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A Woman's Burden

A Novel

By Fergus Hume

Chapter I

A Queer Adventure

It was midnight—midnight on Waterloo Bridge. A plague was over the city—the concentrated vomit of a million and more chimneys wrapped all in an Egyptian darkness.

The miracle of Moses could not have produced a deeper gloom—an atmosphere more impenetrable. It clung to the skin, it even pressed against the eyeballs. It might in truth have been that very outer darkness which we are taught is reserved for those amongst us who are sinners.

Big Ben and his brethren of the steeples struck a muffled twelve, seeming to insist upon their strokes the more as if they knew their dials were hidden from all sight. The very gas lamps entered into rivalry, some looming out mere splotches of dirty yellow light, while here and there one more modern than its fellows managed successfully to penetrate the gloom. The bridge leapt across the river from fog-bank to fog-bank, like the bridge in Mira's vision, and if the chill mist lifted a trifle toward the centre, it was but a matter of a few feet. And above it all presumably there shone the stars and moon in their spacious firmament, they and their kindly influence shut out, it might be for ever, by the relentless pall.

And in the darkness on the bridge, there crawled and lurked and squatted the noisome creatures of the night. They could hear the sullen lapping of the unseen river against the piles, as it swept full tide from the

sea. To their ears, sharpened by hunger and misery, the waters were all articulate, inviting them to exchange their stony resting-place for its softer bed below. And they pondered greatly at the invitation. Were it not better to accept it, and let their half-starved bodies drift seaward with the morning ebb? Nothing, they thought, and truly, could be worse than their present plight. Were it not better to end existence now and for all time? Yet so does the mind of man shrink from the unknown—revolt against the almighty plunge from light to darkness, that of all those hungry miserable creatures, not one got further than the pondering—not one was there who would brave the momentary wrench which should part him from this earthly wretchedness, and give him peace, oblivion even, and that because he did not know, and dared not solve the problem.

So the waters surged on ruthlessly through the arches into the heart of the land, and the fog grew thicker, colder, and more clammy over the city.

Yet humdrum respectability had its representative here withal; and that in the person of an elderly, genteel, moneyed, and apparently unexceptionable gentleman, who should surely rather have been tucked away between blankets, than abroad at such a time and on such a night. For ragged poverty, bedless and foodless, to camp on these stone benches, and seek oblivion there, was in the ordinary course of existence as it runs its way in the daily and nightly round of the great city. Its victims have ample time for reflection, retrospective or prospective—a ruined past, or a wholly problematic future. Workhouse or prison, suicide or starvation—such is their food for thought, with but little or no choice between the evils. But for an irreproachable gentleman of years, who had every sort of comfort at his call, to be pacing about the Surrey side was, in the existing circumstances, truly remarkable.

He appeared to have lost his way, which of itself was natural enough considering all things. He stopped every now and then, and paused, obviously in doubt which way to turn. As he stood deliberating, a small figure emerged, as it were, from nowhere—a very ragged imp—and huskily demanded,

“Wot the blazes ‘e was arter?”

Then the gentleman addressed the small figure:

“What bridge is this?” he asked, through the muffler which was tight around his neck.

“It’s wuth a tanner, any way, m’lord,” answered the boy—such a ragged, stunted, evil-looking boy, true product of the London mud.

Respectability felt instinctively that it was face to face with Iniquity, and that, too, in no very choice neighbourhood, and in a thick fog to boot. Respectability therefore took counsel for a moment, and in the end produced a coin.

Iniquity snatched it, bit it, and spat upon it—why this latter it is difficult to say—through all of which tests the coin seemingly emerged triumphant. It was pocketed, and the sought-for information was hoarsely supplied.

“It’s Wat’loo Bridge, m’lord.”

Then he vanished into the fog like a dismissed spirit.

The elderly gentleman groped his way on, ever keeping touch of the stone balustrade. Suddenly he started at the sound of a shrill whistle. He quickened his step, for he knew not what such a call might portend, and he had no fancy for being the means of supplying the breakfast-table next morning with sensational matter.

Yet as he moved quickly over the sticky pavement, there came upon him the feeling that he was being followed. What if the boy were a pilot-fish, and had returned to direct the shark towards his prey, and the shark were close at his heels now? The thought was disquieting, and took strong hold of him. He looked round for a policeman, forgetful in his apprehension of the fog. At last he took to his heels. Such a thing it was safe to say he had not done for years, and those years had had their say, as was quickly demonstrated, for he got no further than the centre of the bridge. There a murky halo of light was some small comfort. He paused. What was it he heard? Hurried footsteps surely! His blood seemed more than ever to chill, and he could feel his heart thumping against his ribs. It struck him that this sort of thing was very bad for him. He clutched at

his umbrella for want of any stouter weapon. Almost as he did so, a man lunged from out the darkness, and grasped him by the throat.

That grasp meant murder, and he knew it. A hundred trivialities flitted through his mind, as he had always been told they did in face of death. He managed to look round, though choking and gasping as he was, he could not cry for help. And now it came, as all else had come, apparently from nowhere—unaccountably.

A woman rushed up and flung herself on the arm that was strangling him. As in a dream he heard what she said.

“No, Jabez. No—let him go, let him go!”

“Miriam!”

The hand relaxed its grip, and its victim fell on the pavement.

“You here? Get out of it, can’t you?”

“No, I will not. Leave the man alone I tell you. Would you murder him?”

“Yes—for your sake. Aren’t you starving—aren’t we both starving? Curse him. I’ll have his watch anyhow. Ah, would you!” (There was evidence of some slight show of resistance on the part of Respectability, who was now gathering together his scattered senses.) “Do that and I’ll squeeze the life out of you!”

A flutter of skirts and a rush. Then the sound of the woman’s voice—a refined voice—raised as in desperation.

“Jabez, Jabez! I’m on the parapet, Jabez, and I swear if you do not leave him I will throw myself into the river!”

“Miriam, come down I say, come down.”

“Only if you leave him!”

“Damn him then; let him go to the devil!”

With this he kicked the worthy citizen, who retaliated by suddenly regaining power of speech, and calling loudly for aid.

Then the pilot-fish came in sight again.

“Nab his ticker!” he yelled.

“No, no; let him go!”

The woman leapt down, and held them both at bay.

“Go,” she cried. “Go—the police!”

At which Respectability breathed a heartfelt “Amen.”

“Slit ‘is bloomin’ whistle,” said the small boy, who was as uncompromising as he was impolite. He made off followed by the shark. The worthy member of society, assisted by the woman, scrambled to his feet. Then the gloom suddenly became illumined by the rays from a lantern—an unmistakably official lantern.

“Hullo, wot’s all this?”

“Constable!” gasped the rescued one, “constable, I have been violently assaulted, and robbed of—”

“No, not robbed,” interrupted the woman called Miriam, pointing to his chain.

“Oh, it’s *your* little game, is it?” said the one having authority, bringing his light to bear upon her. “Let’s ‘ave a look at you—a bad lot ‘less I’m much mistaken. Better give ‘er in charge, sir.”

“No, no, my man, on the contrary, I am very much indebted to this good lady!”

“Lady, lady! Oh, yes, she’s a real lady, she is, an’ no mistake.”

“At all events, officer, to her intervention I owe my life, so it will be well if you refrain from alluding to her in that way.”

The woman ignored the policeman, and turned to the man she had saved.

“I must leave you now,” she said calmly. “The constable will no doubt see you safely home—for a consideration.”

X103 scowled. He did not like things put thus brutally. He was a trifle subdued too by the elderly gentleman's attitude, which despite his deplorable plight had not been devoid of pomposity, not to say dignity. He felt he was a little bit out of his beat. It was quite right that he should see the gentleman safely on his way home—it was more than probable, too, that he would be offered a suitable reward for so doing. It would not be for him to refuse such reward, no matter what form it might take. So mused X103. He still continued to direct his bull's-eye toward the woman. He could see her face clearly, so could the elderly gentleman, who, he had been quick to notice, wore a fur coat. It was a queer affair. The woman winced under his scrutiny.

“Red ‘air, black eyes!” muttered the constable. “I’ll swear she’s a bad ‘un.”

The elderly gentleman did not again rebuke him. Even in such circumstances he was not one to hear what was not meant for his hearing. He thought the woman's face was a remarkable one, emaciated, pallid, and hunted in expression though it was. Those dark eyes seemed doubly large by contrast with the sunken cheeks—sunken for sure, by the ravages of direst want. The locks of auburn hair, which fell on either side of that low white forehead, could not hide the many lines of care and misery with which it was imprinted. She was gaunt and wasted too; her hands were as bird's claws, and she leaned heavily, almost lifelessly, against the stonework of the bridge. Starvation, outward and inward, was there in all its hideousness, having driven beauty far afield, and left the bare suggestion of what had been, as if to accentuate the more the horrible completeness of its work. Starvation was there in that uncertain, hesitating manner—starvation in the very shawl clutched strenuously with one hand to her bosom—starvation, which, having worn the body, strove now to break the spirit.

But the spirit was strong in the woman, and while she was mute, she was still defiant. She met the gaze of the policeman now, and though she met it in silence, her eyes declared convincingly—and that to one whose daily way was choked with crime—that she knew not evil. The elderly gentleman understood it all.

“Constable,” he said, “you will conduct this young lady”—he emphasised the word—“to the end of your beat. There you can hand her over to your

comrade, and so on in turn until we reach the Pitt Hotel in Craven Street.”

The man saluted.

But the woman spoke.

“I cannot go with you, sir,” she said feebly, “for I must return at once.”

“Return?—where to? Not to that man?—that Jabez!”

“To Jabez,” she answered defiantly.

“But—but you will faint on the way—you are starved. At least allow me to do something for you—you, who have done so much for me. You will, you must take something to eat. I am afraid there is no cab to be found in this fog. Try and walk, Miss Miriam—”

She offered no further resistance, but drew her shawl more closely round her, and took the proffered arm of the man. X103 looked on somewhat grimly. It would be incorrect to say he was not nettled—he was distinctly, for by this arrangement he need not look for anything substantial. But X103 had not been in the force these many years without learning something of philosophy. So he vented his indignation and sense of general injury by putting to utter rout certain shadowy forms that had gathered round the halo of his lantern in the space of the last five minutes. They thought, no doubt, he was unnecessarily abrupt in his methods, but they dispersed without trouble, if a trifle reluctantly.

When the two had reached the far end of the bridge, constable X103 could not resist one parting shaft.

“She’s a bad ‘un, sir, take my word for it. I should send her off, sir, if I wos you. She’s bound to get you into trouble.”

“It strikes me you will get yourself into trouble, my friend, if you don’t hold your tongue. Ah, here is the man on the next beat. It is he, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. He’ll see you into the Strand, sir.”

“Very well then, here you are. Good night. Come, Miriam.”

Saying which the respectable elderly gentleman passed a coin to X103, and proceeded to button-hole his fellow. They vanished into the thickness, and virtue rewarded turned his bull's-eye on to the palm of his hand.

“Ten bob in gold! I'm blowed! He's a good 'un after all, that old rib. Seemed to know her name, and use it pat enough. H'm!”

And in that last grunt there was a whole world of possibility.

Chapter II

A Strange Arrangement

When, conceivably out of gratitude and pure philanthropy, this respectable elderly gentleman took this apparently disreputable, and, by no means elderly female, under his wing, and in the early morning hours appeared at the door of a sedate and wholly decorous hostelry, with a demand for a night's lodging for them both, he ran a very great risk of being misunderstood. They had been passed on from policeman to policeman with every care, though the pilotage dues were by no means inconsiderable. And, strange to say, they were admitted without parley.

Now Miriam had expected a vastly different reception. She was in no way oblivious to the appearance she presented, and was naturally inclined to exaggerate, rather than otherwise, its effect, notwithstanding the irreproachable bearing of her cavalier. The fact that she was received without demur by the landlady, made it, in her mind, only the more remarkable. She had a fair idea of the tendencies of her sex. But evidently the gentleman was known here, such knowledge being—it was equally evident—beyond question, for Mrs. Perks, to judge by the look of her, was not one to grant the benefit of any doubt. Her effect upon blue litmus paper would assuredly have been most striking and instantaneous. In spite of everything Miriam fell to thinking. But she was too weary and famished to cogitate for long. She decided to accept the circumstances as they were.

“Sir,” said Mrs. Perks, addressing the elderly gentleman in the shrillest of voices, “if you only knew what I've suffered this blessed night—but that you never will. Oh, the awful 'orrors and ghastly visions I've 'ad of your 'avin' your throat cut from ear to ear, no less. Bein' a widder, and

‘avin’ no manly ‘eart to lean on since Perks went below—that is ‘is body I should say, for, as is well-known to you, Mr. Bartons, ‘is soul soared straight upwards—I feel these things the more. Thank God you’re ‘ere, Mr. Bartons, safe and sound, and not ‘acked about as I seed you in my mind’s eye. ‘Eaven be praised, I say, for it’s long-sufferin’ to us all!”

Then Mrs. Perks looked fixedly at Miriam, and stiffened herself into a very pillar of disapprobation. Then again she addressed Mr. Barton.

“And now, sir, p’raps you’ll explain this.”

“This,” being, without doubt, indicative of Miriam, who, overcome as she was, had been unable to resist the grateful ease of a lounging chair close at hand.

So it was not going to be such plain sailing after all. The landlady had, it seemed, no intention of foregoing her more purely feminine prerogative. For a moment Miriam had it in her mind to make a clean bolt of it even then. But her deliverer stepped forward. She saw him now, as he stood in the light, for the first time clearly. A shrivelled-up diminished countenance it was she thought. He was quite bald, too, and his mouth was hard—almost ascetic. His looks belied him surely, for he had been all kindness and solicitude for her in her plight. Divested of his fur coat, his evening dress accentuated the leanness of his figure, as it does accentuate either one tendency or the other. He was quite short—hardly as tall as she herself. She wondered why he should so have troubled himself about her. To judge from his face, gratitude for what she had done for him would not go for much. Could it be that he had some ulterior motive? Hardly—unless—unless; but her weary brain refused to follow up the train of thought it had conceived.

As it turned out Mr. Barton made short work of the landlady and her required “explanation.” Turning after her sharply, he crushed her volubility utterly by the adoption of a method nothing if not Socratic.

“Tell me, Mrs. Perks,” he said, “how long have you known me?”

“Lawks a mercy, Mr. Bartons, sir, what a question! Why, maid, and wife, and widder, ‘aven’t I known you these forty years?”

“Quite so. And during that time have you discovered me to have any strong inclination towards your sex?”

“You ‘ates ‘em, Mr. Bartons, sir—’ates ‘em, I know you does, and small blame to you. It ain’t much as I thinks of ‘em myself—it’s mostly ‘ussies they are.”

Then again Mrs. Perks’ eyes rested on the unhappy Miriam. She was too attractive altogether, despite her pitiful state, to please the good widow.

“That being so then, Mrs. Perks, you must allow me to say, ‘don’t be a fool!’ Had I not had you in my mind as a thoroughly reliable and sensible woman, I should not have brought this young lady here.”

Mrs. Perks snorted. It was not quite so sonorous a snort as that with which the policeman had accompanied his repetition of the word “lady,” but it meant exactly the same thing. There was a world of contempt in it. Mr. Barton continued:

“But I feel sure, Mrs. Perks, I have not been mistaken in my estimate of your sound common-sense. Let me tell you that this *lady* has preserved my life—yes, Mrs. Perks, my life, and my purse. There are, I may say, other reasons for my bringing her here, but that I think should suffice for you. She has saved my life, Mrs. Perks. You will be so good therefore as to send something to eat, and a bottle of wine here, and to prepare the young lady’s room.”

“Oh, Mr. Bartons, so you *was* in danger! I know’d it. I felt sure of it.” She pressed the candlestick she carried so close to her that for a moment her curl papers were in imminent danger of conflagration. “Didn’t I see a windin’ sheet in the wick o’ the candle? didn’t I ‘ear the ‘owlin’ of a dog? Yes, Mr. Bartons, I did, and wot’s more, when I tossed a coin to see if it was true, it came up ‘eads, which, as is well-known, means death.”

“Well, I am really very sorry to be the cause of dispersing such overwhelming and convincing phenomena, Mrs. Perks; but, as you see, I’m alive, and what’s more I am exceedingly hungry. Now run along, there’s a good soul, and let us have something to eat.”

With a final wave of her candlestick, Mrs. Perks retreated, muttering,

“If you was a kinder-’earted sort, Mr. Bartons, I could understand it; but you ain’t. It’s well-known as a flint’s putty to you, and I’m puzzled at your goin’s on, I am. Kindness—no, don’t tell me; it ain’t no kindness. She ain’t got no weddin’-ring neither. But food and drink they wants anyhow, so food and drink they must ‘ave, I suppose.”

Mr. Barton poked the remnant of the fire. There was an unpleasant expression in his eye, as he looked at the exhausted woman before him. Mrs. Perks was unusually trying to-night. Miriam was leaning back now. Her eyes were closed and her head drooped. She was an intensely pitiable object. But there was no pity in Mr. Barton’s expression as he looked at her—no glimmer of it. He was scrutinising her searchingly, cruelly. His gaze was something more than intense. She woke with a start.

“Don’t speak,” he said, as he saw her lips part. “Not a word—you are much too weak to talk. After you have had something, then I’ll talk to you.”

She obeyed. She felt as if all power of resistance of mind or body were leaving her. He looked at her critically again. How wasted she was! The cheeks were completely sunken. The lips were blue rather than red. Her whole expression was one of weariness. Yet withal it was a beautiful face—it had been of surpassing beauty. Intellectual, too, and refined in every line. And Barton had studied many faces in his life—and he saw more in this one than was apparent to the casual observer. He rubbed his hands in satisfaction at the result of his inspection. Indeed, he could not repress an audible expression of it—a kind of fiendish chuckle.

It roused Miriam again. She opened her eyes with something like fear in them. A feeling had come over her of intense apprehension. She felt, indeed, as though she were in the clutches of some enemy—an enemy not of herself alone, but an enemy of mankind—of humanity. That such a one could be before her in the shape and person of Mr. Richard Barton—this respectable, middle-aged gentleman—was impossible. The mere idea was preposterous. It was no doubt a symptom of her ill-nourished condition. Yet later on she remembered what she had felt at that moment.

Then appeared Mrs. Perks, bearing the supper-tray herself. She placed it on the table under the flaring gas-lamp, and was about to commence her chatter, when Barton interrupted her.

“You can return in an hour, Mrs. Perks.”

“Ho, indeed, and when am I to ‘ave my natural rest, Mr. Bartons, I should like to know, seein’ as ‘ow in an hour it’ll be ‘alf-past two? But I’ll go, sir, though I must say as I can’t ‘old with such goin’s on in my ‘ouse.”

“Your house—!”

“Well, if it ain’t mine it ought to be, seein’ as I work that ‘ard that I’m just skin and bone!”

“Now understand me, Mrs. Perks, if you don’t take yourself off without another word, you will not be even an inmate of this house to-morrow!”

The woman turned as pale as her sallow complexion would admit. She opened her lips to speak, but with a great effort refrained. She seemed to be within measurable distance of fainting. The man’s expression as he fixed his eyes upon her had been horrible. She felt deadly sick. In the passage she paused, recovering herself somewhat, and shook her fist at the closed door. Then she got herself a glass of brandy—a thing she rarely did.

“That woman was born on my estate in Hampshire,” explained Barton, drawing a chair to the table for Miriam. “You’d hardly think it perhaps, but she began as scullery-maid to my mother, and ended as housekeeper to me. I brought her to London, and placed her here in this house, which I may tell you is my own property. You understand now how I was able to bring you here. An old gentleman and an unknown woman! What decent hotel would have taken in the pair of us! He, he! I know my own knowing.”

But Miriam made no protest. She ate and drank ravenously. Mr. Barton sipped his wine and watched her. Occasionally he gave utterance to the peculiar chuckle which had wakened her before. The same uncanny feeling came again upon her. She could not shake it off.

