I don't intrude?'"

The speaker was my friend, the blackmailer. He had forced himself into my bedroom unannounced.

CHAPTER VIII
MORE THAN HIS MATCH

Yes, unannounced. I am sure that if I had had the least suspicion of his approaching presence I should have kept him out by the simple expedient of turning the key in the door. As it was, there he stood, as bold as brass, holding in one hand the handle of the door which he had closed behind him, and in the other his hat, the brim of which he was pressing to his breast.

A striking change had been effected in his appearance since I had seen him last. He had expended a portion of my hundred pounds to advantage in a tailor's shop. He was newly clad from top to toe. The overcoat which he had on was new, and so also was the astrachan which made it glorious. Thrown wide open, it revealed the fact that the gloss of newness was still upon the garments which it covered. A gold watch-chain ran from pocket to pocket of his waistcoat. Beautiful kid gloves encased his hands. Spats adorned his brand-new polished boots. His silk hat shone like a mirror. Even the dye upon his hair and whiskers had been renewed; it gleamed a beautiful blue-black. In his new splendour his resemblance to Mr. Townsend was more pronounced than ever. Even in the state of agitation which, ill as I was, his sudden appearance caused me, I could not but be struck by that.

He showed not the slightest sign of discomposure at the manner in which I greeted him. He stood grinning like a mountebank, not only as if he was sure of a hearty welcome, but as if the whole house belonged to him.

"Sorry, Mr. Tennant, to hear you are unwell-really grieved. I can only hope that it is nothing serious."

His impudence was a little more than even I could stand. I let him see it.

"What the dickens do you mean, sir, by entering my bedroom?"

In reply, he only smiled the more.

"My dear sir, I am here out of pure consideration for you. When I heard of your ill-health, I could not bear the thought of subjecting you to the inconvenience of coming down to me. So, instead, I came to you."

"Then, having come, perhaps you would be so good as, at once, to go again."

He turned towards me with a movement of his eyebrows, as if to express surprise.

"Gently, sir! Surely you presume upon the presence of a lady. Is that the way in which you should speak to me? I have no desire to keep you. My business with you ought not to detain me more than half a minute."

He seated himself on a chair, which he drew up towards the fire. Placing his hat upon his knee, he began to smooth the nap with his gloved hand. Unbearable though I felt his insolence to be, I saw that, unless I employed actual violence, I should not be able to induce him to budge. I looked at my wife. I should not have minded so much if she had not been there. I had borne with the fellow's insolence before; I might have borne with it again. But I was conscious that Lucy's eye was upon me, and that, unreasonably enough, she was expecting me to show the sort of stuff of which I was made. I say that this attitude of hers was an unreasonable attitude, because, what could she expect of a man who was recovering from a severe attack of illness, and whose nervous system was a shattered wreck. I temporised.

"What do you want with me?"

I fixed my gaze upon him. Avoiding it, he flicked his gloved fingers in the direction of my wife.

"At your service! Pray do not let me inconvenience the lady."

"You do inconvenience the lady greatly."

Both my tone and my manner were severe-as severe, that is, as they could be-considering that I was in my night-shirt sitting up in bed.

"I trust not. I would not wish her to leave the room one moment sooner on our account."

Then I saw what he was at. He wanted to get me alone and without the aid of my wife's moral support to back me. I looked at Lucy. She was standing very straight, looking alternately at both of us, as if she were making up her mind which she ought to admire most-or least. I caught a gleam from the corner of her eye. It was the one I sought.

"I have no secrets from my wife. What you wish to say to me you may say in her presence, and be so good as to say it quickly, sir."

Leaning back in his chair, thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, the fellow looked at Lucy with a smile upon his impudent face for which I could have struck him-and no doubt I should have struck him, had my health permitted it.

"No secrets from your wife? What a model husband you must be! Permit me, madam, to tender you my most sincere congratulations-you have secured a prize."

My wife said nothing. But I saw her lips curl.

"Do not address yourself to my wife, sir; address yourself to me."

Still lolling back in the chair, the fellow turned, with the same impudent smile, to me.

"To you? Certainly I will address myself to you. I am here to address myself to you, though my address will not occupy more than half a dozen words. I want from you a hundred pounds. That is the only remark which I wish to address to you."

"What!"

I was reduced to gasping.

"Surely what I say is plain enough. And don't I say it plainly? I want from you a hundred pounds."

"This is Friday, and you only had a hundred pounds from me on Monday."

"Yes, and this, as you say, is Friday. A hundred pounds are but a hundred pounds. In the hands of a gentleman they fly. Especially when he has to provide for what may be called preliminary expenses of a certain kind, which, in themselves, make a hole in a century."

I knew to what he referred. He meant that he had replenished his wardrobe. As though that had anything to do with me.

"Do you imagine that I am a bank at which you have a large current account on which you can draw at sight."

He laughed-or pretended to.

"That is precisely what I not only imagine, but fervently believe."

"Then your belief is a very foolish one. I assure you that you were never more in error in your life."

He glanced at a gold watch which he took out of his waistcoat pocket.

"Why should we waste time over these small quibbles? Are we children, you and I? I have an engagement shortly. If you have not the sum in the house in gold I will take what you have in cash, and the balance in an open cheque to bearer."

"You will have neither cash nor cheque from me. I will not give you one single penny."

"Do you mean it?"

He replaced his watch in his pocket. He rose from his chair. There was, in his bearing a return to the manner of "the Villain at the Vic." The fellow was theatrical all through. All his moods were equally unreal. At the same time there was something about the change which I did not altogether relish.

"Of course I mean it. You don't suppose that I am going to be robbed and plundered with impunity by you."

"You prefer to hang?"

"You know that I am as innocent of crime as you are, and probably much more so."