“I wish now I had left you to Jabez,” she said suddenly.

“Indeed, why?—that is the sort of speech which I should not make if I were you, more especially whilst you are consuming meat and drink of mine. Why do you wish such a thing?”

“Because I think you are very wicked.”

“Wicked—how? Surely I have fed you. I have ordered for you a comfortable bed, and, what’s more, if you answer satisfactorily the questions I am going to put to you, I intend to procure for you a situation—how then am I wicked?”

“I don’t know—but I feel that you are. You remind me of a rat, and I loathe rats! I can see that woman who has gone feels as I do.”

“Perhaps. Still she obeys me.”

Miriam rose and took up her shawl.

“I am going,” she said curtly.

“Indeed. I think you will also obey me, Miriam. Sit down I say.”

He pointed to a chair. She strove not to meet his eye, but his gaze compelled her. Their eyes met, and, for a moment, were in desperate conflict. Then the woman sat down. She was in a cold perspiration, and was trembling too.

“That’s right—I thought you would. Go back to Jabez would you?—well, we shall see.”

“I thank you for what you have given me, Mr. Barton; but I feel under no obligation to you, since I saved your life. The obligation, if any, is yours. But we will cry quits, if you please.”

“Not at all—as you say, it is my turn now. Let the benefits come from me, and the—well, the gratitude from you.”

“Mr. Barton, understand I wish nothing from you. Allow me to go.”

“Where, back to Jabez—the man who murders strangers because you starve? No, my good young lady. It is for me to save your Jabez from the

gallows by retaining you—that is if—By the way, what is your full name?” he asked abruptly.

His eyes were full upon her again. She felt herself unable to shake off their horrid fascination; all power of resistance seemed to leave her.

“My name is Miriam Crane,” she said faintly.

“And what are you?”

“The daughter of a sea captain.”

“H’m—respectable enough on the face of it. And how do you come to be in this plight?”

“When my mother died, my father left me in a seaport town in charge of a friend of his, having paid my board for a year. He was lost at sea, and I was turned out of doors by his friend. I came to London thinking to get some engagement as a governess.”

“Oh, you are well educated then?”

“Sufficiently so to teach children. But without influence or references I could get nothing. My small stock of money soon went. I pawned everything I had, even my clothes. I even tried to make a living by selling flowers, but I could not. Everywhere I went, in everything I did, I was unlucky. I sank and sank until—”

“Until right down at the bottom I suppose you met this Jabez of yours. He is your lover?”

“He does love me,” blazed forth Miriam, “but I am an honest woman.”

“Naturally,” Barton chuckled, “otherwise with your beauty you certainly would not be starving. Why are you so honest?”

“I believe in God,” her eyes sought his searchingly. “You don’t,” she said.

“Perhaps not—nevertheless, I am honest too.”

“That depends what you call honest,” retorted Miriam. “You have plenty of money, no doubt, so you can’t very well help behaving so as to keep your freedom. But for that—”

She hesitated, but gave him quite clearly to understand her meaning.

“Perhaps’ again,” said Barton. “You mean to say that I have not sufficiently strong incentive to be anything else—that if I had, that if I were a poor man for instance, I should probably land in prison.”

“I am quite sure you would.”

“Dear me, you seem to have made up your mind about me very definitely—it hasn’t taken you long either.”

“I judge by your face. As I read it, it is a page of devil-print!”

Barton rubbed his hands. He seemed more tickled than anything else. Certainly he was in no wise offended.

“I believe I have found a real pearl in the gutter,” he chuckled. Then he turned to her,

“Tell me now, why did you save me from your Jabez?”

“I did not know you then—perhaps if I had, your body would now be lying in the river.”

“And my soul—what about that?”

“You should know—if you are a man and not an animal.”

“You are mistaken, young lady—you think me a libertine, no doubt—”

“Oh, nothing of the kind—you are too hard even for that. If I had any doubt about it, I should not be here with you now.”

“Well, well, let us hope that after a little longer acquaintance your opinion of me will improve. For the present I wish to befriend you all I can—that at least should be a point in my favour.”

“But why—why, I ask, should you wish to befriend me? What is your object?”

“That you shall know when the times comes. Let us resume your very interesting story.”

“You have heard it. I told you I met Jabez, and that he loves me. I suspected when he went out to-night that he was desperate—that he might steal, murder even, if by so doing he could obtain food for me—that is why I followed him, to save him, and, as it happened, I did save him, and you too.”

“And the boy who acted a jackal to your lion—who is he?”

“Shorty—oh, he is a wicked little creature, who ought by rights to be in a reformatory.”

“Indeed. Now please attend to me, Miss Crane. I am no philanthropist, nor am I a fool, and you yourself seem willing to acquit me of any amatory intentions. You will easily believe then that it is from no feeling of sentiment that I have brought you here to-night. One strong dose of that kind of thing has lasted me through life. I suffered badly at the hands of your sex once, but once only. I am never likely to suffer again. Nevertheless, I confess that if it had not been for your beauty, I should have left you there on the bridge.”

“I am not beautiful,” contradicted Miriam.

“No?—well, you must allow me to be judge of that. I repeat, my intentions are perfectly prosaic. I am no Don Juan of gutter-girls. I see in you exactly such a person as I need for the carrying through of a scheme I have in hand.”

Miriam rose.

“I refuse to have anything to do with it,” she said emphatically.

“Had you not better learn what it is first?”

“No. I am sure it is vile.”

She made towards the door.

But his eyes caught hers, and she had to yield. What power had this man over her? It was horrible. She could make no effort of body or will

against him. And he stood there grinning, as she thought the devil himself might grin at the capture of a spotless soul. She sank back weakly in a chair.

“You seem exhausted,” said he. “I’ll ring for Mrs. Perks. You must go to bed at once. We’ll finish our little talk to-morrow. For the moment I will ask you only one more question. Who is Jabez?”

“I refuse to tell you.”

“Tell me, who is Jabez, I say,” he repeated, keeping his eyes upon her steadily.

And she told him. But when Mrs. Perks came in, she was lying in a dead faint.

Part I

A Woman’s Burden

Chapter I

Mrs. Dacre Darrow

Mrs. Dacre Darrow was a much misunderstood woman—at least she said so frequently. Her husband, dead now some five years, had never been able to comprehend her sentimental nature; her uncle, Richard Barton, hard old cynic that he was, did not appreciate her tender heart; and the world at large could not, or would not, understand her. And so Mrs. Darrow posed as a martyr in her day and generation. The late Mr. Dacre Darrow had been a barrister and a failure. He had left her with no income and one child to rear. In this dilemma she had sought the Manor House at Lesser Thorpe, and had proposed to keep house for her Uncle Barton in return for her maintenance. Uncle Barton considered her proposition, and ended by installing both mother and son with three hundred a year in a small and quaint cottage on the outskirts of the park. This was too much altogether for Mrs. Darrow. Could a woman bear such brutal treatment silently? She thought not; nor, in fact, did she. On the contrary she abused Uncle Barton daily and hourly. When not thus occupied, she was as a rule busy in endeavouring to get money out of him, though this latter was, as she expressed it, heartbreaking work. It was rarely possible to extract from him anything beyond her

stated income. Small wonder, then, that Mrs. Darrow regarded Uncle Barton as a brute and herself as a martyr.

“Just think, dear,” she wailed to her friend, Hilda Marsh, “he has five thousand a year and that large empty house, yet he lets me live in this pokey cottage. Three hundred a year! It is hardly enough to buy one’s clothes.”

Hilda, occupying her favourite position before a mirror, made no reply. As the daughter of a poor doctor, and one of a large family, she considered Mrs. Darrow very well off. She could not sympathise with her in her constant grumbling. But she was wise in her generation, was Hilda, and did not argue with the widow, firstly because Mrs. Darrow never argued fairly, but dogmatised and invariably lost her temper; and secondly, because Hilda had more to lose than to gain from quarrelling with her. She was a pretty, vain, selfish girl, and calculating to boot. Mrs. Darrow’s social influence in the parish was useful to her, so she trimmed her sails accordingly. At the present moment she was in the little drawing-room for afternoon tea. She patted a rebellious little curl into shape as in some sort of excuse for not replying to Mrs. Darrow’s latest complaint against Uncle Barton. The widow continued to protest against the way in which she was being treated; and Hilda continued, so far as was possible, to avoid contention, to admire her own pretty face in the glass, until tea was brought in. Then, and then only, did Mrs. Darrow, ever fond of her comforts and blest with the best of good appetites, brisk up. But true to her indolent disposition, she asked Hilda to make the tea.

“You do it so well, dear,” she said coaxingly; “I taught you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Julia, of course you taught me, that is why I can make it to your satisfaction,” said Hilda, sitting down to the bamboo table.

She called Mrs. Darrow Julia at the widow’s express request, for—in Mrs. Darrow’s opinion—such familiarity tended to diminish the difference in their ages. How she arrived at this conclusion was known only to Mrs. Darrow, who never condescended to explain her reasons for either speech or action. It was so, because it was so, and there was an end of it. And invariably the adoption of so uncompromising an attitude was successful. By its means she managed to emerge triumphant from her fiercest altercations. By alternately shifting her ground and refusing

to give any reasons, she always reduced her opponent to a moral pulp. In effect, her tactics were undeniable.

Hilda's attractions were of that order which suited her present occupation. She looked well at a tea-table. She wore white, touched here and there with the palest of blue, and her hands moved ever so deftly among the egg-shell china cups and saucers, with their sprawling dragons of green and red. She was essentially the Dresden china type herself. A dainty figure, a transparent complexion, dark blue eyes, and hair the colour of ripe corn: such were the outward and visible attributes of Hilda Marsh. She looked like an angel, and was frequently taken for one—more especially by men. Her beauty was that of a peach, and, like a peach, she possessed a very hard kernel. Not even Mr. Barton had a more obdurate heart. However, she succeeded in hiding this from all save her own family, and they, being anxious for Hilda to make a good match, were so kind as to remain silent on the subject. Moreover, Hilda—her angelic qualities being reserved wholly for the public, and not at all discernible by the domestic hearth—was, in the eyes of her family, a personage to be got rid of. That seemed clear, since she was a great grief at home. Hers was a case in which the face is most certainly not a correct index to the mind.

“Ah!” sighed Mrs. Darrow, soothed somewhat now with a strong cup of tea and a particularly indigestible muffin, “if I wasn't the best-tempered woman in the world how I should complain of my hard lot!”

“What is the matter now, Julia?”

“Matter! oh, nothing worse than usual. Only that Uncle Barton has engaged a governess for Dicky, and I have had no choice in the matter. Oh, it's nothing.” Mrs. Darrow stirred her tea violently. “Of course, I'm a mere cipher in my own house.”

“Mr. Barton pays for the governess,” suggested Hilda.

“And why shouldn't he? It's his duty to educate Dicky, and give the poor boy a chance in the world. My life is over, Hilda, and I live only for my boy.”

This was one of Mrs. Darrow's stock pieces of sentiment, and she produced it with surprisingly dramatic effect on every occasion. It

sounded well, and cost nothing, for she never troubled about Dicky, save when he was necessary to a tableau on public days, and her reputation of being a devoted mother was to be enhanced thereby. Although her husband had been dead five years, she still mourned him in black silk, amply trimmed with crape, and was careful to use nothing but the most aggressively black-edged paper. Even her handkerchiefs mourned in a deep border, and her cap of delicate white cambric called loudly on the world to witness what a model widow she was. In addition to these mute evidences of eternal sorrow, Mrs. Darrow gave tongue to her woes vigorously. She really did not know, she said, how she bore it. Indeed, if it were not for her dear child she would wish to die. No woman had ever suffered what she had suffered—and much more to the same effect, all of which was very genteel and laudable, and meant to be correctly indicative of her noble state of mind.

“Uncle Barton is coming to tell me about the new governess, Hilda; I expect him every minute.”

Hilda rose quickly.

“In that case, dear, I had better go. Mr. Barton has no love for me.”

“He has no love for anyone. I never knew so selfish and stingy a creature. Don’t go. I want you to stay and talk to me. Perhaps Gerald may come too.”

“Mr. Arkel’s coming is nothing to me,” replied Hilda, tossing her pretty head.

“Really! I thought you liked him!”

“So I do; but then you see I like many people—Major Dundas for instance.”

“John!” Mrs. Darrow became reflective. “Oh, yes; John is very nice, but not nearly so good looking as Gerald. Besides, Gerald is Uncle Barton’s heir!”

“That may or may not be; we don’t know. But this I do know,” said Hilda pettishly, “that should either of Uncle Barton’s nephews become engaged to me, that one will not be the heir.”

“I don’t see why not?”

“Mr. Barton doesn’t like me, that’s why. Perhaps he’ll even go the length of marrying the new governess to Major Dundas or Mr. Arkel to spite me.” Then, after a pause, “What kind of woman is she?”

Mrs. Darrow threw out her hands with a wail.

“My dear, how should I know? I am quite in the dark. I have been told absolutely nothing about the woman. But if she is not a thoroughly satisfactory person, I’ll have her out of this very soon, I can tell you. I’m not going to be imposed upon in my own house by any spy.”

“What is her name?”

“Miriam Crane. It sounds Jewish. I hate Jews.”

“Is she pretty?”

“He doesn’t say. But knowing how Uncle Barton hates our sex, I quite expect he has chosen some raw-boned, prim, board-school monster, just to spite me. I am sure she’s horrid. Her name sounds horrid.”

“Then she shan’t teach me!”

The interruption came from behind the window curtain, and Hilda laughed gaily.

“Hiding in there, Dicky? Come and have a piece of cake.”

“You horrid child,” cried his mother, as the pale-faced Dicky emerged from his retreat. “What a turn you gave me! Why can’t you sit on a chair like a Christian instead of poking in window corners? What have you been doing?”

“Reading ‘Robinson Crusoe.’”

“You should be at your lessons; really, I never knew so idle a child. You’re breaking my heart with your horrid ways, you know you are! I’m sure I’m the most afflicted woman in the world. If I didn’t bear up I don’t know what would become of you!”

Dicky, well used to his mother's wailing, took no notice whatever, but under the wing of Hilda devoted himself to the demolition of cake to a most alarming extent. He was a delicate, nervous child, wan and peevish; far too tall and old-fashioned for his age. Under judicious management as to diet, work, play, and exercise, he would have developed into a charming little fellow; but Mrs. Darrow, with her ill-disciplined mind, was the worst possible parent to be charged with the up-bringing of such a child. She overwhelmed him with caresses one moment, declaring that he was her all, boxed his ears the next, and lamented that she was burdened with him; so that Dicky came as near hating his mother as a child of ten well could, and Mrs. Darrow, instinctively feeling this, bewailed his lack of affection and sought to scold him into loving her. If ever Uncle Barton did a wise thing in his life, it was when he engaged a governess for the neglected boy, though of course everything depended upon the personality of the governess. So far Mrs. Darrow was in the dark, and out of sheer contradiction to Uncle Barton was prepared to make herself highly unpleasant to the newcomer, and nobody could be more disagreeable than Mrs. Dacre Darrow, as the parish of Lesser Thorpe knew to its cost. She was a past-mistress in the arts of scandal-mongering, nagging, and back-biting. The strength for a right-down hatred was not in her.

"If my new governess isn't pretty, like Hilda, I don't want her," said Dicky, when his mother had wailed herself into a state of momentary passiveness. "I don't like ugly people."

"Would you like me to teach you, Dicky?" laughed Hilda.

"Oh, yes; we could read 'Robinson Crusoe' together!"

"I'm afraid that's not a lesson book, Dicky."

But Dicky insisted that Defoe was better than any lesson book.

"Lesson books make my head ache," he said; "and I learn a lot of hard words in 'Robinson Crusoe' without thinking. Why can't lesson books be nice like that?"

"You little imp," burst out his mother furiously; "the idea of talking about what you like. You'll be taught by a black woman if I choose; and I'll burn all those rubbishy story-books."

Thus did Mrs. Darrow, who had read nothing but society journals and fashion magazines, blend discipline with criticism.

“I never saw such a child,” she wailed; “he’s not a bit like me. Oh, Dicky, Dicky, why haven’t you your mother’s sweet disposition and sweet temper?”

Before Dicky could reply to this truly overwhelming question, to which but one answer was expected, a dried-up little man appeared at the French window opening on to the lawn, and stepped into the room. Hilda half rose to fly from her arch enemy, but being caught, decided it would be undignified to retreat. So she resumed her seat and talked in low tones to Dicky. Mrs. Darrow still lay on her sofa, and welcomed the stranger in the faintest of low tones, meant to be expressive of great weakness.

“How are you, Uncle Barton,” she said. “I can hardly speak, I am so ill.”

“I know, I know,” rasped out the cynic grimly. “I heard you talking to Dicky, no wonder you can’t chatter now.”

“I must do my duty to my child,” cried Mrs. Darrow with more energy, “even though my health suffers.”

Mr. Barton surveyed the plump recumbent figure with grim humour.

“You feel your parental duties too much, Julia, they will wear you out. How do you do, Miss Marsh? I see you and Julia have been spoiling your digestions with strong tea. Muffins too! Oh, Lord, think of your complexions!”

Hilda laughed, and glanced into a near mirror. Her complexion was her strong point, and she had no fear of its being criticised even by disagreeable Mr. Barton.

“I’m afraid my appetite is stronger than my vanity,” she said.

“Then you must have the appetite of an ostrich,” growled Barton, sitting down near his niece; “but Julia, poor dear, eats nothing.”

“That I don’t,” murmured Mrs. Darrow. “I peck like a bird.”

“What kind of a bird—a canary, or an albatross?”

“Uncle Barton!” cried the outraged Julia in capital letters.

“There, there, it’s all right. Anyone can see you eat nothing. You are all skin and bone. Dicky, come here, sir. Your new governess will be here in ten minutes.”

“In ten minutes!” screeched Mrs. Darrow, bounding from the sofa with more energy than might have been expected. “She can’t—she mustn’t. I’m not ready to receive her. Oh, Uncle Barton!”—the irrepressible feminine curiosity would out—“what is she like?”

“Very ugly, small, dark-haired, dark-skinned.”

“I knew it. I knew you would choose an ugly woman!”

Barton chuckled.

“Only as a foil to yourself, my dear. Now then, Dicky, what is the matter?”

“I don’t like an ugly governess,” whimpered Dicky. “Can’t Hilda teach me?”

“I don’t know about that, Dick. If beauty is the essential factor in your teacher, then certainly Miss Marsh is more than qualified. What do you say, Miss Marsh? Will you undertake this young gentleman’s education?”

Hilda shook her head, and laughed herself into a pretty state of confusion. It certainly became her.

“I’m not clever enough,” said she, wincing under Barton’s regard.

“H’m. That’s a pity, otherwise you might have had this fifty pounds a year.”

“What?” screamed Mrs. Darrow, “do you intend to give this creature fifty pounds?”

“Why not? She’s worth it.”

“Who is she?”

“Dicky’s governess—Miss Crane.”

“But who is she?—where does she come from?”

“London. You had better make further inquiries of her in person, for there’s the fly driving up to the gate.”

Dignity, or rather her exhibition of it, prevented Mrs. Darrow rushing to the window. She seated herself like a queen on the sofa, and spread out her sable skirts, so as to receive the ugly governess with the true keep-your-distance hospitality of the British matron. At the same time she remonstrated with Uncle Barton for his rash and unnecessary generosity.

“If you gave her twenty pounds a year it would be more than enough,” she said snappishly. “I could do well with the other thirty.”

“No doubt. But you don’t teach Dicky, you see.”

“I’m his mother.”

“So I believe. But you don’t want me to pay you for that, I suppose? Well, here is my Gorgon.”

Hilda remained to see the new governess. Like Mrs. Darrow, she was devoured by curiosity; centred on this occasion solely upon the newcomer’s physical attractions—or lack of them. It was quite possible of course that this creature might be better looking than Mr. Barton’s eyes could judge. With Mrs. Darrow she continually glanced towards the door, and Barton chuckled. As his chuckle was invariably a prelude to something disagreeable, even Mrs. Darrow felt uneasy at the sound.

Outside, in the narrow passage, could be heard voices, and the bumping of heavy luggage being got in. Then the door opened, and the little maid-servant announced, “Miss Crane.” Immediately afterwards the new governess entered the room.

“Why, she’s pretty!” cried Dicky in surprise.

Barton led Miriam to the throne whereon, bitterly disappointed, Mrs. Darrow sat in state.

“Julia, this is Miss Miriam Crane. Miss Crane, my niece, Mrs. Dacre Darrow.”

The widow gave her hand and murmured some commonplace; but from that moment she hated Miriam with all the fervour her petty nature was capable of. Barton looked at the three women taking stock of each other, and chuckled again.

Chapter II **A Red Rag To A Bull**

Miriam, having been thus formally introduced into the parish of Lesser Thorpe by no less a personage than the lord of the manor himself, speedily settled down to her official duties in Pine Cottage. The cottage was typical of its kind—a very fairy cottage, a jumble of angles and gables, casements and rusticity, with a thatched roof, and walls overgrown with roses. Now, in the month of June, the roses were in full bloom, and the place was brilliant with them. It lay a short distance off the village road, half clasped to the breast of the pine forest, whence it took its name. The little garden a-bloom in front was encircled by a white paling fence and a quickset hedge. At the back an orchard of apple and plum trees stretched until it seemed to lose itself in the woods beyond. A charming Arcadian place it was, for which, be it remembered, Mrs. Darrow paid no rent. Yet she continually grumbled at being compelled to live in it.

“I ought to be in my proper place at the Manor House,” she confided to Miss Crane, “but Uncle Barton is so selfish; don’t you think so?”

“Really,” replied Miriam, knowing that all she said would be repeated by this she-Judas, “I don’t know, my acquaintance with Mr. Barton is so slight.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“In London, at a governess’ institution at Kensington. He inquired for someone to teach your son, Mrs. Darrow, and as I seemed likely to suit him, he engaged me.”

It will be noticed that Miriam suppressed Waterloo Bridge, the Pitt Hotel, and Mrs. Perks. This was by Barton's express desire, and indeed by her own; for she had no wish to reveal her past to Mrs. Darrow, who, as she had quickly perceived, bore her no love. Indeed, the widow was at no great pains to conceal her dislike for Miriam. She was horribly jealous of her, notwithstanding her expressed opinion that no woman with red hair could be considered even passable. She feared her, too, because she judged her to be a spy of Uncle Barton's; and, moreover, in her own mind she was distinctly conscious of an existent air of mystery about the governess which she was in no way able to explain. On her part, Miriam rarely referred to the past, in spite of Mrs. Darrow's hints in that direction, and her reticence in this respect only put that lady the more on the alert. She had already made up her mind that Miriam was an adventuress, and watched her, constantly hoping that in some way she would commit herself. But Miss Crane was too discreet for that. She paid strict attention to her duties, made herself in every way agreeable, and soon became popular in the parish. The discovery that she possessed a contralto voice of excellent quality, coupled with musical accomplishment far before that of anyone else in Lesser Thorpe, did nothing to lessen her popularity, whereat Mrs. Darrow of course hated her more than ever. In all the world there is nothing so consistently relentless as the hatred of a petty-minded vain woman. In her own estimation Mrs. Darrow was a truly noble creature, but then her introspection was notoriously short-sighted, and was invariably made through the medium of rose-coloured spectacles. She admitted to herself that she detested Miriam, and the stronger her detestation became, the more she smiled.

With Dicky, the new governess speedily made friends. He was an impressionable lad, and was at once attracted by her beauty and fascinated by the music of her voice. He became her slave, much to the disgust of his mother, who thought that no one should be loved or admired but herself. On all possible occasions she thwarted Miriam's wise regulations for the boy's comfort and health; but an appeal to Uncle Barton soon put this right. Mrs. Darrow was inclined to rebel, and but that her cynical relative held the purse, would most assuredly have done so. When Mr. Barton intimated that Miriam was to have full control of the boy, the widow grumbled and wept copiously. Such an opportunity for hysterical display was not likely to pass her. But eventually she gave

in, and extorted from the old man a new dress in recompense for her submission. She promised not to interfere with Dicky's education, but entered a protest against Miss Crane's mode of action. In a word she was as spiteful as she dared be, but not knowing exactly on what footing Miriam stood with Barton, she judged it wiser to keep her venomous tongue within bounds.

"Of course Miss Crane is very clever, Uncle Barton, but—" she began tentatively.

"She ought to be clever," interrupted the old man. "I don't pay her a pound a week for nothing. Go on, Julia, but what—?"

"She is too severe; she starves the child. The poor boy is allowed no tea, very little meat, and not even a biscuit between meals. She insists upon his taking cold baths, although he is far too delicate for them; and every day she nearly walks him off his feet. Then she won't teach him his lessons in the schoolroom, but is ridiculous enough to make him read to her in the garden."

"What a mistaken *régime*, Julia, yet under it Dicky is growing and improving every day. Any other complaints?"

"She doesn't make him study enough."

"Ah, she teaches him from the book of nature you see, and so relieves his congested brain—quite right. I don't believe in cramming a delicate lad like that. You let him read what he liked, Julia, and the poor little chap was positively getting literary indigestion."

"Well, at all events, I don't approve of Miss Crane."

"I never thought you would."

"She dresses ridiculously—quite above her station."

"Oh, but you see, she is a pretty woman, eh?"

Mrs. Darrow tossed her head disdainfully.

“Pretty, indeed! with that red hair and pasty complexion! It is extraordinary how you men like these unhealthy women.” Then, after a pause, “But she doesn’t like you!”

“H’m! who does?”

“I do”—this with a most fascinating smile. “I love you!”

“Ah!” Barton chuckled. “You are so tender-hearted. I tell you what, Julia, I am beginning to think I did very wrong to interfere with Dicky’s education at all. As his mother you have more right to manage him than I. I’ve a good mind to send away Miss Crane, and you can engage a twenty-pound governess—to be paid out of your income.”

“Oh no, don’t send Miss Crane away. I really think, with a hint or two from me, she will do very well. But she is peculiar, to say the least of it. Tell me, uncle, who is Miss Crane?”

“She is Miss Crane, that is all I know.”

“Has she a past?”

“Seeing that she is some twenty-five years of age, naturally.”

“Yes, but—” Mrs. Darrow hesitated, not quite knowing how to put it. “Well, as you seem to think, she is not bad-looking, and there is John, you know, and Gerald.”

“Well?”

“They may fall in love with her.”

“What—both of them? At all events they have not seen her yet, so suppose we postpone discussion of that contingency?”

“Well!” Mrs. Darrow’s expression and gestures spoke volumes, “I warn you; don’t say I haven’t warned you. Mark me, there is something queer about Miss Crane. I am not a suspicious woman, and I like to think well of everybody; but Miss Crane—well, you take my word for it, she’ll astonish us all some day! Queer, yes, I should think she *was* queer!”

Barton shrugged his shoulders, and went off without making reply, and for the moment Mrs. Darrow was baffled. But she still continued to suspect Miriam—Heaven only knows of what—and to keep a close watch on her every action. It gave quite a new zest to her life, this new pursuit. And shortly all the parish, that is, the female portion of it, was in Mrs. Darrow's confidence; and Miriam was watched not alone by one, but by a hundred envious eyes, and debated about at a dozen tea-tables. But all this espionage resulted in nothing, and the suspect went serenely on her way, as did Una through the Forest of a Thousand Dangers. The toads spat venom, but the snakes could not bite.

“Dicky,” said Miss Crane one warm and sunny morning, “I want you to put on your cap and take me up the village.”

“No lessons this morning?” Dicky jumped up with joy, after the manner of boyhood.

“No lessons this morning,” laughed Miriam, “some fresh air, dear, instead. I'm not going to have you grow up a pale-faced bookworm.”

“I love my books,” said Dicky, as they left the cottage, not without a disapproving word from Mrs. Darrow.

“I know you do, Dicky, almost too well. But you must get your health first, and then the rest can follow.”

The boy understood. He was thoroughly in sympathy with Miriam. And without being aware of it, he was learning a great deal from her, apart altogether from his studies. She told him stories, interested him in the wonders of earth and sky—things which so frequently escape the careless—and taught him generally how to use his eyes. In the very hedges, Dicky found a new world of flower and berry, and tiny active insect life. She pointed out to him the fluttering dragon-flies, the beetle rolling his ball of mud; she revealed to him the miracle of a grain of wheat, showing him how it bears upon it the image of a man with folded arms. The boy had imagination, and did not need to be told twice. Suggestion was everything to him. He was a dreamer—a poet in embryo. Indeed, Miriam soon found that he had far too vivid an imagination, so much so that she felt obliged to discourage any extreme stimulation of it.

“Observe more, and think less, Dicky,” she said. “I want you to notice lots of things that you see every day and don’t notice now, perhaps because you do see them every day; there are lots of interesting things you know in the fields and the hedges—lots of little worlds and their inhabitants, all as busy as can be, and to be seen if we only look for them.”

“I believe you lived in the country,” said Dicky admiringly, “you know such a lot of jolly things, Miss Crane.”

“I did live in the country once, Dicky,” Miriam sighed. “But that was long, long ago. I lived by the sea at one time—there are wonderful things in the sea, dear.”

“I’ve read ‘Midshipman Easy,’ and I should like awfully to be a sailor.”

Miriam laughed.

“That is not exactly what I meant. Never mind, come along, there’s the church; I want to walk across the meadow to it.”

“Oh, that’s jolly, I want to see the bull.”

“What bull, Dicky?”

“Oh, an awful bull—he gores people.”

“Oh, Dicky”—Miriam looked apprehensive—“perhaps we had better go round by the road. Don’t, Dicky, don’t.”

The boy had jumped over the stile into the meadow.

“I only want to see if he’s there,” he cried, and scampered over the grass—a little grey figure with a red scarf. Suddenly he stopped short and looked down the meadow. Miriam looked also, to see the bull dashing along towards the boy, who was too terrified to move. Reproaching herself for not having prevented his bolting away from her, she jumped into the meadow herself and ran to the rescue, and managed to reach him before the bull did, for on seeing another figure the animal stopped short with a comical air of surprise, and pawing the ground began to bellow loudly. With a white face but a courageous heart Miriam caught Dicky to her breast, and began slowly to retreat towards the

hedge, still facing the beast. By this time the frail little lad was sobbing hysterically. The bull tossed his head and came nearer—so near that Miriam could have screamed. Putting down the child for a moment, she opened her parasol, and ran straight at the animal. Aghast and disconcerted he turned, whereupon she picked up Dicky and raced for the stile—fatal mistake! As soon as he saw her flying, the bull followed fast. She was nearing the hedge, but the animal was close behind her, and she screamed aloud, giving herself up for lost.

“Hullo!” cried a fresh young voice, “run hard—hard—for your life!”

A man jumped over the hedge, and flourishing a stick, got between the pursuer and pursued. As he passed Miriam, he tore the loose cape she wore from her shoulders, and threw it at the infuriated animal as he came lunging along head downward. It caught on his horns, fell over his eyes, and the next moment, quite blinded, he stumbled on his knees. The man caught up with Miriam, and putting his arm round her, half pushed, half carried her to the stile. In a minute the three were over it and in safety, while the bull, having freed his head from the shawl, stood looking at his escaped victims and bellowing his disappointment. It was a dishevelled trio which dropped down on the grass beside the stile, out of breath, and with violently beating hearts.

“Thank God!” gasped Miriam, taking Dicky on her lap to soothe him.

“You have lost your cape though,” said their preserver.

“Better than losing my life. I have to thank you for that. Hush, Dicky,” and she calmed the nervous child.

“I think you did most of the saving,” said the young man admiringly. “I came in at the finish, so I must decline the glory. I never saw a neater and pluckier thing.”

“Oh, Cousin Gerald,” sobbed Dicky, “I’m glad the bull didn’t gore you. You were just like a torry-door of Spain. I’ve seen them in pictures.”

“Am I to take that as a compliment, Dicky? What do you say, Miss Crane?”

“Oh, I think it is a very great compliment, Mr. Arkel.”

The young man—he was a handsome, fair-haired young fellow in a grey tweed suit—looked at her with a quizzical expression.

“You know my name, and I know yours. I think we can dispense with further formalities under the circumstances—or perhaps you will look after the social observances, Dicky, and introduce me to this lady.”

Dicky did so most gravely.

“Miss Crane, this is Uncle Barton’s nephew, Cousin Gerald; Cousin Gerald, this is my new governess, Miss Crane.”

Gerald Arkel jumped up, swung off his cap, and made a bow. There was a very keen admiration in his eye as he looked at Miriam. Indeed, so marked was his stare that she became a trifle uneasy, the more so when he observed that her face was familiar.

“Surely I have seen you before,” he said with a puzzled look.

“Oh, no,” Miriam forced herself to say. “I don’t think so. Are you staying in Lesser Thorpe?” she asked hurriedly, to divert his attention.

“Yes, with my uncle at the Manor House. He came out with me this morning. I left him fossiking about one of his fences. He’ll be here soon.”

A chuckle close at hand revealed that Mr. Barton was not only near at hand, but had been close enough to hear the entire conversation. He looked inquisitively from Miriam to his nephew. Gerald took no notice of his scrutiny, but Miriam coloured up, and lifting Dicky from her lap, rose to meet the old man. She led him aside ostensibly to show him the scene of the disaster, but in reality to ask him a question.

“Why do you look at me so, Mr. Barton? Is that—is that—”

“Yes!” Mr. Barton chuckled in his hateful manner. “Yes, that is the man—now you know.”

Chapter III

Poverty Hall

What Miriam meant by her mysterious question, and what Mr. Barton meant by his mysterious answer, was known only to themselves. They

seemed to understand one another without recourse to words for the situation—whatever the situation might be—adjusted itself between them on a swift interchange of glances. Mr. Barton was regarded by the parish at large as being as deep as a well; had the parish seen him with Mrs. Darrow's governess at the moment, it might have considered him even deeper. But the young man whom these glances mostly concerned, saw nothing of the by-play which was to influence his future. He chatted with Dicky, and commended him for his prowess in having run into the meadow to reconnoitre the whereabouts of the bull. Gerald knew better than to scold the boy for his folly; he knew what a sensitive, nervous child Dicky was, and chose this way of soothing him by applauding what he knew had been his intention, so that the little lad plucked up his courage, and recovered his nerve—so far as his feeble body could do so. Poor Dicky, he had a weak heart, overstrung nerves, and an injudicious mother; and between them, was fast being ruined body and soul, when Miriam came to save him. But for that strange meeting on Waterloo Bridge, Dicky's chances of life would not have been what they were. But then that same meeting is responsible for so much of moment, as will be seen hereafter—and all because Mr. Barton took one turning instead of another, and so lost himself in a fog. If ever Providence worked to great ends by small means, it was when Mr. Richard Barton, Squire of Lesser Thorpe, was made to mistake Waterloo Bridge for the Bridge of Westminster.

“I am so glad you are here again, Cousin Gerald,” said Dicky, patting the young man's slim hand. “You'll tell me stories, won't you, and play cricket with me, and I've got such a jolly governess,” finished Dicky incoherently.

Gerald laughed in his pleasant fashion.

“I'll tell you any amount of stories, and I'll play cricket, and I'll adore your governess, Dicky.”

“Oh, you mustn't. Hilda will be so angry.”

With his usual precocity, Dicky saw more than he was meant to see, and said more than he should have said. Gerald flushed somewhat, and picking up the boy placed him on his shoulder.

“You talk too much, young man,” said he gaily. “Miss Crane,” with an anxious look lest she should have overheard Dicky’s indiscretion, “shall I carry this rascal home for you?”

“Isn’t he too heavy, Mr. Arkel?”

“Heavy?” The echo came from Barton. “Why, Gerald is a champion athlete, and plays with cannonballs like feathers. He is Apollo and Hercules both in one.”

“At present he is Mercury carrying a soul to the Elysian fields,” cried Gerald, and strode off with Dicky, who was delighted with this classical allusion which, from that reading which Miriam so deplored, he was quite able to appreciate.

“I am Achilles! I am Ulysses!” shouted Dicky in ecstasy. “Hermes takes me to Pluto and Queen Persephone. Ai! Ai! Ai!” and Dicky lamented in classical style.

Barton looked after the pair.

“You ought to be satisfied,” said he to Miriam. “He is a handsome fellow, though he is a fool.”

“He neither looks like a fool, nor talks like one, Mr. Barton.”

What reply the cynic would have made to this curt contradiction it is impossible to say; but at that moment a shadow fell on the grass near them. Only the shadow—the shadow of a man; yet Barton whipped round with the sudden snarl of a startled wild beast. His snarl was even more hateful than his chuckle, and Miriam winced as she also turned to see the substance of the shadow. Even now, well-nourished, rested, and having recovered her nerve, as she had, she still dreaded Barton. There was something so uncanny about him—something akin to the satyr—to Pan, the inspirer of causeless terrors—that she could never overcome a creeping of the flesh, a sinking of the heart when in his presence. Mr. Hyde, of fictitious fame, was not more hateful.

The new-comer was a tall lean man, so tall, so lean, that he might be defined in the terms of Euclid as a line, having length without breadth. His legs were long, his arms were long, even his head was long; and

clothed in a suit of solemn black, which reflected no lustre, he came as a blot on the sunny landscape. His eyes were small and close together; they looked everywhere but at the person he was addressing, past you, about you, but never by any chance at you; and—as Miriam heard, not then, but long afterwards—he had a deep, booming, cracked voice, such as might come from a flawed and rusty bell. She did not know the man at the time; she had cause to know him later; and he always appeared in the same noiseless, stealthy, slinking way. If Barton was a rat, this man was akin to the serpent.

And the queerness of the thing was that he did not speak to Barton, nor did Barton speak to him. The two evil creatures—Miriam instinctively felt that both were evil—looked at one another; then Barton, without a word to the governess, passed away with the stranger, for all the world as if the latter were the devil come for his soul. Perhaps Miss Crane was unduly impressionable—perhaps she had not altogether recovered her state of health—but she shuddered and grew pale to the lips as those two black figures dwindled into the distance. Involuntarily she glanced at the grass as though it had been scorched by their tread. Who was the stranger? who was Barton? She knew as much about one as she did about the other.

“I must go back,” she muttered, clenching her hands. “I will not bend to that man’s power. It was bad in London—it is worse here. And Gerald Arkel—” her thoughts made no further use of words, and her eyes followed the stalwart figure of the young man as he bounded towards the village, evidently playing at being a horse for Dicky’s greater delight. With a sigh Miriam walked rapidly after them. She did not look again in the direction of Mr. Barton and his attendant demon.

When she came up with them, Dicky was a mediæval knight, and Gerald his war steed. Miriam could not forbear admiring the kindly nature of the man. But his kindliness and love of play were characteristic of Gerald Arkel. He was gay, indolent, and of a sunny disposition; everybody else’s best friend and his own worst enemy. He had never done a stroke of work, and apparently never intended to, since he regarded himself as his uncle’s heir. Handsome and light-hearted, overflowing with animal spirits, full of exuberant vitality, he was one of those rare beings who seem created to enjoy life. Yet he was weak and self-indulgent, and without the necessary will or self-control to guide his

wayward course. Miriam learned those weaknesses later—learned them, pitied and tolerated them by the love which grew up in her heart. As yet she admired him only. Young Apollo, young Hercules, a splendid specimen of manhood; but love came in the end, and with it much sorrow. Not that Miriam would have minded the sorrow so much; her life from her cradle had been one long trouble, and she was well seasoned to it. The wonder was that her evil fortunes had left no shadow, no line on her brow; for now as she walked beside Mr. Arkel, and found him so pleasant and sympathetic a character, she chatted gaily, and was, to all appearance, every whit as light-hearted as he, whose life had been one long flood of sunshine.