"Don't lie to me, you hound!" He turned with a sweeping gesture towards my wife. "You must excuse me, madam, but you will do me the justice to remember that I suggested your departure from the room. I cannot allow your presence to debar me from plain speaking." Directing his attention again towards me, he began to button up his brand-new overcoat, with a deliberation which was, doubtless, intended to impress me. "As you have been lying in your bed, like a cur hiding in its kennel-because pray don't suppose that you can make me believe that you have been sick with anything else but terror-I don't know, my man, if you are aware that all England is on tiptoe, watching for your capture. If I were to point you out, at this moment, in any street in England, the people would tear you limb from limb. The whole country is thirsting, righteously thirsting, for your blood."

"It is false!"

"Is it? Refuse to give me what I ask, and I will prove to you if it is false."

"I won't be robbed by you."

"Then you'll be hung by me instead." He raised his hat, as if he was about to put it on his head. "Once more, and for the last time, which is it to be-the gallows or the hundred pounds?"

"You'll get no hundred pounds from me. I swear it."

"Then it will be the gallows. In ten minutes the news will be flashing through the land that justice has its hands about the murderer's neck."

He clapped his hat upon his head. He moved towards the door. I went all hot and cold-anybody would have gone all hot and cold with such a prospect as the scoundrel pictured in front of him. Whether, with a view of appealing to his better self-if he had one, which I doubt-I should have prevented his leaving the room, is more than I can say. I might have done. After all, self-preservation is nature's first and greatest law. I had, and always should have, an incurable objection to being hanged by such a rascal. As it was, it was my wife that interposed.

"One moment, sir, before you go."

He removed his hat-with a flourish which, as usual, was reminiscent of the transpontine drama.

"Madam, ten thousand, if you wish it."

"Are you the person who travelled in the next compartment to my husband's from Brighton?"

"Madam, I am."

"You look it."

The fellow might be excused for looking a little startled-which he certainly did do. I have found that particular tone of Lucy's, now and then, a little startling myself. The man did not seem as if he quite knew what to make of it.

"I look it, madam-how do you mean?"

"You look the sort of character."

"To what sort of character, madam, do you refer?"

"You look like the sort of person who would wear another man's clothes."

He drew himself bolt upright, as if his backbone had suddenly been straightened by a spring.

"Madam! I would have you to know that I wear no one's clothes but my own."

"You are wearing my husband's clothes at this present moment."

"Your husband's clothes?"

"Were they not purchased with his money?"

"Madam! you have a very extraordinary way of putting things. Is it possible that you intend to be offensive?"

"Is it possible to be offensive to such as you?"

"I, madam, am a gentleman, born and bred."

"That you are a gentleman of a certain kind I have no doubt whatever."

The man began to look badgered, as if he were growing conscious of a feeling of tightness about the region of the chest. He commenced to smooth the nap of his hat, violently, with his gloved hand.

"I take it, Mrs. Tennant, that you don't quite realise the position in which your husband stands."

"And I take it that you don't at all realise the position in which you stand."

The fellow ceased brushing his hat, the better to enable him to stare.

"I stand?"

"Yes, you."

"And pray, madam, how do I stand?"

"Have you ever heard of such a thing as an accessory after the fact?"

"An accessory after the fact?"

"Because that is the position in which you stand-in the position of an accessory after the fact."

The man looked unmistakably uneasy. He continued to suspend the operation of smoothing his hat.

"You are pleased to be facetious."

"You will find that that view will not be taken by a judge and jury."

It was with a distinct effort that the fellow returned to an attitude of defiance-squaring his shoulders and tugging at his moustache.

"I have no wish, and no intention, to chop phrases with a lady. I imagined, madam, that you desired to say something pertinent to your husband's terrible position-with the gallows already shadowing him. Since it appears to be otherwise I can but proceed to do my duty."

"By all means do your duty. But you understand that when my husband is arrested you will be arrested too."

"Pooh, madam-you cannot frighten me!"

"But I can, and will, get you penal servitude for life."

"Can you, indeed, madam? May I ask how you propose to do it?"

"By telling the plain and simple story of your connection with my husband. That will be sufficient, as you know."

"I know nothing of the sort; tell your story, and be hanged!"

Thrusting his hat upon his head, the fellow marched out of the room in a couple of strides. His exit, whether consciously to himself or not, was marked rather by haste than by dignity. When he had gone I looked at my wife. Lucy, on her part, looked at the door through which he had vanished.

"Now you've done it," I observed.

Lucy turned to me with a smile hovering about her lips, which, under the circumstances, I thought was a little out of place.

"I have done it, as you say."

"You don't seem to be aware of what you've done. What's the good of talking to him like that? Do you suppose that you can frighten him-that you can take him in? He knows very well that whatever happens to me he'll go scatheless. He's the one witness whom the prosecution will not be able to do without."

"I think you are mistaken. With a man of that type the high horse is the only horse you ought to ride. He desires nothing less than to get into the witness-box, or I misjudge the man. I suspect that his own record is not of a kind which he would care to have exposed to the cross-examining light of day."

Hardly were the words out of her mouth than there came a tap at the panel of the door. Lucy shot a glance towards me.

"Who's there?" she asked.

Whom should it be but our friend the scoundrel. He came in with quite a dove-like air of mildness, mincing, like a dancing-master, on his toes.

"Excuse me, but even on the front door steps my heart got the upper hand of me. I could not do what seemed even to approximate to cruelty. I could not hang anybody-I judge not, so that I may not be judged. My one aspiration is, and always has been, to be a friend in need. I cannot help it, but so I am."

Producing a parti-coloured silk handkerchief-brand new-he manipulated it in such a manner as to diffuse an odour of perfume through the room. My wife looked him up and down. Her tone was dry.

"Your sentiments do you credit."

"They do, I know it; but, such as they are, they are mine own." He coughed. "So far as I am personally concerned, financial considerations are as nothing. It is circumstances which weigh me down. Instead of one hundred pounds, suppose we say seventy-five-in a cheque and cash."

Lucy took upon herself to answer him-

"I am afraid we cannot say seventy-five."

"Merely as a temporary advance, till Monday. I expect remittances on Monday, very large remittances, from my agents."

Lucy's tone was even drier than before. "I am glad to hear it."

"Yes, quite so." The fellow glanced towards me. He came sneaking towards my bed. He spoke to me under cover of his hat. "I think, Mr. Tennant, if you were to ask your good lady to withdraw, and were to allow me to have one word with you, between ourselves, in private-just one-I know we should understand each other; I am sure we should."

I looked at Lucy. She also looked at me. I am bound to admit that what I saw in her eyes supplied me, to a certain extent, with the moral stamina in which, owing to the severe illness from which I had recently been suffering, I was temporarily deficient. I spoke to the fellow plainly-

"No, sir. As I have already told you, I have no secrets from my wife, and whatever you wish to say to me must be said while she is present."

"You are-you are" – I suspect that he was going to say something the reverse of complimentary, only Lucy's presence and attitude induced him to change his mind-"a husband in a million. Now, Mr. Tennant, allow me, as one gentleman speaking to another, to ask you if, considering all things, you are not disposed to advance me, on unimpeachable surety-that of my word-the sum of seventy-five pounds."

"I am not, sir."

"You are not? Strange! I confess I had not thought it possible. However, I will not utter what may seem a word of reproach. We will make it fifty pounds, then."

"We will not. At least, I won't."

"Then, since fifty pounds is insufficient to supply even my most pressing needs, it is useless for me to attempt to carry the discussion further. You are compelling me, Mr. Tennant, to take a step which, when it is taken, we shall both of us regret. But, remember, whatever comes of it-and ill will come-the act is yours, not mine. I wish you good-day, sir; a last good-day! Also, madam, I wish good-day to you." He marched to the door in a fashion which, this time, made up in dignity what it lost in haste. With the handle of the open door in his hand, he turned to me again, "I will concede still one more point. We will make it forty-five."

"We won't."

"Then nothing remains." He vanished, to immediately reappear; his head and shoulders were inserted through the partly open door. "Shall we make it forty?"

"Nor forty."

Instead of taking the rebuff as final, he brought his legs and body into the room after his head and shoulders. He addressed himself to Lucy.

"I am conscious, madam, that in this matter yours is the controlling voice. May I ask if you quite realise the responsibilities of your position? Your husband's life hangs in the balance. My necessities urge me on. Were it otherwise, I shall be only too happy to give that assistance of which, at present, I stand in need. Even as it is, you shall find in me no huckster. In proof of it, I need only state that I am willing to accept the loan of a paltry five-and-twenty pounds."

"You won't get it."

"Then what shall I get? I find it hard to believe that a man can be reduced to the position of a mendicant! I ask again-what shall I get?"

"Nothing."

"That is not only foolish, madam, it is cruel. Shall we speak of such a bagatelle as fifteen pounds?"

"No."

The fellow made a grimace as if he ground his teeth.

"Ten?"

"No."

He threw out his arms as if appealing to the gods of the gallery.

"Confound it; is a gentleman to be reduced to ask for the loan of a trumpery five-pound note!"

"Though he asks, he will not get it."

He looked at Lucy, as if he could not believe she was in earnest. Then he sighed, or groaned. His hat, which he had been holding in his hand, he replaced upon his head. Throwing his overcoat wide open, he began to examine his pockets, methodically, one by one, as if he searched for something. He did not find it, whatever it was.

"Bare, absolutely bare! This is awful. 'To err is human, to forgive divine!'" He raised his hat about an inch from his head, possibly under the impression that it was a text which he was quoting. "I came into this house with my heart beating high with hope, filled with the milk of human kindness, and it ends in this. It seems absurd to pawn a watch within four-and-twenty hours of buying it, though I certainly never should have bought it had I foreseen that I should receive such treatment. Might I ask you to oblige me with the loan of a sovereign to keep me going till I receive my remittances on Monday?"

"Better not. Your request would only meet with a refusal."

"Would it? That does finish it, that does. I'm off." I thought that this time he was off finally, but scarcely was he off than he was back again. He came hurrying towards me across the room. "I say, Tennant, I'm actually without a cab fare. Lend me five shillings, there's a trump."

"I will not lend you fivepence."

"You won't, won't you? Now we do know where we are." He glared about in his best tragedy style. "Perhaps you will give me back that handkerchief you borrowed."

Lucy interposed. "I shall not."

"You won't? Do you mean to steal it? Is it your intention to add theft to the rest of the family crimes?"

"I mean to keep it as evidence."

"As evidence? What do you mean?"

"As evidence of your being an accessory after the fact. If you take my advice, with the proceeds of the pawning of the watch which you purchased with my husband's money, you will remove yourself as far from the reach of the police as you conveniently can."

He put his hand up to his chin, as if pondering her words.

"If you will lend me-"

Lucy cut him short. She threw the door wide open.

"I will lend you nothing. Now go-unless you wish me to send for the police."

He looked at her, not seeming to like what he saw. He scowled his finest scowl.

"Go? Oh yes, I'll go." He cast his eyes up towards the ceiling. "Ingratitude, thy name is woman!" Then down to me-"Not to mention man." He began to button up his overcoat as if in a hurry. "I'll be even with some one over this, you see if I don't."

Then he went finally. We heard him stamping down the stairs; then we heard him shut the hall door behind him with a clatter and a bang as he went out into the street.

CHAPTER IX
FOR THE SECOND TIME

Lucy turned to me as soon as it was quite clear that the fellow had gone.

"Now get up and dress, and go at once to some great lawyer and tell him everything. To whom shall you go?"

"My dear! At this time of day? By the time that I reach town they'll have all gone home."

Lucy looked at me in that freezing fashion which has always struck me as being so singularly unsympathetic.

"What do you propose to do?"