“I am afraid you will find this place dull, Miss Crane,” said Gerald.

“I find it peaceful, Mr. Arkel, and that is enough for me.”

“You have had trouble?” he asked with quick sympathy.

“My parents died while I was in my teens,” explained Miriam, “and I was left a penniless orphan. Yes, I have had trouble. Shadow has been as much my portion as sunshine appears to have been yours.”

Gerald set down Dicky, and took his hand.

“Oh, I have had my troubles too,” said he easily, “but I don’t feel them much. Perhaps my nature is too shallow.”

“Or too sunny, Mr. Arkel—if a nature can be too sunny. Did you ever read Hawthorne’s ‘Marble Faun’?—I believe it is called ‘Transformation’ in the English edition.”

“No.” Gerald stared at the apparent irrelevancy of this question. “Why?”

“Because you are so very much like one of the characters in it—a child of nature, called Donatello. You are just the kind of man children love and animals trust.”

“Oh, I get on pretty well with everyone,” cried Gerald, tossing back his bright hair, “and everyone gets on with me.”

“Ah, you are ‘simpatico,’ as the Italians say.”

Arkel turned an expressive eye on Miriam. He was very sympathetic, especially towards pretty women; and with one exception, this governess was the prettiest he had ever seen. Yet the adjective was not one he would have chosen deliberately as adequately descriptive of Miss Crane. He would have said beautiful rather—imperious, regal; the word “pretty” was but the outcome of his habit of loose expression. He knew quite well that it could not correctly be applied to her. She was no white-frocked, pink and white miss, with coquetry in every step she took over the cobble stones of the village street. Such a one though, was now close upon them, and as Arkel recognised her, he raised his hat, and his eyes and lips smiled in greeting.

“Miss Marsh, where are you going?”

“Home,” replied Hilda, swiftly glancing at the speaker and the governess. “How are you, Miss Crane? Dicky, don’t wink, it’s vulgar. I didn’t know you were here, Mr. Arkel.”

“Arrived yesterday,” responded that young gentleman. “Uncle Barton asked me down for a week. Why, I don’t know! but I was glad to come.” He fixed his bright eyes on Hilda, and a colour came into his cheeks. “I was very glad to come,” he repeated.

“Of course, I know how fond you are of Mr. Barton.”

“If you will excuse me,” said Miriam, unwilling to be an inconvenient third, “I will go—come, Dicky.”

“I must go too. I will leave you with Mr. Arkel,” and before either Arkel or Miriam could parry so very pointed a thrust, Hilda tripped away with a smiling face and—it must be confessed—an angry heart. Although, of course, she knew nothing of the episode which had been the means of bringing them together, her instinct told her that Gerald and Miss Crane were in strong sympathy one with the other.

Like an ass between two bundles of hay—the simile, though uncomplimentary, will serve—Gerald looked after Hilda, and then glanced at the governess. She had already moved away, and was walking on rather fast with Dicky dancing beside her. Courtesy demanded that he should follow her, but a tugging at his heart-strings drew him in Hilda’s direction. With characteristic self-indulgence, Mr. Arkel obeyed

his own inclination rather than the other thing, and tried to catch up with Hilda. But a side-glance informing her of this pursuit, Miss Marsh thereupon resolved to punish this young man for his all too-patent admiration of the governess—"that red-haired minx," as she called her.

Just as Gerald came up with her, and was on the point of speaking, Hilda, in pretended ignorance of his presence, shot into a broken-down gate, through a desolate garden, and into a dilapidated house. From behind a torn curtain which partially veiled a dirty window, she had the satisfaction of seeing him retreat with a somewhat sulky expression on his usually bright face.

"Serve you right," she said to herself. "You'll find I am not the one to take you from that carrotty horror;" which remark was vulgar, unjust, and spiteful—so spiteful that it could only be prompted by one feeling.

Hilda's home was a tumble-down old house set in a neglected garden. Mr. Marsh was a physician—that is to say he was allowed by the laws of his country to prescribe drugs and generally to administer in a medical way to a small practice. Things were so with him that he had long since given up any idea of a peaceful existence; and it was always a matter of supreme amazement to him that his patients sought to prolong their lives at the cost of swallowing the doses he prescribed for them. For himself, he paid an infinitesimal sum yearly by way of rent for Poverty Hall, as his residence was dubbed in the village; earned enough to feed and clothe those dependent upon him in the most penurious way, and managed, as he phrased it, "to drag them up somehow." Two of the boys were doing for themselves in London, and had dropped out of ken, since they neither sent money nor wrote to their father; three were at school, where Dr. Marsh found it hard work to keep them, and since someone must pay, the four sisters remained at home, and were furnished by Hilda with a scratch education, she being the only one of the girls who had received a good one. Hilda detested teaching her sisters, and gave them as little of her time as she well could without falling foul of her father. For the rest she was like a lily of the fields, and neither toiled nor spun. Mrs. Marsh—she was of ample habit—did the toiling and the spinning, with the assistance of the exhausted menial aforesaid. When not scrubbing, or baking, or mending, she indulged in the most mawkish class of fiction, and complained querulously of her lot the while. Yet even the Marsh family had their idea of a millennium—when Hilda

would marry a rich man, and the rich man would rain gold on Poverty Hall. That was why Hilda was pampered and much was pardoned to her. She was the Circassian beauty destined for the seraglio of some millionaire sultan; and the proceeds of her sale was to set up the family for life.

“Where have you been, Hilda?” asked her mother, looking up from a novel. The room was a chaos of dirt and dust, and in the midst of it all sat Mrs. Marsh, a very she-Marius amongst the ruins of Carthage, placidly but thoroughly enjoying the sentimentality of her hero and heroine. The carpet was ragged, the blind was askew; the table was littered with plates dirty from the mid-day meal, and the furniture was more or less dilapidated. Thus did Mrs. Marsh, in an old dressing-gown, with hair unkempt, delight to read of the erratic course of true love and Belgravian luxury, oblivious utterly to her surroundings.

“I’m sure, Hilda, I wish you hadn’t gone out,” she lamented. “Who is to clear the table if you’re not here?”

“Oh, bother!” cried Hilda all graciously, “where are the girls?”

“They took some bread and jam and went out with the boys,” said Mrs. Marsh vaguely. “I don’t know exactly where—they were going to have a picnic, I think. You really must help, Hilda. Gwendoline” (Mary Jane was not to be tolerated) “has too much to do as it is. Your father will soon be home, and will want something; and I’m that tired! Oh dear me, how tired I am!”

“Well, I can’t help it, mother. You will have to manage with Gwendoline as best you can. I must get my blue dress cleaned and altered. Mrs. Darrow has asked me to dinner to-morrow night.”

“Who is to be there?” asked Mrs. Marsh with a ray of interest in her tired blue eyes.

“Mr. Barton, Mr. Arkel, and Major Dundas. I suppose that horrid governess will be there too. She was with Mr. Arkel just now.”

“How did she come to know him?”

“Oh, she’s a sly creature. She has managed to make his acquaintance somehow, and I can see the fool is quite taken already with her airs and graces.”

“Hilda!” said her mother apprehensively, for Mr. Arkel was the second string to Hilda’s bow, and it was supposed would inherit the Manor House. “That must not be.”

“Oh, so far as I am concerned, they can please themselves. If Mr. Arkel prefers red hair and freckles, he can do so. Major Dundas may have better taste.”

“But he is not rich, dear—he will never be.”

“How do you know that?” retorted Hilda, who made a rule of contradicting her mother on principle. “Mr. Barton may make him his heir instead of Gerald Arkel. Or for that matter, I shouldn’t be surprised if the horrid old thing left his money to an asylum.”

“Be sure of that before you marry either of them,” said the anxious mother. “Unless,” with a touch of romance, “you are in love with—”

“Love!” Hilda echoed the word with fine contempt. “I want money, not love. Either Major Dundas or Gerald would make a good enough husband. I like Gerald the best—he is better looking and not so dull as the Major. But I’d marry anyone—even old Barton, much as I hate him, to get out of this pig-sty.”

“It is your only home,” said Mrs. Marsh with dignity.

“That’s exactly why I want to get out of it, mother. If that red-haired governess tries any of her pranks, trust me, I won’t spare her.”

“Whatever do you mean, Hilda?”

“Never you mind, mother,” Miss Marsh nodded mysteriously. “I’ve been talking with Mrs. Darrow, and she says—well, don’t bother about it just now. But Miss Crane—if that is what her name is—is no saint, believe me. I’m not altogether sure that she’s respectable.”

“Hilda!” Mrs. Marsh’s middle-class virtue was up in arms. “If that is so, you must not associate with her. Our house is lowly (she might have added dirty), lowly, but genteel.”

“Now don’t you bother, ma. Leave the governess to me. If you talk you’ll spoil all.”

“All what?” cried Mrs. Marsh, frantic with curiosity.

“H’m, h’m,” Hilda nodded again. “Come upstairs, ma, and look over my dresses. I must look particularly well to-morrow night.”

“But the clearing and washing-up, Hilda?”

“Oh, the girls can do that when they come in; pigs! It’s little enough they do!”

“Your father will want something hot,” suggested Mrs. Marsh with compunction.

“Will he! Well, there’s cold corned beef and pickles; he can warm them if he likes.”

So Mrs. Marsh went upstairs, novel, dressing-gown and all, and spent a happy hour with Hilda over chiffons. Dr. Marsh came home to a cold dinner, and was truly pathetic in the restraint of his language. The picnic-party arrived back hungry and boisterous, to find that as the baker had not called, there was no bread in the house. They lamented, Mrs. Marsh nagged, her husband’s patience gave way, and the whole house was as pleasant as Bedlam. Hilda, the cause of the trouble, kept out of it in her room—the only clean room in the house—and stitched away at her costume. She thought of Miriam and smiled. It was not a sweet smile.

“So you’re going to spoil my chance, are you, you horrid creature!” she thought. “I’ll push you back into the mud you came from—or I’ll know the reason why.”

If Miriam could have seen her then, she might have felt still more uneasy. What could Miss Marsh know of her past? Perhaps Mrs. Darrow, always poking and prying, could have explained.

Chapter IV

Mr. Barton's Visitor

As a rule Mrs. Darrow was not very hospitable—unless there was something to be gained from the exercise of such hospitality. She revelled in the afternoon tea, because it cost little—a few spoonfuls of “Lipton” and some slices of thin bread and butter—and afforded ample opportunity for that small talk, which was the essence of her life, since it enabled her to keep *au fait* with her neighbours' delinquencies. She had been known to go so far as a hot luncheon for certain high and mighty people whom it suited her book to conciliate; but never by any chance had she been known to give a dinner. Now—for some weighty reason, known only to herself—she had actually requested no less than five people to rally round her in the stuffy little dining-room of Pine Cottage—Major Dundas, Mr. Arkel, and Uncle Barton, to pair with Miriam, Hilda, and herself. When Mr. Barton was informed of this festivity, he not only point-blank refused to go himself, but he positively forbade his nephews, who were staying at the Manor House, to represent him.

“So you can have a hen-party, Julia,” he croaked, “and abuse better people than yourself.”

Mrs. Darrow sought refuge in her handkerchief, and shed a few careful tears—I say careful, because she was made up for the day, an operation which entailed the labour of an hour or more.

“Oh, Uncle Barton,” she sobbed, “why won't you come?”

“Now why, I should like to know, are you so thunderingly generous all of a sudden. There must be something very much amiss, surely, or going to be!”

The widow raised her eyes to the blue sky—this conversation took place in the open air—to call Heaven to witness how she was misjudged.

“As if I was a miser,” she complained, “instead of one whose whole thought is for my fellow creatures.”

“At other people’s expense—quite so,” said Barton. He really was a disagreeable old creature. “Come, Julia, tell me the truth. Why are you giving this dinner?”

“I’m afraid Miss Crane is dull, and I thought it would liven her up a little.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said Barton, not believing her in the least. “Then you and she and Miss Marsh had better come to dinner at the Manor House. There is nothing for Miss Crane or anyone else to enjoy in being poisoned by your cook.”

Mrs. Darrow calculated that she could gain her end—whatever it was—just as well at Uncle Barton’s expense as at her own. But although she accepted with avidity, she wept still as a tribute to her dignity.

“Of course, if you insist upon it, I will come,” she said; “but my poor little dinner would have been quite a treat for you all. I intended to assist cook.”

“Did you? worse and worse! Well, will you come to-morrow evening at seven?”

Mrs. Darrow bowed her head.

“And I hope you won’t mind giving me a cheque, Uncle Barton. Miss Crane eats a great deal; she comes expensive.”

Barton chuckled.

“What, at your Barmecidian banquets? I tell you what, Julia, my dear, if you will tell me the truth to-morrow night I will give you something.” And he walked off.

As Mrs. Darrow knew, and as Uncle Barton knew she knew, it was impossible for her to tell the truth without offending him. He guessed that her purpose was spiteful, and one in some way connected with Miriam; and he was right. The widow had discovered—as she thought—something to Miriam’s disadvantage, and wanted to explode her bombshell in as public a manner as possible. Up to the present she had told only Hilda about her discovery, and Hilda, being no less spiteful

against the unfortunate governess, was hoping to witness her discomfiture before Major Dundas and Gerald. This being so, Mrs. Darrow knew that if she told the truth Barton would refuse to pay for the confession of so mean a purpose. Therefore she saw the promised cheque eluding her, and calculating—in her own logical way—that up to the present Miriam had cost her a possible ten pounds, allowed her feelings full vent for the time being. She glared after Uncle Barton's retreating figure; and would have shaken her fist at it had she not known from previous experience that he had eyes at the back of his head.

“Horrid old man,” she murmured. “I'll make you and your red-haired creature pay for this!”

That evening and all the next day she was particularly sweet to Miriam; so much so that Miss Crane, used to her by this time, began to think there was something in the wind. She wondered if Mrs. Darrow could have made any discovery likely to cause trouble, and recalled all her words and actions for the past week. But she could think of nothing injudicious that she had said or done. Nevertheless, she was on her guard against Mrs. Darrow. She readily accepted the invitation to the Manor House, because she wanted a private conversation with Mr. Barton. Hilda also was informed that the little dinner would take place at the Manor House, and was pleased by the change. She intended that a day should come when the Manor should be hers by marriage, and in the meantime she was in nowise averse to seeing as much as possible of her future home. When she married Major Dundas, or Mr. Arkel—whichever of them might inherit the Nabob's vineyard—she intended to make many and great changes in the gloomy old mansion. Hilda's aerial castles invariably took the architectural form of Lesser Thorpe Manor House.

The next evening after the primitive fashion of this Arcadia, the three ladies, with lace scarves over their heads, and cloaks over their evening dress, walked up the avenue and arrived at the great porch precisely at seven. In the warm light of the July evening Miriam admired the noble oaks, the trim gardens, the velvet swards; and most of all, she admired the great house, with its windows aglow from the beams of the setting sun. It was elevated on a rise, surrounded by stone terraces, and stood out majestically against a background of pine-trees, with its many gables, high roofs, and stacks of twisted chimneys. In the Tudor style of

architecture, built in Tudor days, mellowed by centuries, and overgrown with ivy, it might well have been the palace of some Sleeping Beauty buried in the midst of its sombre woods. The evening was still and warm; there was no wind, and a quiet melancholy seemed to brood over the great pile. It was a haven of rest to the weary, and irresistibly attractive to Miriam, who had been buffeted so long on stormy seas. Hilda caught her expression at that moment, and did not fail to interpret it in her own fashion, looking an angel the while.

“You want to marry Gerald and have all this, do you?” she thought. “Well then, you shall not, if I can help it. When he knows who you are, and what you are, there won’t be much chance for you, my lady!”

In the drawing-room Mr. Barton received his guests, and Miriam, in spite of her self-control, could not help wincing. Since that never-to-be-forgotten night on Waterloo Bridge, or rather at the Pitt Hotel, she had not seen him in evening dress; and the sight of him now recalled those past horrors with horrible distinctness. The shrivelled little figure, the cruel clean-shaven face, the bald head and rat-like eyes, made up an object of utter detestation to Miriam. With her recovered health had come a resolve to throw off the mesmeric influence he had exercised over her when she had been weak and starving. In some degree she had succeeded, but although fear had gone, repulsion remained, and Miriam regretted bitterly that she had been beguiled into the clutches of this modern ogre. That night she resolved to seek her freedom.

“Good evening, ladies,” said the Squire in his grating voice. “You know these two gentlemen, so there is no need for a formal introduction.”

“I know Mr. Arkel,” said Miriam composedly, since Barton’s eyes were upon her, “but not Major Dundas.”

“John!” gushed Mrs. Darrow—“not know Cousin John? This is he, Miss Crane, my cousin in the army. John, my dear friend, Miss Crane.”

Barton lifted his brows on hearing this very warm allusion to Miriam; but Major Dundas, not knowing Mrs. Darrow’s little ways, accepted it in good faith, and bowed gravely, being a man of but few words. He was tall and stalwart, with a countenance which, though anything but handsome, was wholly pleasant, and was so well groomed and generally smart and trim in his appearance, that altogether he bore an air of supreme

distinction. With formal courtesy Miriam acknowledged his bow, but in spite of herself she found her eyes wandering towards Gerald's bright face and charming smile. He shook her by the hand, made some commonplace remark, and almost immediately turned to speak with Hilda, whom he greeted with unmistakable eagerness. It was easy to see in what direction Mr. Gerald Arkel's affections lay for the time being. The object of them looked this evening more than ever like a Dresden china shepherdess, and sparkled all over her pretty face as Gerald came up to her. Barton evidently did not approve of the state of things existing between the two young people, for he frowned and bit his lip. On her part Miriam felt an unaccountable pang at the way in which Gerald ignored her for Hilda. Since meeting him she had thought more of his gallant rescue of her, and more of his charming manner than was quite good for her. Although she was as yet unaware of it even then Gerald was gaining possession of her heart. She watched him furtively all the evening, and could be seen to brighten up distinctly when he spoke to her, a circumstance which seemed to cause the observant Squire the greatest satisfaction.

"Come, come; dinner, dinner," said Barton, cutting short Mrs. Darrow's small beer chronicles. "Julia, take my arm. Gerald, Miss Marsh is waiting. Miss Crane, I am sure Major Dundas will be delighted."

"Charmed," murmured the Major with all gravity.

He could not but admire this tall and beautiful woman, and was impressed, as Dicky had been, by the music of her voice. Miriam, in a plain black silk dress, showing her beautiful neck and shoulders and her shapely arms, looked as regal as a queen. Her red hair twisted in smooth shining coils crowned her as with a diadem, and Hilda's girlish prettiness paled before her graver splendour. As for Mrs. Darrow, art had done its utmost, but it could not make her either fresh or young. When she looked at Miriam she seemed to be conscious of this, and her feelings may be left to the imagination, but she promised herself a full revenge before the evening was over.

"Doesn't Miss Crane look charming to-night?" she whispered to her uncle.

“Charming,” assented that genial gentleman. “Like Semiramis or Cleopatra; and she doesn’t owe anything to art either.”

Mrs. Darrow grew red beneath her rouge.

“Oh, I dare say she has painted in her time!”

“What do you mean?” asked Barton sharply.

“Well, if you don’t know, of course I don’t,” was Mrs. Darrow’s ambiguous reply; and as the occasion was unpropitious, Barton did not press for an explanation. Still, he guessed that her remark had something more behind it, and the look he gave her in consequence caused Mrs. Darrow to devote herself exclusively to the soup for the next few minutes. In that glance of disapproval she saw the final disappearance of the cheque.

“I hope you like Thorpe, Miss Crane,” said the Major in his ponderous way.

“Very much indeed. I like the quiet and peace.”

“Really! Have you then had so stormy a life?”

“Oh no,” Miriam laughed, and her merriment extracted a glare from Mrs. Darrow. “But I have lived a great deal in London, and the country is so restful after the roar of the city. Of course you prefer town?”

“No indeed; I was cut out by nature I believe for a country squire. I’m fond of soldiering of course,” added the Major quickly, “but when I retire it will be to a place like this. I am more of a country bumpkin than my uncle. He’s always running up to town.”

“Is he?” murmured Miriam, thinking of Mrs. Perks and the hotel in Craven Street. “Why is that?”

“Oh, I don’t know; he hunts after books and that sort of thing. My uncle is quite a student, you know.”

Miriam did not think from what she knew of Mr. Barton that book hunting took up a very considerable portion of his time when in London;

but evidently the simple Major believed the fiction in all good faith. But his next remark startled her.

“His taste in books is so peculiar,” resumed Dundas, “and rather morbid; he collects all books dealing with crime.”

Miss Crane paled, and hastily sipped her wine.

“With crime?”

“Yes, memoirs of Vidocq—Stories of Robbery and Murder, The Newgate Chronicle, and Jonathan Wilde; his library is filled with gruesome volumes of that kind. Did you ever hear of Selwyn the wit, the friend of Horace Walpole, Miss Crane?”

“No,” murmured Miriam, self-possessed but colourless to the lips.

“His great delight was to see men hanged. My uncle seems to have the same queer taste. If public executions were in vogue I believe he would attend every one.”

“John,” called out the Squire, “what are you saying to Miss Crane? You’re making her nervous, surely; she has lost all her colour.”

“No, no,” cried Miriam; “I am quite well.”

“What a brute I am,” said Dundas aloud; “but the fact is I was talking of your penchant for crime.”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Darrow vivaciously; “it’s really horrid of Uncle Barton to be so fond of these things.”

“Crime!” chuckled the Squire; “and what do you call crime? I’m a student of human nature in the depths, if that’s what you mean. I like to search out the springs of action—to learn what moves man, the machine.”

“In short, you are a realist, uncle,” said Gerald.

“Oh, I don’t know. I find the lower orders vastly more amusing than the higher, if you call that realism. I like to explore the slums and the thieves’ kitchens, and talk to the detectives; and I like to hear of crimes

that are impenetrable.” And here his eyes rested on Miriam. She drank more wine.

“But I thought no crime was impenetrable nowadays,” said Hilda.

“Indeed, my dear Miss Marsh, a great number are. Those crimes which are reported in the newspapers, those murderers who are hanged, constitute the minority. The clever crimes, the really interesting criminals, are never discovered.”

Mrs. Darrow here entered a protest. She would not sleep she said if Uncle Barton thus rode his gruesome hobby, which was really a skeleton horse, or something horrid. She did think such things should not be spoken about in the presence of ladies; Miss Crane was quite pale with horror, so she would leave the gentlemen to discuss their wine and crime together, and carry the ladies off to the drawing-room—a determination which she at once put into execution. When the door closed on them, Mr. Barton became moody and silent. He left Gerald and Dundas to pass the bottle and do the talking; and knowing his sombre humours they left him to himself.

Shortly there entered a plethoric butler, purple of hue, as though all the blood in him had turned to port wine. He bent over his master and whispered.

“Eh? What do you say?” said Barton, rousing himself from a brown study.

“A gentleman to see you, sir!” whispered the man in a husky voice.

“Who is it?”

“The gentleman who was here before, sir.”

“Confound you—how can I recognise anyone from that description? What’s his name?”

“I don’t rightly know, sir. He told me to mention the name Jabez.”

“Jabez!” Barton jumped up with the alacrity of a man half his age. “Gerald! John! go into the drawing-room and entertain the ladies. I shall

be engaged for the next half-hour in the library.” And he vanished with the plethoric butler.

“Hullo! What’s up with Uncle B.?” said Gerald.

Dundas shrugged his shoulders.

“One of his mysterious interviews, I suppose. He is a mystery in himself is Uncle Barton.”

Chapter V **Behind The Scenes**

In the drawing-room, Mrs. Darrow, feeling it incumbent upon her to provide entertainment for those assembled, decided she could not do better than relate to them the history of her married life—how good and devoted she had been to a brutal husband, how she had been unable to buy a rag of clothing for quite six months at a time, and consequently had been obliged to go unfashionably clothed. How she could have married at least a dozen men who were dying for her. But how foolishly she had chosen the only one who never appreciated her, and much more to the same effect. Such a theme she held, more especially when adequately set forth and expatiated upon, must be all absorbing.

Hilda, it was true, had heard a vastly different version of her friend’s connubial existence. She knew, in fact, that the late Mr. Darrow had been something more than glad to leave this sphere. But for the present that mattered not at all.

Mrs. Darrow told her tale, and told it very well, and although neither of her audience was in the least degree convinced by it, undoubtedly many people would have been. Right in the midst of a sentimental outburst, in which she was declaring how now she lived solely for the sake of her darling child, being otherwise quite prepared to join the late Mr. Darrow in Heaven, the two young men entered.

“Already!”—the good lady was in no wise disconcerted at having thus abruptly to strike another note.—“Ah! our company is more attractive than than your wine and cigars?”

“Can you doubt it?” said Gerald, making his way over towards Hilda.

Thus deserted, Mrs. Darrow captured the Major, who, too polite to evade her, forthwith buckled to, and did his best to fall in with her very obvious desire for conversation, if not for controversy. Miriam, without a cavalier was thus left to her own devices. She scanned a photograph album which was at her hand.

“Where is Uncle Barton?” asked Mrs. Darrow. “He should be here, if only to entertain dear Miss Crane.”

“I don’t wish to be entertained, thank you,” said Miriam, noting the petty spite. “I think if you don’t mind I’ll take a walk in the fresh air, it is so close here,” she said, and, without waiting for approval or otherwise from Mrs. Darrow, she stepped through the French window which opened on to the terrace.

“Well, I’m sure!” ejaculated the widow. “What coolness! Don’t go, John, I have so much to say to you.”

“But doesn’t it seem rather unkind to leave Miss Crane alone?” said the Major, who was already somewhat under the spell of Miriam’s beauty.

“Oh, she likes being alone,” smiled Mrs. Darrow—“she has the most mysterious love for solitude. What she thinks about I don’t know!”

“Who is she, Julia?”

“Ah! that’s just it”—she wagged her head solemnly—“nobody knows. There is something very queer about her. She is a *protégée* of Uncle Barton’s of course, and I shouldn’t be the least surprised to hear that he had picked her up on one of those excursions amongst the criminals in London, he’s so fond of!”

“Julia, you shouldn’t say that. Miss Crane is, I consider, a most charming young lady.”

“Red hair—I’m glad you think that charming, John!”

“Are you speaking of Miss Crane?” said Gerald, rising from his seat by Hilda. “She’s a plucky woman that—did you hear how she saved Dicky’s life?”

“Dicky told me what happened,” replied Mrs. Darrow sharply. “I rather think it was you, Gerald, who saved both her and my darling child.”

“Oh, nonsense—I came in at the tag end,” and Gerald related the whole adventure, glorifying Miriam’s bravery in a manner which made Hilda long to box his ears. But the only outward and visible indication of these turbulent sensations within her breast was as usual the sweetest of sweet smiles.

Mrs. Darrow, having nothing to lose, was less careful.

“Bravery!—fudge!” she said politely. “I believe the whole thing was acting.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Gerald drily. “The bull certainly was acting, though hardly in the sense you mean.”

“Then if it wasn’t, she certainly isn’t fit to be entrusted with Dicky’s life. If I had lost my boy!—just think of it! I should have died. He is my life, my sole comfort on this earth—the image of my darling departed,” &c., &c.—

To all of which both Gerald and the Major, acting upon that wisdom born of experience, agreed, though, needless to say, they retained their own opinions of the young lady under discussion.

In the meantime, Miss Crane, not ill-pleased to be out of the society of her enemies, paced meditatively on the terrace. The night was warm, cloudless, and silent—save for the wild singing of the nightingales in the woods. The gush of melody so piercingly sorrowful threw Miriam into a melancholy mood. In truth she had much to mourn for—much to regret, and the future was so full of doubt, its path so crowded with pitfalls and snares, that she could foresee nothing to cheer her there. Walking up and down, a black solitary figure in the white light of the moon, she was in herself the true embodiment of her sad and lonely life. From her earliest childhood she had known sorrow, and, on her of late had fallen too, the shadow of disgrace, yet she was as pure as the unsullied moonlight. For this beautiful, sad woman was a bearer in more than an ordinary degree of other people’s burdens. She had many foes, but no friend—unless Barton could be called one—and he, as she knew only too well had befriended her only to use her as a tool. From her present

environment there seemed to be no escape, unless she faced her benefactor boldly, and refused to obey turn. But for more reasons than one, she was unwilling to take the extreme course.

Her walk to the end of the terrace brought her abreast of the lighted windows of the library. Just as she was near them—about ten minutes after she had left the drawing-room—one of them opened. She shrank back in the shadow, and saw Barton step forth with a tall lean man, the very man she had seen on the previous day. The pair talked in low whispers for a moment or so—then the man fluttered down the terrace steps like a huge bat, and disappeared in the shade of the trees overhanging the avenue. Barton looked after him, and shook his fist, an action at which Miriam wondered in so hard and seemingly impervious a man. His back was towards her, and not wishing to be found eavesdropping—although truly she had heard no word—she stepped out again into the moonlight.

At the sound of her light tread Barton spun round like a beast at bay; but when he saw who it was he smiled and saluted her. He was too sure of his power over her to fear anything she might have overheard. But Miriam had heard nothing, and said as much in reply to his sharp question.

“I was just taking a walk in the cool air,” she explained. “The others are enjoying themselves very well without me. I am only the governess, you know—and a great thing in a governess is to know when her room is preferable to her company, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I know; but I wonder what they would say if they knew something else. A governess! Oh, Lord!”

And Barton chuckled as he looked at the beautiful woman whose face was so pale in the moonlight.

Perfectly calm, since she felt able now to resist Barton’s mesmeric power, Miriam stepped into the library.

“Come in here, Mr. Barton,” said she imperiously, “I must speak to you.”

Somewhat surprised at her tone, Barton followed her, and, having made fast the window, looked at her in the yellow lamplight.

Miriam, with her hands loosely clasped on her black dress, looked, in her turn, without flinching, at this man who considered himself her master. His eyes—wicked as they were—fell before that clear resolute gaze.

“Well, what is it?” he asked roughly, and threw himself into a chair.

Still standing, Miriam replied to this question quietly and with curtness.

“I wish to go away.”

“Indeed! You wish to go away—why?”

“Because I am not happy here, and I am doing no good.”

“Indeed, I think you are doing a great deal of good,” replied Barton, with a gentleness far from common with him. “You are making a man of Dicky. You have rescued him from the influence of his foolish mother. Come, Miriam, let us sit down and talk this over.”

“I am fond of Dicky,” said Miriam, taking a seat; “he is a good child and very lovable. If it were only Dicky I should not mind. But his mother is jealous of me. She hates me; so does that Marsh girl. They would do me an injury if they could. Besides,” added she, looking very earnestly at Barton, “I do not quite understand you—why did you rescue me in London, and bring me down here?”

Barton rose, and began to pace to and fro. He prefaced his speech with his customary chuckle.

“Oh, it was no philanthropy, believe me,” he said. “If you had been a plain woman, you might have gone your way. I told you that before. As it was, I saw that you were not—in fact, not only were you a beautiful woman, which was necessary to my plans, but you were a good one into the bargain. I knew that, notwithstanding your somewhat equivocal position when we met on Waterloo Bridge. So I brought you here. You know why.”

“I know what you said—that you wished me to marry some one in whom you were interested, and the other day you pointed out Mr. Arkel as the gentleman. But why do you wish me to marry him?”

“I’ll tell you that later. But, say, have I not been good to you—bad man as you think me to be?”

“In a manner you have, but I cannot disguise from myself that what you have done has been to your own ends. You have given me money for myself and Jabez, and you have obtained me this situation—”

“You forget—there is something else. Did I not promise you two hundred pounds if you succeeded in marrying Gerald, and taking him away from that shallow hussy?”

“Yes, and I accepted your offer, so that Jabez might go to America, and there start afresh—it was for his sake I did it.”

“He is not worthy of it, believe me.”

Miriam made a gesture of despair.

“Perhaps not; but knowing what you do you cannot wonder at my anxiety to help him all I can—yes, even if to do it, I have to marry at your bidding.”

“But Gerald is a handsome fellow, Miriam. I can’t see what you have to complain of!”

“This,” she replied passionately, “that my feelings threaten to upset your scheme—that is what I complain of. If this marriage were one of cold calculation, if I had but to play my *rôle* of adventuress, and marry your nephew, perhaps I could do it, and perhaps from a sense of duty I could make him a better wife than Miss Marsh is likely to do. But I—” She paused, and dropped her voice to a lower tone. “But I already have a—a very sincere regard for Mr. Arkel.”

“All the better; it will be so much the easier for you to carry out your part of the bargain.”

“No,” Miriam rose grandly. “As an instrument for the sake of Jabez, I was willing to be used, but as a woman—a woman who feels, who, as I tell you, already has a feeling of respect, of regard, of—No, Mr. Barton, I will not consent to marry him, unless—unless, perchance, things should come about differently.”

“What about Jabez then, and his new life in America?”

Miriam’s head sank, and she clasped her hands together with a gesture of pain.

“I don’t know—I must think—I must consider myself as well as Jabez. He has brought me low enough as it is without my sacrificing my last shred of womanly pride for his sake—anything but that. I would do much for him. Yes, I may as well confess it, I love Mr. Arkel; whatever you may think of me, I love him. I suppose it is because you are such a stone—because I hardly look upon you as flesh and blood—that I can bring myself to say this to you. But it is true, true. You cannot understand the birth of such a feeling in a woman’s heart. But she knows it, and cannot mistake it. I love Gerald Arkel. But I would not marry him unless he loved me—no, not for thousands! That is why I say I wish to leave, Mr. Barton.”

“But, my good young woman, this is most extraordinary—you have hardly seen the man. I should have thought you had a mind above the fascination of good looks.”

“His looks have nothing to do with it. But pray spare me. You cannot understand. Consider my position, Mr. Barton. I have laid bare my soul to you. I should love him were he ever so ugly—perhaps, who knows, he may come to love me, though I can hardly believe such happiness will ever be mine—there, now you know!”

“Would you tell him your past?”

“Yes, even at the risk of his shrinking from me in horror. I am not a wicked woman, you know that, whatever my past may have been.”

“Quite so. That is exactly why I want you to marry Gerald.”

“But why, why?—me, a nobody, why should you want *me* to marry him?”

Barton’s brow gathered. He resumed his seat.

“I will tell you why in a very few words,” he said grimly and savagely. There was a look almost of insanity in his eyes. “It is because I seek revenge—revenge against the woman who ruined my life—his mother!”

Chapter VI

Mrs. Darrow's Bombshell

For a moment Miriam stood aghast at the man's abandoned confession of his feelings. How anyone could nurse such venom in his breast it was beyond her to conceive.

"It is very terrible, this idea of yours, Mr. Barton," she said; "to me very horrible! Do you mean to say that you would make the living suffer for an imaginary wrong done you by the dead? for I cannot but think it is imaginary."

Barton scowled, and gripped the arm of his chair.

"Miriam Crane," he said, "you don't know what you are talking about. Gerald's mother—my sister—ruined my life—ruined it as utterly and hopelessly as ever man's life was ruined. Thirty years ago I had the chance of marrying the woman I loved, of settling down and becoming a decent member of society, of having my wretched hereditary weaknesses curbed by a gentle wife—in a word, the chance of happiness was mine, and this fiend-woman, Flora, sister of my blood, put an end to it. For that, I hated her while she lived. I hate her memory a thousand times more now that she is dead. For me, her son represents her, and he must bear the punishment she escaped."

"But how—why? I do not understand. You seek to punish him by marrying him to me? I am surely not such a pariah as that?"

"Of course you do not understand—how should you? Later on perhaps you will understand many things that seem unintelligible to you now."

"I shall never understand that the innocent should suffer for the guilty."

"Oh, you know well that I pretend to be no saint. I tell you this son of hers, to me, represents her. I was not able to take vengeance upon her while she was alive—he must bear it now. Let that suffice—I need tell you no more; you now know my motive."

Miriam was perplexed. She looked searchingly at Barton. Was he mad? She thought he must surely be. She did not like the light in his eye.

“But,” she said, “even so, I cannot see how his marriage with me is to act as the punishment you would have it. I cannot marry him against his will, even if I would; and if it were his wish to marry me, I—I—I think he would be happy.”

“Exactly so; exactly so. His future lies in your hands. You can avert his punishment—that is to say he can avert it through you. Listen to me. You may love Gerald Arkel, but you do not know him. He is the weakest, blindest, most easily led of men. It is through his weakness that I intend he shall suffer. It shall be my strength—unless he be wise in time and grasp the chance fate offers him. I intend he shall be my heir. I need not name the sum he will inherit; but it will not be small. And it shall be his damnation, his ruin. By means of it he will sink to the depths of infamy—of degradation, to perdition utterly. So shall he expiate the bitter wrong that has ruined my life—so shall he suffer for the sin of his cursed mother. Still I am not merciless. He has two women now from whom to choose. If he choose the right one, well and good. Such an influence as yours over him is the only thing that can save him, for you are a good woman. That is why I brought you here. But if he choose the other—the brainless, shallow minx with whom he thinks he is in love, then will his downfall be more rapid a hundred times. Now you know his chance and yours.”

“But—but.” Miriam was more and more bewildered. “But why choose me—you know nothing about me really, and what you do know is not on the face of it very reputable. How can you be sure that I am what you seem to think me?”

“I am sure of it. I knew it the first moment I saw your face; but still, I did not trust to that. I made inquiries; nothing was overlooked. I was very careful—you forget I had ample time and opportunity whilst you were recovering your health at the hotel.”

Miriam turned pale.

“But how could you do that? I told you nothing of myself. You had nothing to go upon.”

“I had sufficient for my purpose. I had Jabez, you told me about him. I learned what you had been to him—how in the midst of all corruption you had kept yourself pure, how your strength of purpose and never-

flinching spirit had been exercised for him, how you had encouraged him and helped him and stuck to him through all tribulation, even to starvation—for you were starving on that night, Miriam. All this I learned, and more, and so I determined that you were the woman who should stand for the salvation of this man, and I brought you here that you might marry him if you would, and save him from himself. You see, I am not altogether so bad as you think me.”

“Indeed, I don’t know what to say, Mr. Barton. It is all so very strange to me. Surely it would be better to leave your money where it would do good, not evil—to Major Dundas, for instance.”

“As a matter of fact, the money is at this moment left to Major Dundas; but I intend to alter my will in Gerald’s favour. At first I thought to punish him by leaving him nothing. But I soon found out my mistake. As a poor man, obliged to work for his living, Gerald Arkel would stand a fair chance of happiness. As a rich one and his own master, he stands none. And so I have determined to offer him at one and the same time his ruin and his salvation. Now do you begin to understand?”

Still Miriam knew not what to say. The whole scheme was to her so fantastic and so abominable, and at the same time so extraordinary, that its genesis seemed hardly human. It was impossible to believe the man was sane. She decided she could have nothing to do with it.

“I am afraid,” she said coldly, “that so far as I am concerned your scheme is quite impossible. Indeed, I can understand your wishing to salve your conscience in the face of so abominable a design as you contemplate for the ruin of this young man’s life; and God knows I would willingly save him if I could. But much as I am interested in him, much as I—I feel, that is I think—oh, I don’t know what to say,” she broke off in despair. “I must return to Jabez, Mr. Barton. Let me pass out of this life of yours. I will go out of it—I refuse to do your dirty work!”