"Well, my dear, I think I'll get up and dress, if you don't mind, and have a little dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yes, dinner. It's easy enough for you to sneer, but if you'd been living on toast and water, which, to some extent, during the last four days, I practically have been doing, the prospect of a little decent food would even appeal to you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"And you're a man? As, I suppose, is the individual who has just taken himself out of the house."

"I should be obliged, Lucy, if you would not institute comparison between that vagabond and me. I don't like it. In the morning I will follow your advice. I will go to a lawyer, and I will place myself unreservedly in his hands. Just now the thing is out of the question; I shouldn't find one, to begin with; and, in the second place, I'm hungry."

We had dinner. Or at least I had dinner, and she looked on at me while I was eating it. Her companionship did not tend to increase one's appetite. She sat in front of me, bolt upright on her chair, her hands clasped in her lap, eating nothing, and saying nothing either. She seemed to be counting every mouthful which I took, as though I was doing something of which I ought to be ashamed. I don't know what there was to be ashamed of. I don't see why a man shouldn't eat, even if he is going to be hanged, especially if he is innocent as a babe unborn, and is about to be made the victim of a judicial murder, as I bade fair to be.

A knock which came at the front door just as I was finishing came as a positive relief. I should have had words with Lucy if she had continued to sit, like an unblinking statue, in front of me much longer. The servant announced that the knocker was Mr. Keeley. Adolphus Keeley and I on Fridays play chess together, all through the winter-one week at his house, the next at mine. Owing to my illness, and the preoccupation of my mind and body, I had forgotten that this was Friday, and that it was his turn to come to me.

When Keeley was announced Lucy looked inquiringly at me.

"Shall I tell Jane to ask Mr. Keeley to excuse you?"

"Certainly not." I had not been by any means looking forward to the pleasurable prospects of a *tête-à-tête*. Keeley came as a relief. "Tell Mr. Keeley I will be with him in a minute."

Adolphus Keeley, to be frank, and to use an idiom, is not so wise as they make them. He is well intentioned, but dull. I have known him pretty well my whole life long, and I can stand as much of him as any one. But that night I found him particularly trying. He persisted in keeping the conversation in a groove for which I had a strong distaste. One of his weak points is an inability to see a hint in time to take it. I not only dropped hints, I threw them at him as hard as I could; but I threw them all away. I had a dreadful time. In preferring his society to Lucy's I had stepped from the frying-pan into the fire.

He began as soon as I was in the room.

"Well, Tennant, what do you think about the murder?"

"Murder? What murder?

"The Three Bridges tragedy; isn't it a dreadful thing?"

At the mere mention of the subject a shiver went all over me. I tried to make him see that it was a topic for which I had no relish. I might as well have tried to put two heads upon his shoulders.

"I have heard scarcely anything about it. I've been ill-very ill."

"I heard that you'd been seedy. Got a bit fluffy on Monday, eh?"

It is true that Mrs. Tennant was not in the room at the moment, but she might have been just outside the door; and, in any case, the insinuation was of an unwarrantable kind.

"Got chucked from the Empire, eh? Went home Hackney way, without a hat. I know. Shouldn't be surprised if you have been a little queerish; you look puffy even now. I tell you what, Tennant, you ought to go in for training. I could get a couple of stone off you, and you'd be all the better for it. But about this murder. I'm not a bloodthirsty creature, as a rule, but I should like to have the fellow who did it all alone to myself for about five-and-twenty minutes."

Keeley is one of the large army of muscular maniacs. He stands six feet three in his socks. He spends most of his spare time in a gymnasium, and the rest in what he calls "keeping himself fit." He could kill me with a single blow of his fist. Just then Lucy came in.

"Sorry to hear that Tom's been seedy, Mrs. Tennant."

"He's been in bed."

"So I hear. And what do you think of the murder?"

Lucy had brought some work in with her. Seating herself by the fire, she began busying herself with it.

"Do you think it was a murder?"

"I should think it was a murder. What else could it have been?"

"The woman might have fallen out of the train by accident."

"Accident? A lot of that!" I have told Lucy over and over again that, in the presence of ladies, Adolphus Keeley is sometimes brusque to the verge of rudeness. "Do you think that if there had been any accident about it, the fellow who was with her wouldn't have given the alarm? He knew better."

I had been setting out the chessmen on the board, and turned to Keeley with a pawn in either hand.

"Which hand will you have?"

"Left."

The white pawn was in the left hand. We sat down to play. Still he continued to prose. "Fred Courtney wanted to bet that they wouldn't have the fellow in a month. I should be almost inclined to take short odds that they'll have him within four-and-twenty hours."

He had moved to king's pawn. I was about to give the usual reply, but when he said that my hand faltered on the piece.

"Within four-and-twenty hours? What makes you think that?"

Keeley winked.

"I've heard something, that's all. It's your move."

I moved.

He brought his knight out. I fancy that I brought mine. But I am not sure. I found that, after all, I was not sufficiently recovered to do myself justice over a chessboard. I am more than his match as a rule. I have played him three weeks in succession-one night a week-without his ever winning a game. But on that occasion I was not a foeman worthy of his steel. He beat me with even ridiculous ease. And directly he had won he began again.

"You're fond of murders, aren't you?"

"Fond of murders, Keeley! What do you mean?"

"I've heard you say more than once that you like a first-class murder."

"I don't remember ever having said anything of the sort. It seems incredible that I could have done. It would have been in direct opposition to all my principles."

"Come! – I say!" He looked at me as if to see if I was joking. I emphatically was not. "I've heard you say that you'd like to be in the position of a murderer yourself, just for the sake of a new sensation."

"Keeley!"

"I have! And when the Putney mystery was on you took as much interest in it as if it had been a personal matter. Why, you have even talked about starting as an amateur detective to see if you couldn't ferret out the business yourself. You used to declare that the fellow who did it deserved flaying alive; and, when I suggested that there might be extenuating circumstances, you used to get quite mad with me."

"My dear Keeley, the Putney mystery belongs to ancient history. Won't you have another game?"

"But it seems to me that this Three Bridges business is quite as pretty a puzzle. What did he kill her for? They talk about getting up a sweepstake in the office. The possible reasons to be put down on pieces of paper, and whoever draws what proves to be the right one when the fellow comes to be tried and hung, to take the sweep. Now, what should you say he killed her for?"

"Would you mind changing the subject, Keeley. You forget that I have been ill, and still am very far from well, and that the topic is hardly one which is likely to appeal to an invalid's brain. I think I'll have a little whisky, Lucy."

I had a little whisky. In fact I had a fairish quantity; I had to, since I had to bear the burden of Keeley's conversation. That particular topic seemed to be the only one he had inside his head. He harked back to it nearly every time he opened his mouth. Had I not known the man I should have concluded that he was doing it out of sheer malignancy. But I did know him. I knew he was thick-headed. Lucy was not of the slightest use. She went on sewing in silence, as if all subjects were indifferent to her.

I was glad when Keeley rose to go. I went with him to the front door to see him off the premises. After he had gone I remained standing on the steps to get a mouthful of fresh air. It was a dark night; there was no wind, and there was a suspicion of fog in the air. I was standing on the bottom step but one. The nearest lamp-post was some distance down the road. What with the darkness and the mist I could not see any of the lamps on the hall doors on the other side of the street. It was very quiet. There was not a sound of footsteps nor of any sort of traffic.

Suddenly, while I was thinking of nothing in particular, except that Keeley had been making rather a greater ass of himself than he generally did, I saw something begin to shape itself in the air in front of me. It did not come all at once, but by degrees. First a dim outline, then feature after feature, until the whole was there. It began to take the shape of a face. It was a face-a woman's face-her face-Ellen Howth's. For the second time it had come to me, unwatched for, undreamed of, unawares, a visitant from the dead-come to me with its awful, staring eyes. There could be no question this time about my having drunk too much. I was as sober as I ever was in my life. I can give no adequate conception of the havoc with which I realised that this was so, and that the face was there. It came slowly towards me. The idea of a closer contact was more than I could endure. As it advanced, I retreated, backwards, up the steps. Still the face came on. I got into the house, and banged the door, as it seemed to me, just in time to shut it out. I staggered against the wall. Lucy came to me, as I stood there trembling.

"I was coming to tell you to come in. You will catch a cold." Then, perceiving my state of agitation, "Tom! What is the matter?"

"Lucy, I have seen a ghost."

"A ghost?"

"As I live and breathe, I have seen a ghost. Oh, my God!"

"Tom!"

"This is the second time I have seen it. I have a premonition that the third time will mean death."

There came a knocking at the door. Lucy looked at me.

"It is Mr. Keeley back again. The servants have gone to bed. I will open and see."

It was not Keeley. It was a short, broadly-built man, with a bushy beard. Other men were with him, though I could only just see them standing in the shadow at the foot of the steps. The bearded man addressed himself to me-

"Are you Thomas Tennant?"

"That is my name."

"I am a detective. You are my prisoner. I arrest you for wilful murder."

Then I saw that the men who had been standing at the foot of the steps, and who now, uninvited, were entering the house, were constables.

BOOK II. – THE CLUB

(The Tale is told by Reginald Townsend, Esq.)

CHAPTER X
THE HONOUR OF THE CLUB

I had not a notion that it would be Louise, that evening at the club-not the very faintest! How could I have? I did not know that the lot would fall to me. I was the first to draw. When I saw that the card which I had drawn was black, and that on it were inscribed, in gleaming crimson letters, the words, "The Honour of the Club," it gave me quite a start. Of course I knew that the odds were equal. But, somehow or other, I had never expected to draw the thing. I held it up in front of me.

"Gentlemen, the Honour of the Club is mine."

Pendarvon, in the chair, stood up. The others all rose with him.

"Gentlemen of the Murder Club, charge your glasses to the brim." They filled them with neat brandy. Pendarvon turned to me, holding his tumbler above his head.

"Mr. Townsend, we offer you our most sincere congratulations."

The others all chimed in-

"We do!"

They emptied their glasses, with inclinations of their heads towards me. I don't fancy that, ordinarily, they would all of them have been quite equal to drinking half a pint of brandy at one swallow, neat. Some of them did not like it even then. As young Rasper-Stenning, who was in front of me, put down his glass, he pulled a face, and caught at the table. I thought he was going to be ill.

Pendarvon went on-

"The Honour of the Club, Mr. Townsend, rests with you. We do not doubt that, this day month, you will return it to us, as untarnished as when it came into your keeping." They sat down. I rose.

"Gentlemen, I thank you. I give you my word that, with me, the Honour of the Club is safe. I will wear it next my heart. At our next meeting I will return it to you with its crimson of a still more vivid hue. I will show you that it is possible to paint even scarlet red."

I put the Honour of the Club into my pocket-book. I went away with Archie Beaupré. He wanted to know if I had any one in my mind's eye.

"Not any one-unless it's you."

He was lighting a cigarette. He laughed.

"It's against the rules to kill each other. Have a light?"

I had one.

"I'll kill some one, never you fear. What is likely to afflict me is not a poverty of choice, but an embarrassment of riches. The difficulty will be to know, not whom to kill, but whom to leave alive. Think of one's creditors. How they cry out for slaughter."

But Louise O'Donnel never occurred to me. I was too fond of her. The little witch had twined herself about my heart. When I thought of her, I thought of nothing else but kisses. I don't know how many women I have loved in my time-I hope that, as becomes a gentleman, I have loved them all! I never loved one better than, at that period of my career, I loved Louise.