“And so you call it dirty work to save a human soul?”

“I must go back to Jabez, I say.”

“That is to poverty, to disgrace, and—to crime!”

“To poverty, yes. But not to crime, no, nor to disgrace. I will leave tomorrow, Mr. Barton.”

“You shall not.”

“I must—I will. I do not fear you now. No, I defy you!”

“Take care, young lady; you had better not defy me.”

“And why not?” She winced, though she spoke haughtily enough.

With a sudden pounce the man seized her wrist and bent so close to her that his lips almost touched her ear. So low, too, did he speak, that she could with difficulty hear what he said. But enough she heard to make her colour come and go; and when he had finished, the beads of perspiration stood out upon her forehead.

“Who told you?” she gasped. “Who told you?”

“The man who left me just now. He tells me all I wish to know.”

“What is his name?”

“He has no name—for you. Call him ‘The Shadow,’ if you will. It will serve as well as any other name. Now, do you go or stay?”

She leaned against the writing-table, breathing heavily. For more than a minute she stood thus, battling with herself. Then slowly she turned and looked at him.

“I will stay,” she said. Then she fell helplessly into a chair and sobbed bitterly.

Barton looked at her with a sneer. He went to the side-board for a decanter and a glass. As in a dream she was conscious of his holding wine to her lips, and as in a dream she drank it, and heard him speak to her.

“Remember,” he said, “on your implicit obedience depends the future. Thwart me, and—”

“Hush, hush!” she cried, looking round in fear lest already someone should have overheard. “I will do all I can.”

“Very good. Now, if you feel better, we will return to the drawing-room.”

At the door she laid her hand upon his shoulder.

“One moment, Mr. Barton; you will keep this man—this shadow, as you call him—from doing harm?”

“I will. He is as much my slave as you are.”

And Miriam, although she shuddered, did not dare to contradict him. She was indeed his slave. His whispered communication had given her no choice. Again, from that moment, poor Miriam had taken up her burden.

For long after that, the impression left by this extraordinary interview was deep upon her. Circumstances altogether beyond her control compelled her to obey Barton; but she could by no means understand him. He puzzled her completely. She could not reconcile the man’s wish to ruin Gerald with his apparently co-existent desire to give him a chance of escape from the trap prepared for him. It was so utterly inconsistent to her mind. She could only surmise that the man had a conscience, and that in this way he strove to quieten it. The desire for vicarious punishment which seemed to have taken possession of him was, to her thinking, as childish as it was reprehensible. She could not reconcile it with either a normal sense of morality or with sanity.

It was no doubt a species of mania. Besides, in many other ways Barton’s actions were such as to cast the gravest doubts as to his mental state. His behaviour became more and more perplexing, and his actions almost invariably baseless and inconsequent. And it was not until long after, when the skeins of the various lives with which her own had become entangled, began to unravel themselves, that she understood what was now perfectly inexplicable to her. Then, knowing what she knew, she was no longer surprised.

“Wherever have you been, Miss Crane?” demanded Mrs. Darrow with some asperity, as she and the Squire entered.

“Oh, she has been talking to me on a little matter of business,” interrupted Barton before Miriam could reply. “It’s all right, Julia, there is nothing for you to disturb yourself about.”

“Oh, really, I don’t mind in the least,” said Mrs. Darrow, seeing she had made a *faux pas*; “but now that Miss Crane has returned to us, perhaps she will be so good as to sing something?”

Miriam’s first impulse was to decline, for her interview with Barton had shaken her nerve a good deal. But she saw the sinister look of curiosity on Mrs. Darrow’s face, and she determined she would give that lady no further ground for suspicion.

“I will sing with pleasure,” she said, moving towards the piano. “But I am afraid I have brought no music.”

“Oh, I saw to that,” said Mrs. Darrow producing a roll. “I was quite sure Uncle Barton would like to hear your voice, so I brought a few of your songs for you.”

“A few of my songs?” repeated Miriam; “and where, pray, did you get them?”

“Oh, it was Dicky who found them, in your room, dear. The child brought them down to show me a picture on the title page of one of them which seemed to have attracted him.”

“Indeed! Perhaps you will give me the music?”

Mrs. Darrow rose to fetch the parcel. Then she proceeded to open it and read out the titles of the songs. On Hilda’s face there was the blandest of smiles, masking, if the truth had but been known, the keenest of interest. She knew that Mrs. Darrow’s bombshell was now about to explode. To her, as to the wily widow, this was *the* incident of the evening—in fact, the whole *raison d’être* of it.

“I hear your voice is a contralto, Miss Crane,” said the Major, admiring the contour of her head. “I am so glad; it’s my favourite voice.”

“Really, Major?” observed Hilda. “I should have thought you would like something more lively—to me a contralto, no matter how beautiful, is always rather doleful.”

“There I can’t agree with you,” put in Gerald. “To my thinking the contralto is always full of pathos—it is the voice which goes straight to the heart.”

“Now, you too surprise me, Mr. Arkel,” replied Hilda, smiling ever so amiably. “I did not think you were so susceptible in the—what is it the doctors call it—the cardiac region?”

“I think you, of all people, should know me better than that,” murmured Gerald, bending towards her.

“Nonsense; I admit no such superiority. But hush, let us hear what it is Miss Crane is going to sing to us!”

Ever suspicious at any kindness however trifling on the part of Julia, the Squire had moved up close to the piano, and was keeping a pretty close watch upon her. But Mrs. Darrow was all unconscious of his scrutiny, being too deeply absorbed in the effective lodgment of her bombshell to pay much attention to anything else.

“‘The Sands of Dee,’ ‘The Clang of the Wooden Shoon,’ ‘Down the Long Avenue,’” rattled off Mrs. Darrow. Then, with the prettiest air of surprise, “Oh, and here is a comic song!”

“I think you must be mistaken,” said Miriam coldly. “I do not sing comic songs.”

“Now, now, Miss Crane, you know you are hiding your light under a bushel,” cried Mrs. Darrow with horribly artificial mirth. “What’s more, I expect you sing them delightfully. Come now, confess.”

Miriam seated there at the piano might in truth have been carved out of marble, so cold and so perfectly calm was she.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t sing any songs of that kind at all.”

“Oh, but really!” Mrs. Darrow was smoothing out the folio of music; “you can’t say that, in the face of this. Surely this must be yours—’It’s a Funny Little Way I’ve Got!’ M. Crane, Frivolity Music Hall!” She handed the sheet over to Miriam.

Barton bit his lip, and began to see at last what she was after. Mrs. Darrow proceeded.

“Really, Miss Crane, I don’t think I deserved to be so deceived at your hands. You might at least have told me that you were a singer at that class of—entertainment.”

There was a dead silence. Barton looked daggers, and was in truth somewhat fearful that more of Miriam’s past life than he liked was on the verge of discovery. Major Dundas raised his eyebrows, and Gerald, to conceal his surprise, hastily turned away. With a faint smile Miriam took the music, and looked coldly at Mrs. Darrow.

“I never sang a song in public in my life,” she said, “and most certainly I have nothing to do with the Frivolity Music Hall.”

“But the name is yours, and, I think, the handwriting too. How do you explain that?”

“The handwriting, as you say, is mine. But the name is not. If you must know, the song belonged to my brother, Michael Crane. He was very fond of the Frivolity Music Hall. He heard the song there, and bought it to sing himself. He was quite absurd in his liking for that class of thing, and really sang songs of the kind remarkably well—so much so that I often used to say he would end by becoming a music-hall singer. I happened to write his name upon this song, and I added ‘The Frivolity Music Hall’ simply by way of a joke. I little thought when I did so that it would be the means of placing me in my present position. I can only say that it is one I don’t appreciate in the least.”

Thus did Mrs. Darrow’s bombshell burst with but little real result—so little that the lady could but with difficulty conceal her disappointment. She was ready to discredit Miriam’s explanation altogether, but Barton, delighted at her discomfiture, put an end to that.

“I knew Michael Crane very well myself,” he said. “Indeed, I have often heard him sing his comic songs, though I cannot say I have heard this particular one. So I think you owe Miss Crane a very deep apology, Julia, for the most unpleasant way you chose of putting things.”

Miriam gave the Squire a glance full of gratitude.

“Oh, not at all,” she said. “It was a very natural mistake to make—I mean about the name. As for the other thing, that hardly matters, does it?—after all, whatever I have done in the past can concern no one but myself. Now that it is settled that I am still a respectable member of society, if you really wish to hear me, I will sing.” And without taking any notice of the effect of her words, Miriam turned to the key-board and commenced the prelude of the song she had chosen.

As her noble voice rolled through the room, Hilda and Mrs. Darrow exchanged glances of extreme significance. Their little plot had failed. They had been ignominiously beaten, and they knew it. Mrs. Darrow rapidly surveyed the position in her own mind, and decided to make the best of a very bad job. So when Miriam had finished her song she approached her.

“I am afraid I was very wrong, Miss Crane,” she tittered. “But you must admit it was a wholly excusable mistake.”

“I have already said so, Mrs. Darrow,” replied Miriam coldly, “very excusable. Please think no more about it.”

But when the party broke up, Gerald managed to get close to Miriam, and to whisper something in her ear.

“I knew your face was familiar to me,” he said. “It was at the ‘Frivolity’ I saw you. But fear nothing from me. I will keep your secret!”

Chapter VII

In The Woods

Having thus ignominiously failed in her attempt to bring about Miriam’s downfall, Mrs. Darrow judged it wise, for the time being at least, to desist from further attempts in the same direction—in fact, she left her governess severely alone. She realised that her abortive experiment had

resulted not only in failure of her object, but that it had utterly destroyed her chance of obtaining from Uncle Barton that little cheque which was looming up so distinctly and pleasantly on her mental horizon when she conceived her little plan for the undoing of Miriam Crane. And, worse still, she realised that Uncle Barton now knew the reason for her proposed hospitality. Nor was he long in taxing her with it, and administering in a series of expressive periods verbal chastisement as severe as any Mrs. Darrow had had to swallow from him for long past.

In vain she tried to excuse herself.

“It was all in the interest of the dear child,” she protested plaintively. “Surely you would not have Dicky entrusted to the care of a common music-hall singer?—it is so horribly low and vulgar, not to say worse.”

“Miss Crane is no music-hall singer. What she told you is perfectly true, for I know her brother well—indeed, it was through him I heard of her. He is a young ne’er-do-well, and happens to be in the employ of my own solicitor. Hearing that his sister was seeking employment as a governess through the agency of an institute in Kensington, I went there, saw her, and engaged her. I think the wisdom of my choice is evident.”

“Oh yes; so far as teaching goes she certainly does very well. But so she should, seeing she is well paid for it—far too well paid in my opinion.”

“But this happens to be one of the many points upon which your opinion is not of vital importance, Julia. I pay the lady what I consider is due to her for her services. The fact of the matter is, you cordially dislike Miss Crane.”

“No, that is not true,” replied Mrs. Darrow. “All I say is that there is something queer about her—very queer. For one thing she dresses absurdly above her position.”

“Does she? It seems to me she dresses very plainly.”

“Oh yes, to your eye, no doubt. But you must excuse me if in your own words I reply that the ‘cut’ of a lady’s dress is not one of the points upon which *your* opinion is of vital importance. You may take it from me that her dresses, ‘plain’ as you think them, come from a first-class

dressmaker, and cost a large sum of money. What I want to know is, how did she pay for them?”

Now this of course Barton knew very well, seeing that he himself had written the cheque for them. All he said was,

“If Miss Crane chooses to pay an extravagant price for her clothes, it is no business either of yours or of mine. She does her duty excellently well, and leaves absolutely no cause for complaint. Unfortunately, you are one of those people who do not need a cause. Your fault-finding capacities are endless and illimitable. Now either you accept Miss Crane as the very satisfactory person I consider her to be in her position, or I send her away without further ado, and you can attend to Dicky yourself.”

This was not at all to Mrs. Darrow's mind. In such circumstances she would be forced to get another governess, and the chances were, as she knew well, one vastly inferior to Miriam. Not that the boy's educational welfare weighed with her so much as the fact that she would have to pay for her out of her own pocket. Such a proceeding with her extremely finite income would entail personal sacrifices, for which she was in no way inclined. Therefore did she readily promise and vow that she would not again dig or delve into the past of Miriam Crane, and while declaring that she was altogether satisfactory as a teacher, hazarded the hope that if in time to come her suspicions should prove to have been well founded, Uncle Barton would not forget that she had warned him. All this the Squire took for what he considered it was worth, and left her without any effort to disguise the contempt he felt for her. So far as she was concerned he thought Miriam was safe, for the time being at all events. Self-interest was the securest of all possible dams to the verbal torrent of the irrepressible Julia.

But that the widow lady still nurtured her feeling of enmity for Miriam was evident from the hundred and one petty ways in which she contrived to show her spite. And while Miriam, on her part, was altogether above taking notice of such trifles, she felt the sting of them nevertheless. So the days and weeks and months went by, without open rupture of any kind, though with much silent fortitude on the part of the unhappy governess.

By this time she had no doubt as to the strength of her feeling for Gerald Arkel. She saw him continually, sometimes in the company of Hilda Marsh, often alone. Of this latter young lady, further opportunity seemed only to confirm her opinion. She was selfish, shallow, and altogether without heart. With the sharp swift instinct of a woman in her position, Hilda saw the real state of affairs, and despite all Miriam's endeavours to avoid the existence of any spirit of rivalry between them—such a position being to her undignified and wholly detestable—she found herself being more or less forced into it.

And the young man himself could not but see how things were. But he seemed in no way to object. On the contrary, although he did not lessen his attentions to Hilda, he continued to spend a considerable amount of time with Miriam, just—as he pleased to phrase it to himself—to “keep the pot boiling.” Had she so wished it, Miss Marsh could probably have brought him to an open declaration at any moment. But she did not, and that for the very excellent and weighty reason, that it was not at all certain in her mind which of the two nephews Uncle Barton had determined upon making his heir. And so for the same reason when Major Dundas visited Lesser Thorpe, which indeed he did but rarely, he was kept thoroughly well in hand by this young lady, who had made up her mind to be the future mistress of that very desirable property. And, in truth, the gallant Major was rapidly succumbing to the charms of Miriam Crane, and his feelings were only fanned the more to vigour by the absence of any encouragement on her part. So the daily wheel revolved in sight of the whole parish, and not a little to its diversion. To Uncle Barton most of all its convolutions afforded the greatest satisfaction, not to say amusement, pending the time when it should come “full circle.”

Such a position as that in which Gerald Arkel found himself was tenable neither with dignity nor with any degree of nobility. But then this young man was not endowed even in a minor degree with either of these estimable qualities. He was in truth the most material and nonchalant of mortals, rejoicing in the possession of a comely person, and an invariably imperturbable disposition—not infrequently miscalled “sunny” by many who knew him. He had the greatest aversion to work of any kind. In the enjoyment of a liberal income from his uncle, he gave himself over to a life wholly useless, purposeless, and by no means above reproach. Once a week on an average he ran down from town to the

Manor House, and, usually at Barton's expressed desire, remained for two or three days, dividing his favours between Hilda and Miriam. So weak and invertebrate was his character, and so horribly pronounced his vanity, that in her heart Hilda owned to an active dislike of him, and she tolerated his attentions solely because ambition, coupled with a desire to free herself from her present poverty-stricken existence, were with her for the time being paramount feelings. On the other hand, Miriam, so far as this young man was concerned, appeared to have lost herself utterly. Noble woman as she was, with the highest aims ever dominating her life, she saw no bad in the man. He was, in her eyes, unfortunate, weak, misguided; and, by virtue of those very failings, seemed only the more to appeal to her strength. With her—how sure she felt of it!—he would rise to the highest things, and she longed unutterably for the right to guide his steps and turn them in the right direction. With such a woman as Hilda Marsh—the Squire was right—he was doomed. For that and for that reason only, she allowed herself gradually to be drawn into rivalry with this other woman. The end, to her thinking, justified the means, and the conviction grew upon her so, she became so absorbed in it, that she was heedless completely of any sense of degradation in her own eyes, which in other circumstances she would have been the first to feel, as well as of the fact that in the parish she had come to be looked upon as an impudent adventuress, aiming by fair means or by foul at the capture of Squire Barton's heir. Those were very bitter times for the friendless Miriam.

Since Gerald's whispered intimation that he knew her as a woman he had seen at the Frivolity Music Hall, there had been no reference to that matter between them. The day after the dinner-party he had left for town, and although he had met her almost immediately on his return a week later, the subject had been avoided by tacit and mutual consent. But Miriam knew that an explanation would have to come. Without it she would never feel sure of his respect, and that she felt she must have before all else. Her opportunity came some three weeks later, and the absolutely free and unfettered statement she made was only characteristic of her.

On that warm August afternoon she had taken Dicky into the woods around the Manor House for one of his readings from Nature's book. There would be ample time, she knew, for indoor teaching, when the short days and long nights of winter came upon them. So for the present,

despite his mother's grumbling that the boy was always idle, Miriam strove to keep him out of doors as much as possible that he might acquire that bodily health and vigour without which she could not hope for him to thrive mentally. Of this Barton approved most highly, and more than ever did he congratulate himself on the success of Miriam as a governess. Indeed it began to come upon him very strongly that she was altogether too good to be thrown away on a wastrel such as Gerald. But he would allow nothing to interfere with his design. He was obliged to confess to himself that Miriam impressed him more favourably than any other member of her sex with whom he had come in contact hitherto, and in truth, had things been otherwise than they were, it is quite possible that he would have come to offer his shrivelled body and not particularly spotless soul for her acceptance. The piece of glass picked up on Waterloo Bridge that night had proved to be a diamond of first water, too late though it was to set it in his crown.

On the dry grass under a pine-tree, where the ground was strewn with needles and cones, sat Miriam, whilst Dicky scampered and frolicked about, climbed the trees, and behaved generally after the manner of his kind. This day the boy seemed full of vitality and the very joy of life. The strong sun drew out the resinous odour of the pines, and the whole wood was filled with their spicy fragrance. Through the green branches Miriam caught sight of the blue sky overhead, and watched the strong shafts of the sun-god smite into the twilight heart of the woods. She sat with a book on her lap, drinking in the pure air and revelling in the gambols of the sunlight through the trees, though ever with a watchful eye upon Dicky as he played.

“This is a fairy wood, Miss Crane; and I am the knight who seeks a lovely princess enchanted by a magician. She has gone to sleep for a hundred years, so you must shut your eyes, please.”

Miriam laughed too.

“Now I am fighting my way through the wood. Whist, Whist! oh how strong the branches are; but here is the palace. I walk upstairs and find the room where the beautiful princess is sleeping on her purple bed. I kiss her, and—”

“She wakes!” cried Miriam, catching the boy in her arms, and repaying the kiss with a dozen. “Oh, Dicky, how I wish I could sleep for a hundred years!”

“I don’t,” replied the boy seriously. “You would not be with me then.”

“But think of the long holiday you would have, dear.”

“I don’t want any holiday without you. There would be no jolly games like we have now. Come on, Miss Crane. I’m going to be Samson now, and slay the Philistines; I—”

“All right, Dick, my boy, here’s one of them; come on!”

It was Gerald Arkel who spoke, and the instant he did so, Miriam noticed that his voice was quite unlike himself. There was always upon him that look of hereditary delicacy, but now there were dark circles under his eyes, and he wore a haggard and weary expression which unmistakably betokened sleepless nights. When he saw who it was, Dicky threw himself into his arms with a shout.

“Oh, I’m so glad it’s you, Cousin Gerald; come on, we can play at horses now.”

“No, no, Dicky, I can’t. I’m not on for games this morning. You go on being Samson and find some more Philistines to slaughter. How are you, Miss Crane?”

“Oh, I’m very well, thank you. And you, Mr. Arkel, you’re not looking quite yourself; are you ill?”