True enough, later on my love grew fainter. The fault was hers. My experience, a tolerably wide one, teaches me that, when a man's love does grow less, almost invariably the woman is at fault. The days went by. The Honour of the Club remained in my pocket. I could not make up my mind whom to choose. When it came to the scratch, I found the task harder than I supposed. I

thought of my scamp of a brother. Goodness knows he would be all the better for killing. I might have pitched upon him had not another choice been positively thrust upon me. None of one's other relatives seemed worthy serious attention. The Depehurst people are a nuisance. But one scarcely felt justified in killing one of them, just by way of a joke, except it was Harold, who, what with his temperance fad, and his anti-gambling fad, and his social purity fad, and all the rest of his fads, is one of the most obnoxious prigs I know. On the other hand, if one commenced killing men simply because they were prigs, slaughter would know no ending.

Then Louise began to worry me. The usual story-her character at stake. As though it mattered! But, try as I would, I could not induce her to take my point of view. Never was a girl more unreasonable. I had always foreseen that she was the sort with whom one might have trouble. But then I had always supposed that she loved me. I made at least a dozen suggestions-delicately, and almost inferentially, as it were, because she was in a state of mind in which a slip on my part might have made her dangerous. Nothing would do for her except that I should marry her, which, of course, was absurd.

Then it happened. Up to the very last moment I was undecided. The fault was hers all through.

She was staying in lodgings at Brighton-really at my expense. I had enough expenses of that kind upon my hands just then! Her tenancy was up on the Monday. I told her to leave instead on the Sunday. She was to meet me at East Grinstead. She might have been under the impression that, having met me, she was to stay with me-if so, again the fault was hers. Leaving town early, I met her at East Grinstead Station. We lunched at a tavern near the station. After lunch we walked over to Turner's Hill. At the inn we had a hybrid sort of meal. Afterwards we started, as she supposed, to walk back to East Grinstead Station.

In so supposing, she was wrong.

She had been affectionate all day-too affectionate-with a sort of affection which suggested what a good wife she would be to her husband. When we left the inn, instead of going in the direction she supposed, I turned towards Paddockhurst, intending to walk through Tilgate Forest to Three Bridges Station, distant some four or five miles. She was a stranger in that country. I knew every inch of it-a lonely one it is at night. I made up my mind to put the issue plainly to her on the road. And that then, if she did not promise to be reasonable, I would do something for the Honour of the Club. The month allowed by the rules was up on the Thursday following. At the meeting I should be called to account.

Louise continued to be as unreasonable as ever-if anything, she was more so. She talked about my promises-as if they were anything! She cried, making quite a scene-or rather, a succession of scenes. She kept stopping, as we were going down Whitely Hill, accusing me of all sorts of things. I fancy she was rather taken aback when I turned into Tilgate Forest. It was pitch dark, and the walking was not too smooth. The game seemed wide awake. We could hear the rustling of unseen feet, the hurtling of unseen wings. Once we flushed a pheasant right from beneath our feet. A startled cock-pheasant is not the quietest of birds, but I don't think I ever heard one make such a noise as that bird did then. It startled even me. Louise was frightened out of her wits. I felt her trembling as she clung to my arm.

All the way along I kept saying to myself, "Now! now!" And I should have done it in the forest, only just as I was bringing myself to the sticking point, my eyes were saluted by a crimson glare. I thought for a moment we had gone further than I supposed, and had reached Wrench's farm. Then I thought of the charcoal-burners. You will find them somewhere in Tilgate Forest all the year round. Sure enough it was them. Their furnace was glowing blood-red-they had built it close to the path. They had raised a barricade of faggots to screen it from the wind. Louise wanted to stop and look at it, I believe, because she wanted the encouragement of its companionship. But I would not agree; I hurried her on. I had no desire to be seen just then, even by a charcoal-burner. As I was

congratulating myself that we should get past unnoticed, a short, stunted figure, starting out from behind the barricade, glared at us through the gloom.

Little was said by either of us, as, leaving the forest, we went across the fields. Reaching the railway, we passed under the arch. I helped Louise over the stile. We paused by the gate. About half a mile off were the village and the station. I resolved I would give her another chance; then if she was obstinate, I would do it.

She was obstinate, even, as it seemed to me, in a positively ascending scale.

"You promised to marry me. I have your letter. I trusted you. If you are going to leave me to face my shame alone, there is nothing for me but death."

That saying of hers finished it; there was nothing for her but death. Only it came a little sooner than she quite bargained for. Just at that moment a train went thundering over the bridge towards town. As it went a cloud must have parted, because, suddenly, the moon came out. It shone upon us two. Louise looked up at me through the moonbeams. Although she had been crying-and I never knew a woman's face which was improved by tears-her prettiness, revealed, all at once, by the moonlight, particularly struck me. She looked prettier even than when I first saw her at the Coliseum. Her beauty went to my heart. She put her hand upon my arm-a tiny hand it was.

"Reggie, has your love for me all gone? Don't you love me still?"

"Oh, yes," I said; "I love you still."

Then, putting my hands round her neck, I began to choke her. Hers was a slender neck, so that I was able to put my hands right round and get a good, firm grip. I don't think that at first she realised what I was up to. She was thinking more of love than of death. At any rate she did not attempt to scream. She looked to me as if she was startled. She looked more startled as I increased the pressure. Appetite came with eating. I had not altogether relished the business until I tackled it. But, as I got a tighter and tighter hold, and felt her convulsive writhings and her life slipping through my fingers, I began to feel the joy of killing, for the killing's sake. I began to be filled with a sort of ecstasy of passion-the sort of sensation which I had been in search of when I joined the club. After all, it was worth feeling. Lifting her up, I bent her backwards over the gate. She took longer to die than I should have supposed. When she had ceased to move, and went all limp in my grasp, I dropped her. My fingers were rigid with cramp. For some seconds I could not move them. When I could, the pain was excruciating. I found, too, that I was not only breathless, I was damp with perspiration.