He flung himself on the grass beside her, and picked up a fir-cone which he began to pull to pieces.

“I feel nearly dead,” he said irritably; “I suppose I must expect to. I was playing pretty well through the night, and worse luck, dropped a good deal too. I never can get on without my sleep, and lately my nerves have been playing Old Harry with me!”

“Then why in the name of goodness do you go on like this—you are ruining your health.”

“Oh, a fellow must live, and enjoy himself somehow!”

“And do you call playing cards into the small hours and shattering your nerves—not to speak of losing your money—enjoyment? I really am surprised, Mr. Arkel, that a man like you, especially when you know your constitution won’t stand much, should behave so foolishly. It isn’t as if you hadn’t sufficient means—”

Gerald shook his head.

“Sufficient means?—that’s just it. I know nothing about my means. For the present, yes, my uncle allows me—well, I suppose really you would call it a sufficiency. But in the future? I am all in the dark. He may make me his heir—on the other hand he may not. You know how eccentric he is. He may leave me without a penny. He’s quite capable of it. That’s really why I gamble, so that I can put by something and be independent of his whims.”

“You should be independent of anyone’s whims, certainly. But hardly by gambling. In any case, you must know it is a fool’s game waiting for dead men’s shoes, Mr. Arkel. Why don’t you work and make your own fortune—you have a great deal in your favour?”

“Oh, come now,” interrupted Gerald, “that’s pretty rough on me. I’ve never been brought up to work. ‘Pon my soul, I shouldn’t know how to go about it. Besides, why should I, when there’s no absolute need?”

“For one very good reason if for no other. You must not be offended with what I’m going to say—but you’re one of those men who are not fitted to be their own master. Whilst you are idle you are bound to get into mischief. Work—right-down hard work would be the salvation of you.”

“Well, upon my word—I suppose you would have me grub away in some beastly office all day!”

“Well, better an honest grub than a—yes, I’ll say it—than a dishonest butterfly. You know quite well what I mean.”

He flushed, sat up, and faced her.

“Miss Crane, I thought you liked me!”

It was Miriam's turn to flush now, and it was a very crimson face that looked at him.

"I do like you, Mr. Arkel," she said, "otherwise I should not be speaking to you like this. I want to be able to think well of you."

"You don't think well of me then?"

"No, I do not. I don't see how you can expect me to. How can I think well of a man who is content to occupy a position such as yours? You accept money from—indeed you are content to be wholly dependent upon a man whom you know you dislike, and you tolerate his whims simply that you may step into the shoes which you are waiting for him to vacate. You cannot hold that it is an honourable employment, Mr. Arkel."

Now Mr. Gerald was wholly unaccustomed to this order of treatment, more especially at the hands of a comely young lady. From them he had come from experience to expect treatment vastly more solicitous and sympathetic. And he was quite inclined to resent this change from the tactics upon which he had been reared, so to speak; more especially, seeing that his ill-luck and shattered nerves should of themselves have been sufficient to enlist the condolence of anyone—certainly of one who pretended to a liking for him as Miss Miriam Crane had just done. Such methods of exhibiting "liking" this spoiled child did not understand. And he did not quite know what to say, so he deemed it best to maintain for the moment a dignified silence. She might take what she liked from that. She saw his attitude, and felt hurt at it, but undaunted she went on.

"You will get plenty of people, I know, to flatter and to spoil you, Mr. Arkel, and I suppose you think me a very objectionable person for speaking to you like I am doing. But I have had a bitter, hard, and cruel life, and it is deep down from experience that I speak. If you knew—but there, all I can say is, that no matter how difficult it has been for me, I have always stuck to it, and tried to do my duty. You know I don't want to preach, I—"

"You have not always been teaching," hazarded Gerald, in the hope of changing the subject.

"No, you know I have not. Did you not tell me that you yourself had seen me at the 'Frivolity'?"

“Yes, I did. But mind you, I have not breathed a word of it to a soul. You were in the chorus, weren’t you, in one of the musical sketches?”

“I was,” replied Miriam calmly. “But I felt obliged in my present position to deny it point-blank to Mrs. Darrow—not for my own sake altogether, but for the sake of others. Besides, although I know well the sort of capital Mrs. Darrow and her friends would make out of such an incident, I was doing nothing to be ashamed of. I was earning an honest living when I could do so by no other means, though it was only ten shillings a week.”

“But however did you manage to get yourself into such straits, may I ask, Miss Crane?”

“I will tell you. My father was a captain in the merchant marine. He was lost at sea, leaving my mother and me penniless. I thought that as I had received a good education, if I came to London I should be able to find employment as a governess. But I found it quite impossible, as I had no one to speak for me. Little by little my funds dwindled away, until in sheer desperation I applied at the music-halls for work of any description. My voice helped me there, and I managed to get this engagement at the ‘Frivolity.’ But I was not there long, for shortly after that I met an old friend, a school teacher, through whom I obtained an introduction to an agency in Kensington, and so came to be engaged by Mr. Barton for Dicky. But what I have come through and what I have suffered—well, it is because I have so suffered that I speak to you as I do, because somehow such acute trouble seems to impel one to warn—anyone they are interested in.”

“You have been very plucky, Miss Crane.”

“Because I have put honour first, Mr. Arkel; one cannot be plucky without it. In the very depths of despair I have always clung to that, and though as I say, I have suffered, yes, even to starvation, thank God there is nothing to which I can look back with shame. I concealed from Mrs. Darrow what I did because I know the kind of woman she is, and because I knew that I was justified in doing so for the sake of others—for the sake of this dear little fellow here who needs me, and whose little life it is my thought to care for and to guide. Do you think if it were

otherwise I could stay beside him, Mr. Arkel? Still, even now, if you think it right, you can tell Mrs. Darrow everything—or I will.”

Gerald protested hotly.

“I am not quite the black crow you paint me, Miss Crane. I most heartily approve of the course you took. It would have done nothing but harm all round if you had taken any other. No one shall ever hear a word of it from me. Whatever I am, I’m not the man to think lightly of a woman because she has had to come through the rough and tumble of life a bit. You have had a hard fight for it, but you have won, and although you have told me pretty plainly that you think precious little of me and my present mode of life, my opinion of you is—if you care to have it—that you are a very fine and noble woman, and worth a hundred Julias any day of the week.”

This was sweet music to Miriam’s ears. He believed in her withal. She was, in his mind, on an equality with the best—on an equality with Hilda, fenced off as she had been by the protective pale of home influence from the harsh and bitter realities of the world. How good it was to know that! It had cut her to the quick to think that perhaps she stood in his mind on a lower plane. But thus reassured from his own lips, she felt she could bear anything—almost to lose him.

“Indeed, indeed, I care to have it, Mr. Arkel,” she said. “It is not because I urge you to take up your own fight in life that I value your good opinion the less. I know you are capable of good things, and I want to see you achieve them. You do not start handicapped as I did; you have not the sins of others to hamper you—” she stopped, for with the words came the thought of Barton and his diabolic scheme. “You have but one enemy worth the counting.”

“And who is that?”

“Yourself. You are weak, and your love of pleasure dwarfs all else with you. At least you can strive to put a check on your desires—to indulge yourself less. Then gradually the rest will come; if you will only try. Will you?”

There was a whole world of meaning in her tone; and the expression upon her face was very beautiful. His eye met hers, and he took her hand.

“I will try, Miss Crane,” he said. “No one has ever spoken to me before as you have done. I know that what you say is true. You are a brave woman, and as good and kind as you are brave. I will try and deserve the interest you take in me.”

“And you will succeed,” said Miriam. “All I would ask of you is to be worthy of yourself.”

Chapter VIII

Shorty

In every community or family there is generally one person who is strong enough to play the part of the cuckoo in the nest. The relative with a temper, who always gets his or her way—the bully of the tribe—the despot of the nation—these types are well-known if not appreciated. They dominate all those with whom they come in contact; they storm down opposition, and rule by sheer force of terror. Mrs. Darrow had the instinct and will to be one of this sort, but neither was her brain of sufficient capacity, nor her will sufficiently dogged to permit her attaining to such eminence. But the parish had its despot, and that in the person of Mrs. Parsley, the vicar’s wife. She was a domestic Elizabeth crossed with Zantippe, and her sway was absolute.

Mr. Parsley—the Reverend Augustine—was a tall, imposing-looking man, who should surely have been a bishop if looks went to the making of one. He was learned in a dry-as-dust sort of way, and was at present engaged in writing a book on the Hebrew syntax, though of what use this would be to the world when it was finished—if it ever did reach the finite stage—no one knew, himself least of all. However, as Mrs. Parsley said, his labours served to keep him out of mischief, and therefore she encouraged him in his digging for Jewish roots.

For forty years had the Rev. Augustine been vicar of Lesser Thorpe, so by right of possession his wife had a title to her social throne. In contrast to her imposing husband, she was a dry chip of a woman, tall and marvellously lean, with a clacking tongue, a wonderful comprehensive

vocabulary, and a thoracic resonance almost as deep as the vicar's. To hear the two of them discoursing was to listen to the bell of St. Paul's discoursing with Big Ben. As a rule, on such occasions, Mr. Parsley's part was closely analagous to that of confidant to a stage heroine, which is as much as to say he threw out remarks, provocative of arguments, recollections, scoldings, and scandal. Mrs. Parsley was a notable gossip, and had the history of the parish for the last forty years at the tip of her tongue. Her memory was renowned, her tongue was dreaded, and all, not excepting Mr. Barton, bowed to her sway.

Not for some considerable time after she had become a member of Mrs. Darrow's household did Miriam meet this formidable lady, for, taking into her head that she was threatened with pulmonary disease, Mrs. Parsley had insisted on starting for Davos Platz at a moment's notice, and on remaining there until she felt quite sure the dreaded visitor had given up all claim to her very imposing person.

For a wonder she left the Rev. Augustine behind, and he enjoyed his holiday prodigiously wrestling with the letter "Jod," while his curates—he had two of them, the meekest of their kind—attended to the church services and to the other spiritual requirements of his parish. When shortly before Christmas Mrs. Parsley returned, she immediately called at Pine Cottage to see the new governess of whom she had already heard the most conflicting accounts. Then a most wonderful thing happened—she took a fancy to Miriam.

More than this, Mrs. Parsley told Miriam so, and forthwith enrolled her under the ægis of her own tongue, so that all gossip suddenly ceased, and Miriam was as much praised as formerly she had been blamed. For Mrs. Parsley approved of the way in which Dicky's education was being conducted, and congratulated Mrs. Darrow on having one sensible woman under her roof.

"The first time there has been any sense there to my knowledge," she sniffed, to which expression of opinion the widow did not dare to object lest worse should befall her. She had too many weak spots in her armour to allow of her defying Mrs. Parsley.

One consequence of all this was that Miriam visited the Vicarage frequently, and became as great a favourite of the Rev. Augustine's as

she was of his wife's. He told her in his characteristic dreamy way that in Hebrew Miriam meant "the strong one," and that it was eminently suited to her, since she was strong of body, brain, and will. And Dicky sometimes went with Miriam, and played in Mr. Parsley's study, where he found many things grateful to his imaginative faculties. For the vicar was something of an antiquarian, and had a store of ancient coins, still more ancient images, and wonderful reproductions of Assyrian and Babylonian sculptures, all of which the child delighted in. It was always a happiness for Dicky to visit that wonder-room.

A week before Christmas the weather turned cold and raw. There had been a slight fall of snow, and, owing to the absence of sunshine, much of it still lay on the ground. A bitter wind swept inland from the sea, and whistled through the bare branches of the trees, so that the woods around reverberated like harp-strings. Night was drawing in, but in the Vicarage parlour all was snug and cosy. The vicar himself was buried in his books in his study. So Mrs. Parsley and her visitor had the drawing-room to themselves, and were drinking their tea before a bright and cheerful fire. As she listened to that never-failing verbal flow, Miriam threw in a word occasionally because she knew it was expected of her, and in order to show her appreciation of the words of wisdom showered upon her with such reckless prodigality. The conversation—or, to be more correct, the homily—turned upon the personality of Mr. Barton.

"He is a bad man," said Mrs. Parsley, shaking her head at the fire, "a free-thinker, and a walker in darkness. But we must not be too hard on him—indeed who could be hard upon a lunatic?"

"Do you really call Mr. Barton insane?" asked Miriam.

"Why not? I don't think he has ever been sane since he had brain fever!"

"I never knew that he had had brain fever."

"Yes, indeed—some thirty years ago—it was all about some woman, or rather women, I believe. I wonder you haven't heard about it."

Miriam judged it best to assume entire ignorance of Mr. Barton's past.

"Do tell me all about it, Mrs. Parsley," she entreated.

“Well, it’s not a very complimentary story to our sex, my dear. But, there, I never did think much of women. Who could,” she exclaimed, with sudden gusto, “when there are such fools as Mrs. Darrow and minxes like Hilda Marsh to be found in every parish? I’d give them both the ducking-stool if I could. Hilda—there’s a smiling cat for you, and as deceitful as—as a weasel. She never helps her wretched mother, but thinks of nothing but dressing herself up in fripperies that are never paid for. She thinks to secure that idiot of a Gerald Arkel by her mincing. But she shan’t. I’ll put a stop to that. We’ve got more than enough with the two of them, without letting them marry and produce more fools.”

“But about Mr. Barton?” asked Miriam, bringing the good lady back to the subject in hand. “I am very curious to hear this story of his.”

“I can soon tell it to you. Barton was a younger son—a gay, light-hearted young fellow, not unlike Gerald Arkel, but of course with ten times the brains. He was engaged to marry a pretty, and, strange to say, sensible girl, who would no doubt have made him an excellent wife. But one of his sisters—Arkel’s mother—took it upon her to interfere (so like them!), with the result that the girl married somebody else. Well, Barton, who was always a nervous, highly strung sort of creature, went off his head altogether, and was seriously bad for years. While he lived his elder brother looked after him, but unfortunately the brother died, and Barton came in for the property. He then had to go his own way, and a pretty mess he made of it.”

“But what reason had his sister for interfering—surely it was very wrong?”

Mrs. Parsley rubbed her nose, as she was wont to do when puzzled.

“Of course it was wrong, my dear; but I never did get at the exact truth. There was a great deal of talk about it at the time—some said one thing some another. Barton and Mrs. Arkel—she was Flora Barton then—held their tongues you may be sure. But I had my own opinion, and I still have it,” concluded Mrs. Parsley, frowning at the fire.

“And what is it?” said Miriam. “But perhaps I should not ask.”

“Oh yes, you may, my dear. You are very discreet I know. I don’t mind telling you. Well, Flora was very much in love with a man named Farren,

a penniless scamp though of good family. She ended by eloping with him, and Barton (our friend) followed her and brought her back. The man went off to India—was bribed to go! *He's* never been right in his head since either, I believe. Flora never forgave her brother, and out of revenge she made up some disgraceful story about him, and went straight with it to the girl with whom he was in love, a Miss Cotton, who, without giving him the benefit of the doubt, sent back his ring, and of course broke off the engagement. He tried to see her, but her mother, who was also prejudiced by Flora's story, took her away at once, and eventually the girl married some other man. The thing so preyed upon Barton's mind, that he got brain fever, as I told you, and Flora married—was forced, I think, to marry—Arkel. She had one son, and died. But Barton never forgave her. And," added Mrs. Parsley, with great emphasis, "that is the part I never could make out!"

"What do you mean?" asked Miriam, much interested.

"Why, when Arkel's father died, Barton took his nephew and had him educated, and, in fact, has allowed him an income ever since. From all accounts he intends to make him his heir. Now," said Mrs. Parsley, looking directly at Miriam, "why, I ask, should a vindictive creature like that be so kind to the son of the sister whom he detested?"

Miriam could have answered that question very quickly; but she felt she had no right to betray the Squire's confidence; she therefore contented herself with asking Mrs. Parsley in what particular way she considered Barton "queer."

"Oh, my dear!" and the good lady lifted up her hands, "have you seen the books in his library? Of all criminal literature!—I'd burn the whole lot if I could. The man has a perfect mania for reading about murders and robberies, and all that sort of thing. He goes up to London, and associates with the blackest criminals, haunts the slums; in fact, takes a fiendish delight in contemplating the worst side of human nature. A curate of ours, who went to work in the East End, saw him one day in the company of a Chinaman—fancy, a Chinaman! From that you may judge the sort of company he keeps in London. He's not only queer, in my opinion, but mad—right down mad!"

But all this did not let in much new light on the vagaries of the gentleman in question so far as Miriam could see. If he haunted the slums, as Mrs. Parsley said, she could easily understand how he came to be on Waterloo Bridge at midnight. What she could not explain, save by the theory of lunacy, was this criminal craze and love of associating with the lowest of human kind. And although she discussed this point thoroughly with Mrs. Parsley, that lady could supply no reason save the aforesaid one of “queerness,” than which she did not think a stronger was necessary. So for the time being the subject dropped, and Mrs. Parsley, having finished her tea, and enjoyed it, was minded to “put on her things” preparatory to an evening jaunt.

“I will walk home a bit of the way with you, my dear,” she said graciously. “I have to see old Pegwin, who is passing away rapidly. I must arrange with him about his funeral.”

With this cheerful object Mrs. Parsley left the Vicarage with Miriam. There was a drizzling rain and a high wind, and walking was anything but pleasant. On the outskirts of the village—the church and Vicarage stood some way beyond it—Mrs. Parsley left Miriam to make the rest of her way home alone, and started down a side lane for the Pegwin cottage—so called—although it was little better than a pig-stye. As she battled against the wind, the lean figure of a ragged boy suddenly started out of the hedge, and ran past her in the direction Miriam had taken.

Mrs. Parsley, who knew every face in the village, saw that the boy was a stranger, and filled with curiosity immediately gave chase. In a very few moments she had the urchin by the scruff of the neck.

The boy wriggled and twisted, and kicked Mrs. Parsley’s shins, but that indomitable lady held on, and whacked vigorously with her umbrella.

“You monkey,” she raged, “who are you, and what are you doing here?”

He was a stunted, pale-faced brat, with a particularly repulsive countenance, rendered none the more inviting by his screwing it up with a leer.

“‘Ere you, lemme alone, will yer?” he yelped, still wriggling. “I ain’t a-doin’ nothin’ to yer, blarst yer!”

“Don’t you swear at me, boy, or I’ll have you locked up. Where do you come from?”

“Where d’ yer think I come from—Paris? ‘Tain’t no bisness of yourn, any’ow.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Shan’t tell yer; wot’s more, lady, I’ll knife yer if yer don’t lemme go; s’elp me, I will!” and the boy kicked again.

Mrs. Parsley shook him.

“You horrible little creature! how dare you speak like that to me? We want no vagrants here, so if you don’t take yourself off out of this village I’ll have you put in jail, do you understand?”

“Oh, my eye, ‘ere’s a bloomin’ shaime,” wailed the boy. “I ain’t a-doin’ no ‘arm, mum. Father’s ‘ere, too, and I’m only a-goin’ arter ‘im. ‘E’s got a carawan ‘e ‘as, an’ ‘e’s perfect respect’bl’. Le’ go o’ me, will yer? I don’t want t’ ‘urt yer!”

Mrs. Parsley was about to question him further, when, with a sudden wriggle, he escaped from her clutches, leaving the collar of his coat in her hand. Without even a look behind, he dodged up the lane, emitting sounds which Mrs. Parsley could only take to be derisive, and disappeared in the waning twilight. She would have followed, but as Pegwin demanded her attention, she was reluctantly obliged to forego the chase. In the meantime, like a hound on a scent, the boy had darted off in the direction Miriam had taken, and, having caught up with her, spoke to her.

“‘Ere,” he said hoarsely, “I want to speak to yer!”

“Shorty!” she exclaimed.

She recognised the creature at once. It was Shorty, the pilot-fish of the Jabez shark!