She lay in an ugly heap on the ground. I arranged her draperies and straightened her. In her pocket was a purse-one which I had given her, so I was only regaining my own-some letters in an envelope, which, I guessed, were also mine, and a handkerchief. I knew that she was in the habit of wearing a portrait of mine, which I had been ass enough to give her, in a locket round her neck. Opening her dress at the bosom-which I had a job in doing-I found the locket tied to a piece of ribbon. Tearing it off, I put it, with the other things, into the inside pocket of my overcoat. Not wishing to leave the body lying there for the first passer-by to find in the morning, picking it up I carried it a few feet along the hedge which bordered the railway embankment. On the other side of this hedge shrubs were growing on the sloping banks. Raising the body above my head, I threw it, as far as I could, among these shrubs. I distinctly heard it fall. Then, immediately after, I heard a sort of rustling-exactly the sort of rustling which the body might have made had it been alive and was rising to its feet. I knew well enough that it was not alive; I had taken care of that. But the sound was, in one sense, so apposite, and, in another sense, so very much the other way, that it filled me with an unreasoning panic terror. I started off running across the open meadow as if I had been running for my life.

I had meant to keep along the Brighton line to Three Bridges Station. It was only when I struck the stile which leads to the footpath across the Horsham line that I realised what an idiot I was. Then I pulled up, and only then. I was in a muck of sweat. Sitting on the stile, I began to mop

myself with my pocket-handkerchief. I was exhausted-all of a quiver. Something of my absurd attack of terror was with me still. I actually thought that I had seen a face rise up from among the bushes and stare at me-white in the moonlight. As I recalled my folly-even though I was conscious it was folly-I shut my eyes and shivered.

As soon as I felt myself presentable and in a condition to move, I went along the Horsham line into the station. I gained the platform unobserved. I made at once for a refreshment-room. I was aware that it was not the part of wisdom to expose myself too much, but I felt that I must have a drink, even though directly after I was hanged. There being two refreshment-rooms on the up platform, I had two drinks at each of them.

The return half of my East Grinstead ticket was available to town from there; so I had no concern on that account. As I came out of the second refreshment-room, feeling that the stuff which they had sold me for brandy had done me good, I tackled a porter about a train. The next, and last, to London was at 10.20. Glancing at my watch, I found that it was just past the hour.

A woman, coming up to me as I moved from the porter, asked me the question which I had just been asking him. I noticed what a pleasant voice she had-few things in a woman appeal to me so much as that. Something in her bearing suggested that she might not resent a desire on my part for sociability. I gave her the information she required, with additions of my own, thrown out by way of feeler. She responded; we began to talk. The long and short of it was that I travelled with her in the same compartment to town.

Possibly I had at the moment an unconscious craving for congenial society-I am a gregarious animal. Certainly, she did appeal to what I take to be my instincts in an unusual degree. She was not in her first youth, but she was still good-looking, and she was not made up. I hate a woman who paints and powders; after all my experience I have never got over a feeling that a woman who does that sort of thing can't be clean. She was good style; if she was not exactly a woman of our world, then she was either very clever or very near it. She had seen the world, and it had not spoilt her. She was well dressed, and by the right people. I would not have minded doing a turn in the Park with her any day of the week.

She was frankness itself-it was that which made me shy a little. With strangers our women are not so frank, though that I have a sympathetic, not to say fascinating, way about me, I make no doubt. It is not a question of conceit; I know it. I ought to, considering it is the leading article of my stock-in-trade.

She said she was a widow. We got so thick that she gave me her card-Mrs. Daniel J. Carruth, with an address at West Kensington. She herself was English, her husband was American, which explained the name. She had been out of England several years; had returned to find herself alone. She felt her loneliness she said. I had no reason to suppose she lied.

"Have you no children?"

"No. I have scarcely known whether to be glad or sorry. There is something to be said on either side of the question." Looking down she began pulling at the pile of her sealskin coat. "You must know that my husband was many years my senior." I nodded. "It would have made a difference if he had been young."

Though I did not quite see the sequence, I nodded again. She had given me permission to light a cigarette. I was at my ease. I was conscious of feeling a really curious interest in Mrs. Carruth.

She glanced up at me. Hers were fine eyes, though about them there were two peculiarities-they seemed to be looking, not at me, but at something far away, and they always smiled.

"It seems so odd. When I left England, though I was poor, I had troops of friends. Now I have come back I am rich, but all my friends seem to have vanished into air. I have not one."

"That is a state of things which is not likely to continue long."

"Perhaps not; I hope not-one does not like to be friendless. But it is all so different to what I had looked forward to. When one has been absent a long time from home, and is able to return

at last, one dreams dreams. Only those who have experienced it can know how" – she hesitated, as if for a word-"strange it feels when one is forced to recognise that those dreams have been but dreams." She glanced down; then up again. "I have many acquaintances; they are not friends."

I agreed with her, asking myself at the same time what she might happen to mean. Was she dropping a hint to me? If so, I might be more than half disposed to take it. Mrs. Carruth appealed to me strangely, every moment more and more. The minutes sped; before I knew it we were in town.

I saw her into a hansom at Victoria. She asked me to call on her; to renew and improve the acquaintance made in the train. I said that I would. What is more, when she was gone, I told myself that I would keep my promise.

Her voice lingered in my ears.

CHAPTER XI
WHAT MR. TENNANT HAD WRITTEN

There were several letters by the morning's post. One's creditors, at any rate, seemed to be in town. Do those sort of people ever go away? Lily Langdale wanted me to look her up. Confound little Lily Langdale! I had looked her up too much already. Chirpy Mason, writing from Monte Carlo, wanted to know if I could do him a hundred or two. Would I wire? No; I would neither do the one or the other. I knew Chirpy. He had probably made the same request to half a dozen more of us. There were only two letters among the heap worth looking at. One contained just two type-written words, "Buy Boomjopfs." No address, no signature, no nothing. I put that aside. It would entail my going into the City as soon as I could. The other letter was from Haselton Jardine: -

"Sloane Gardens.

"Dear Townsend, – If you are in town and this catches you, and you have nothing else to do, come round to-morrow (Monday) and dine *en famille*. Only Dora! I have something which I rather wish to say to you.

"Yours,
"H. J."

I was to go down to them at Cockington on Friday. What had he to say to me which would not keep till then, I wondered. But I had nothing else to do-and there was Dora! So, scribbling a line of acceptance, I told Burton to take it round. When I opened the paper I found that Sir Haselton was leading for the defendants in the great diamond earring libel case-Mrs. Potter Segundi against Lady Lucretia Jenkyns. I should not have minded being in court to see the fun. They say Mrs. P. S. has brass enough to start a foundry. I know, of my own knowledge, that Lady J. is fairly well equipped. When I am in Queer-street I hope that Sir Haselton will be briefed for me.

It was past one when I got out. I ought to have gone straight to the City. Instead, I dropped into the Climax, and had just one rubber. I cut Pendarvon against Graeme and Bicketts. Pendarvon and I had the luck of the devil: we scored a bumper. Altogether, with bets, I walked off with about a pony. When I reached the City it was not very far from four. I made for a broker in Austin Friars-a man named Tennant, Thomas Tennant-as steady a file as ever I saw. I have done a good deal of business through him at various times. I don't fancy that he has much nose of his own; but he keeps quiet, asks no questions, and follows instructions to the letter.

Tennant was out. He was not in the House. A clerk thought that he was at Danby's; he would go and see. I knew where Danby's was-it is one of those City restaurants where there is more drank than ate-so I saved that clerk his trouble, and went myself.

I spotted Tennant directly I got inside the place-a plump little fellow, with round, pasty face, and hair which always looked to me as if he soaped it. A mild, unassuming neat-as-ninepence sort of man. He had a table to himself. As a rule, in a mild sort of way, he is jolly as a sandboy. Just then it appeared to me that he seemed hipped. Taking a chair on the opposite side of the table, carelessly, thoughtlessly enough, I took hold of a scrap of paper on which he had been scribbling. When I glanced at it a thrill went down my back. It was a bolt out of the blue. I do not think that in all my life before I was ever so taken by surprise.

Tennant had been scribbling all over the sheet of paper a woman's name-"Louise O'Donnel." That my appearance on the scene at that particular moment was a pure coincidence, I had, of course, no doubt. It could not have been otherwise. But how came he to have been writing that name? I could scarcely believe my eyes. I stared at the paper, and then at him.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked.

"The meaning of what?"

When I showed him what he had been writing on the piece of paper he seemed to be as much taken aback as I was. At first he wanted me to believe that he had been writing a name over and over again without having an idea of what it was that he was doing. I could not make him out at all. He made me feel uneasy.

So far as I was aware, I was the only person in England who had been acquainted with the girl's real name. She had always assured me that such was the case, and I had believed her. Everybody, except myself, knew her by her stage name-Milly Carroll. Her father was the only relative she had in the world, and he was in Colorado. Father and daughter had fallen out. Coming to England with a burlesque company from New York, she had left him on the other side of the world. If this story of hers was true-and I did not, and do not, believe she lied-she was not that sort of girl-how did Mr. Thomas Tennant come to be in possession of her name?

I put the question to him point blank.

"What do you know about Louise O'Donnel?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Tennant, I say!"

"I heard it mentioned for the first time in my life last night."

"Last night?" The coincidence made me shiver again.

"As I was coming up from Brighton."

"Brighton?" I had to gasp for breath. "Did you come up last night from Brighton? By what train?"

"The 8.40."

I figured it out in my mind. I should not be surprised if that was the identical train which had rattled over the arch while Louise and I had been leaning against the gate, just before I did something for the Honour of the Club. And Tennant was in it. "Was the long arm of coincidence going to make things pleasant for me?"

"What did you hear about Louise O'Donnel as you were coming up from Brighton?"

"Nothing. The name was casually mentioned in my hearing, that was all. It seems to have stuck in my head."

It did seem to have stuck in his head-and it seemed to have crept unawares from the ends of his fingers. That something had been said or done to fix the name in his memory, I did not doubt. What had been said or done was another matter. Somehow I did not seem to care to question him too closely. Generally, in his own placid, fish-like fashion, Tennant is as cool as you please. Then he was as fidgety as if he had been sitting on hot bricks. He said he was ill, and he looked it-if his ailment was not more mental than physical I misjudged him.

I clean forgot all about the Boomjopf shares, which I had come up to instruct him to buy. I left Tennant in Danby's without having mentioned them to him from first to last. Indeed, I never thought of them till I pulled Groeden's tip out of my pocket when I got home to dress for dinner. Seeing the girl's name upon that sheet of paper made me all of a fluster.

Scarcely had I left Danby's when I all but cannoned into my scamp of a brother. He seemed as little pleased to see me as I was to see him, but as I had seen and heard nothing of him for the last two years, I thought that I might as well do the fraternal. He looked seedy enough, and cad enough to boot. The cad was in his face and bearing; the seediness was in his clothes. He had on what looked like, not a second, but a fourth-hand overcoat, trimmed with the usual imitation astrachan. If he had his way, I believe that he would be buried in imitation astrachan.

"Not in prison then?"

"No." He fidgeted inside his clothes. "I'm not in prison."

"Recently come out?"

"Nor have I recently come out."

"Or just going in?"

"Not unless, my dear Reginald, it is to visit you."

Alexander was cheeky; he must be in funds, although he did not look it.

"May I ask, my dear Alexander, what means you are at present taking to increase your fortune?"

He blew his nose with an old silk handkerchief and a flourish. Did he ever do anything without a flourish-even pick a pocket?

"I don't know, my dear Reginald, that it much matters to you what I am doing, but I don't mind telling you, in confidence, that I am at present devoting my energies to the detection of crime."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.