Chapter IX

The Shadow

The sudden apparition of Shorty at once dismayed and disheartened Miriam. It seemed as if she were never to shake off the past—never to be allowed entirely to emerge from out the mire into which she had sunk through no fault of her own. If Mrs. Darrow were to see her in confidential discourse with this Arab of the gutter, Heaven only knew what would be the result. With apprehension she glanced swiftly up and down the road. But no one was in sight. Then quietly she glided to the lee-side of a cottage, where she was sheltered both from sight and from the wind. Shorty followed her with rat-like activity, and snuggled in his rags against her skirts. The night was closing in around them, and she shuddered and shrank back from the contact of this obscene creature who had crawled out of the darkness, as it were, across her path. The urchin gazed at her admiringly.

“My eye, y’are a stunner, y’are,” he croaked, hugging himself; “wot ‘ud old Mother Mandarin say t’ ye now?”

“Hush!” Miriam glanced round again. “Nonsense, Shorty; someone might hear! What do you want—money?”

“I cud do with a bit. Travellin’ fust clarse fro’ London costs a ‘eap; an’ m’ close ain’t wot they shuld be fur wisitin’.”

With a hasty gesture Miriam drew away her skirts, and producing two half-crowns handed them to the boy.

“This will get you food,” she said hurriedly. “I can’t give you any more. I am little better off than you are.”

Shorty clinked the coins together, and whistled shrilly—much to Miriam’s dismay. But the wind was so loud that the sound was drowned in the sweeping of the blast.

“How did you find me out?” she asked.

“Jabez knew. Y’ sent him twenty quid fro’ Craven Street, didn’t y’?”

“Yes, but I didn’t tell him where I was going.”

Shorty hugged himself again and uttered a dignified screech.

“I foun’ yer out, I did. Jabez ‘e sent me t’ the ‘otel as y’ guv the name on the letter y’ sent the quid with, an’ I went there, an’ sawr the ole cove as Jabez tried to scrag.”

“But how did you find out? Did Mr.—did he tell you?”

“Ho yes! ‘e tole me, leastways ‘e tole Mother Mandarin, an’ she tole me, an’ I tole Jabez; an’ ‘e sez, ‘you jes’ go down,’ ‘e sez, ‘an’ say to Miriam as I wants to ‘ave a word with ‘er, I does,’ an’ I sez, ‘right y’are,’ an’ I pass off down ‘ere, I does, and sleep in barns an’ ‘aystacks, an’ dodges the bloomin’ peelers. An’ I gits ‘ere to-day, an’ I sees you a talkin’ to that skinny laidy; an’ wot does she do but ketches me a clout on the ‘ead an’ arsk questions; but she didn’t fin’ out nothink fro’ me, no, blarst ‘er!—not a bloomin’ word, an’ I clears out arter you, an’ ‘ere I am;” and Shorty, having exhausted his stock of breath for the time being, executed a shuffle by way of keeping himself warm.

The cold would have killed a delicately nurtured child, but Shorty, like the man in the Greek story, was “all face,” and the cold affected his hardened carcase but little. He shuffled and slapped his hands, and leered at Miriam until her very soul was sick within her. What had she done to be thus visited by this horrible reminder of the past?

“Did Mr.—did the old gentleman tell Mother Mandarin I was with him?”

“Ho yes, ‘e tole ‘er. Mother Mandarin’s fly, she is, an’ there ain’t much she wants to know as she don’t git t’ know.”

Miriam started, and, seizing the boy by the arm, looked at him searchingly.

“Does the old gentleman—?” but Shorty interrupted her with a grin.

“Yes, that’s it. Ho, ‘e’s a bad ‘un, ‘e is. As wicked a ole cuss as ever wos. ‘Satan,’ Mother Mandarin calls ‘im, an’ Satan ‘e is.”

“Does he often go to Mother Mandarin?”

“E goes there a lot, ‘e does. But look ‘ere,” continued Shorty crossly, “I can’t staiy torkin’ ‘ere all night, I’m orf to git grub. ‘Twas Jabez sent me ‘ere, it wos.”

“What does Jabez want?” Miriam had a premonition of ill.

“T’ see y’ an’ ‘ave a jaw, didn’t I te’ y’ so?”

“I can’t see him. I daren’t leave here, Shorty.”

“There ain’t no ned. Jabez is a-comin’ ‘ere.”

“Shorty!” Miriam seized hold of the boy again, and looked at him. He glanced at her and wriggled free with a yelp.

“Don’t look at me like that; I ain’t done nothink.”

“He can’t come here,” said Miriam hurriedly. “Tell him he must not—he dare not. If he leaves London, he is lost!”

“I don’t know; I don’t know a bloomin’ thing about it,” said Shorty sullenly. “All I knows is as ‘e said ‘e wos a-comin’ ‘ere next week. Goin’ to keep ‘is ‘oliday in the country. An’ I don’t want no more lip, Miriam, d’ y’ ‘ear? If you’d let Jabez scrag that ole Satan, ‘twould ‘ave been best for ‘im Jabez sez ye’re t’ meet ‘im outside the church ‘ere next Friday.”

“What! has he been here before then—that is, since I came here?”

“I don’t know. That’s all ‘e sez, an’ all I knows. I’m orf for grub I tell yer.”

“Shorty!” Miriam detained the boy. “I have always been kind to you.”

“Ho yes—you’re a good ‘un as ever wos.”

“Then don’t speak of me to anyone about here. Don’t say you’ve seen me; mind, Shorty, not a word.”

“I’m fly.” Shorty spun a coin like some horrible imp of darkness.

Miriam leaned against the wall of the cottage. It was with the utmost difficulty that she could keep up—she felt giddy and faint. Though on all sides she was environed with perils, it would never do to give way now. She would have to meet Jabez, yes, and fight him—otherwise he would betray her, and she would sink back again into the horrible life which she hoped she had left for ever. It was with a heavy heart and tread that she regained the road, and began to make her way home.

She walked along, a lonely figure on the lonely road—for the evening was so cold that the labourers and their wives were not inclined to loiter out of doors. More than once she had half a mind to turn back to the Vicarage, and tell the whole truth to Mrs. Parsley. She seemed kindly disposed to her—indeed fond of her; perhaps she would help her. But then, again, Mrs. Parsley was at best a hard woman, reared upon relentless dogma of the Old Testament. It was quite possible she might spurn her when she came to hear her story. Miriam had never confessed the whole truth, not even to Mr. Barton, although, in her early weak moments she had said enough to enable him to trace the rest through the strange creature he had called the Shadow. And though Barton knew all, he still remained her friend. But after what she had learned from Shorty concerning Mother Mandarin's connection with the Squire, she felt she could no longer trust him. It might be best to risk confiding in Mrs. Parsley, who was above suspicion, and possessed of much social power. She could not make up her mind. What was best? What was right? She paused, hesitated, and looked up for guidance to the windy sky. The stars were there, and the moon, across whose face the flying clouds were driving in the sweeping east wind; but there was no guidance, no hint of what course she should take. Thrown back on herself, Miriam wavered and was lost. She walked on and on and on; but she did not go back to Mrs. Parsley. Alas! had she but turned back on that fatal night how different would her future have been! She had come to the cross-roads, although she knew it not; and she had taken the wrong one. Henceforth her path was difficult, tortuous, and weary.

As, battling with her conflicting thoughts, Miriam pressed on to Pine Cottage in the face of the wind—which seemed as if it would drive her back to the Vicarage and Mrs. Parsley—a shadow, as it seemed, emerged from out the other shadows and came towards her. Then she saw that it was human—a tall, gaunt figure, clothed in black. Instantly and instinctively she knew this was the strange person whom Barton called the Shadow. Her nerves were so shaken by her late interview, that at this unexpected encounter she could not withhold a sharp cry.

“Who are you, and what do you want with me?” she panted.

Then for the first time she heard his voice, deep, sad, and thrilling—a voice that once had been beautiful, but had been robbed of half its beauty.

“Who I am does not matter,” he said slowly. “What I want you shall know.”

“Tell me,” said Miriam, recovering from her first alarm.

“Know then that I overheard you and that lad. But you need not fear. Your secret lies safe in my keeping. I know you, and I know of you.”

“Was it you who found out all about Jabez?”

“It was I, and it is of Jabez I would speak with you. He comes here soon to see you.”

“So Shorty says.”

“Then warn him while there is yet time that he does not come, for there is danger.”

“From whom?” asked Miriam with a white face.

“From him who lives in yonder Manor—he threatens to arrest Jabez.”

Miriam drew closer to him, and laid her hand upon his arm. It was in a frightened whisper she spoke.

“For what—for that?”

“Yes, indeed; for that. He knows all, and will surely use his knowledge.”

“He dare not do that,” and Miriam twisted her hands together as if in pain. “He will not—not while I obey him.”

“Put not your hope in such false reasoning, child. He is a man relentless and of devilish persistency.”

“But why should he seek to harm Jabez?”

“I know not. He gives no reason. But he threatens. Be warned, and if you would save your Jabez, act while there is time. Farewell.”

“No, no; tell me who you are, and what you know of Mr. Barton.”

“What do I know of Barton?” The man laughed fiercely. There was that in his laugh which caused Miriam to shiver. “What do I know of him?—more, child, than I dare reveal—more than, for my own sake, I dare to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because he holds me in the hollow of his hand. I am a nameless man, and must ever be his slave. In warning you this night even I have run great risk. But I would save any soul from such a fate as mine.”

“Oh!” Miriam shrank back. “Are you like Jabez?”

The nameless man looked at her through the darkness, and it seemed to Miriam as though his eyes were luminous. Peering into his face she saw stamped upon it a look of abject misery; the look of a soul damned past redemption—past all hope. For a moment they looked at one another, then the man stole quietly away—melted, as it were, into the surrounding blackness. Miriam made no attempt to stay him. She read in his eyes the look that she had read in Jabez’, and knew what he was, and why he obeyed Barton. For quite a moment after he had left her she stood still, clutching at her heart as though there lurked a cruel pain. Then with a sigh she turned homeward—to the only home she knew.

Before she had taken many steps the rain began to fall in torrents, and in a few minutes the High Street of Lesser Thorpe was flooded with water. A furious wind, wailing and angry, drove the slanting spears of rain against her form, and she splashed ankle-deep through the water, so quickly had the flood risen. But Miriam did not care. There was that in her heart which made her callous to her surroundings—impervious utterly to any physical inconvenience. When she arrived at Pine Cottage, Mrs. Darrow, having heard the gate clash, herself came to the door. She was aghast at the change in her governess.

“Good Heavens, Miss Crane, what is the matter?”

“Nothing,” replied Miriam tartly. “What should be the matter? I have just come from the Vicarage, and have been caught in the storm—that’s all.”

But Mrs. Darrow did not think that was “all.” She was convinced something serious was the matter. But as all her inquiries, direct or indirect, proved fruitless, she was forced to return to the drawing-room with her curiosity only the more keen because unsatisfied. Miriam ran up to her room, and locking the door, sat down to write a letter. It was a letter of but one page, but it contained the substance of the Shadow’s advice to Jabez that he should remain in London. She directed it to him, care of Mother Mandarin, 20, Sago Lane, Lambeth; and having stamped and sealed it, was about to take it to the post. With her hand upon the key of the door she paused. Then she sat down and thought.

It came upon her overwhelmingly that no longer could she bear her burden alone. She felt she must confide in somebody—must have the sympathy of some friendly soul. Again her thoughts turned to Mrs. Parsley. She was inclined to go and tell her everything as she had been before. Together Barton and this nameless spy were working for the end of Jabez. She felt convinced of it. Anything to save him from that—and indeed she herself must suffer with him. His downfall was hers too, and then—Yes, she would go.

She unlocked the door, and with the letter under her cloak ran downstairs. In the hall she was confronted by Mrs. Darrow. There was an angry glitter in the widow’s eye.

“Where are you going, Miss Crane?”

“To post a letter.”

“Cannot the servant post it?”

“No,” replied Miriam curtly, and left the house.

Mrs. Darrow peered after her.

“She goes out in this fearful rain to post a letter—herself,” she thought. “More mystery! I won’t stand it any longer. Dicky or no Dicky—money or no money—she goes this day month!”

When Miriam returned Mrs. Darrow gave her notice.

Chapter X

The Squire's Secret

It is not to be supposed that during all this time Miriam had lost sight of Gerald. Their conversation in the wood had had the effect of drawing them much more closely together, so much so that there had grown upon Arkel the habit not only of going with his troubles to Miriam, but of taking her rebukes ever so meekly whenever she choose to mete them out to him. But so far only had things progressed. He was at no time in danger of falling in love with her, being as much as ever the slave of Hilda's physical charms. But that young lady did not seem to be in the least in a hurry to bring matters to a more definite conclusion between them.

“You see, I cannot yet be sure that Gerald will really inherit Mr. Barton's money,” she explained to her mother. “Once I am certain of that, you will find he'll propose quick enough. He'd have done so half a dozen times already if I hadn't stopped him.”

“And what about Major Dundas? I thought—”

“Never mind Major Dundas. I assure you, although of course he likes me, he's quite crazy about Mrs. Darrow's governess. And she is welcome to him for all I care—solemn long-nosed thing that he is!”

“But, Hilda; suppose after all Mr. Barton should leave the money to him and not to Gerald?”

“Then Miss Crane would have to take a back seat, that's all. I should have to put up with him, long-nosed as he is.”

“You might not find it so easy to get him, my dear.”

“Oh yes, I would. I tell you, mother, that Miss Miriam, with all her goodness, is awfully in love with Gerald herself. I know it. So even if Major Dundas did propose to her she wouldn't have him. As it is we all know Gerald is devoted to me, and as he is almost certain to inherit old B.'s property, that is as it should be. As soon as I am satisfied that there is no longer any 'almost' about it, why then our little affairs will settle themselves quite quickly and nicely, you shall see. Believe me, dear mother, I know what I am doing.”

Mrs. Marsh, weary and untidy as ever, looked at this guileless offspring of hers with something like surprise.

“Really, Hilda,” she said, “your feelings are delightfully adaptable!”

It was not often Mrs. Marsh indulged in sarcasm—in fact, it was something of an effort for her. But her daughter’s utter callousness brought it out of her.

“Cannot you understand that either Gerald or Major Dundas would, in his capacity of future Squire, be equally able to take me out of this pigsty and give me something like a decent life? And cannot you understand that the man who can do that is the man for me? I don’t pretend to any sentimental feelings at all.”

“Well, you are candid, to me, at all events, Hilda. But at your time of life I confess I should like to see a little more romance. It is terrible to hear such purely mercenary sentiments from a girl of your years.”

“That’s so like you, mother. You actually blame me for doing credit to your own teaching—that’s what I call so ridiculous and unfair. Who has told me for years that my face was my fortune? Who has always drummed into me that it was my duty to help my family by making a good match? I think you know.”

“It is true, Hilda; we are so poor,” wailed Mrs. Marsh. “But I’m sure I always wished that you might marry someone you loved, only I said it would not do for you to love a poor man, or else what would become of us? I can tell you I lie awake at night thinking of what would happen to us if your father died. We should all have to go to the workhouse, for he hasn’t saved a penny, and his life is not even insured.”

“Then is that not all the more reason why on this occasion, at all events, I should forego the luxury of sentiment. You may thank your stars that I am as I am.”

“I married for love myself,” wept poor Mrs. Marsh, with a flush at the recollection of what had been, “and I was very happy—for a time.”

Hilda cast an eloquent glance at the slatternly room and at her prematurely aged parent.

“Well, you must forgive me, mother, but if this is the result of marrying for love, I trust my heart will continue to be governed by my head. After all, it isn’t as if I didn’t like Gerald. I do, very much, and I am sure I could be perfectly happy as his wife.”

“Then I hope you’ll marry him, Hilda. I should like to know that you had some feeling for your husband, and at the same time—well, be able to help us. And I hope, too, it may be soon, dear, for the butcher’s bill has been running these three months past, and I don’t know how we are to pay him. His meat’s very bad too. As for the grocer’s bill, it seems endless. I’m sure I never spare myself, and I cut down expenses to the very lowest. Yet your father is always grumbling. He says now he can’t do with one candle but must have two. The number we seem to get through is appalling. He is never contented.”

“Job himself would grumble in this house,” retorted Hilda, and leaving Mrs. Marsh in the lowest of spirits, she went upstairs to dress, for Gerald was due to take her for a walk.

Recently that young man had shared his time pretty equally between London and Lesser Thorpe. For one thing he was deeply in love with Hilda, for another he found the greatest possible comfort in Miriam’s company. So far he was obliged to confess to himself that, notwithstanding his promise to Miss Crane, he had achieved nothing very definite even negatively speaking. His life in town continued pretty much as it had been. Every now and then he would put some mild restraint upon himself, but such times were few and far between, and the result but fleeting. There was no backbone in the man, and an entire absence of any power of resolve. But at Lesser Thorpe he was always the repentant prodigal. Hilda was his Venus, Miriam his Minerva; but like Paris he did not hesitate to bestow the apple on beauty rather than on wisdom. His choice was wholly characteristic of his nature. In life there was but one path for him—the path of dalliance and of ease.

Notwithstanding the circumstances, it did not take Hilda long to dress on this occasion. Within ten minutes she was downstairs, and greeting Gerald with a smile. As she looked at him she thought how young, good-looking, and altogether desirable he was. She was sure she liked him as well as she could like any man. Hilda Marsh was a shallow girl, a vain girl, but on the whole not a bad girl. With a judicious bringing up she

might have turned out a very respectable specimen of her sex; vain always, since vanity was the essence of her being, but still a woman of good instincts and some sense of duty in the world. As it was, she had not been thus blessed, and her position of beauty to the family, to be sold to the highest bidder, had done the rest. She had been taught that her mission in life was three-fold—to be careful of her beauty as her stock-in-trade, to catch a rich man with it, and to help her family when the rich man had been caught. In that misguided and slovenly household and sordid commonplace existence, there was nothing to appeal to or in the least degree to stimulate any of the other and finer feelings which might have lain dormant in her. What she saw around her gradually became reflected in her nature. As she saw others do, so she did, until she came to look upon material satisfaction, and the securing of it, as the whole object of life. But even so, as has been said, she was not wholly without redeeming qualities.

After her first burst of spite against Miriam she came to like her, and even to appreciate her high principles and wholesale disdain of the petty vanities of everyday existence. Such a personality was something altogether new to Hilda—something “larger” by far in human kind than she had ever met before. And it said no little for the girl that she acknowledged this to herself, and allowed her better nature to have its say, even to the point of dissociating herself from Mrs. Darrow in the persecution of her governess. So it was that Mrs. Darrow, deprived of her ally, felt it incumbent upon her to carry on the war with that double energy which had so quickly resulted in the dismissal of Miriam. Had Hilda’s attitude continued, as it had been in the beginning, it is probable that the lady’s tactics would have been based more upon a “linked business long drawn out,” wherefrom not only would she have obtained enjoyment, but would have saved herself much personal inconvenience.

“You are looking very sprightly to-day, Mr. Arkel,” said Hilda, as they walked down the village. “Have you had any good news?”

“The best of news. But before I tell it, let me ask you why you always call me Mr. Arkel?”

“It is your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but surely you might call me Gerald; it would be equally correct, and ever so much nicer.”

“I don’t know if it *would* be quite correct,” replied the cautious Hilda; “still, as you make such a point of it, I don’t mind—if I can remember. Well—Gerald—and what is this joyful news?”

“Uncle Barton has decided to make me his heir!”

Hilda stopped. Although she had more than half suspected to hear it, now that the news had come she felt something like a shock. But the sensation was by no means unpleasant. On the contrary it brought with it a welcome sense of relief, for now no longer need she keep this young gentleman at arm’s length. She could accept him with a clear conscience, and unless her powers of foresight were very much at fault, it would be as his affianced wife that she would return from their walk.

“I am very glad,” she said. “You have my most heartfelt congratulations. Has Mr. Barton actually made his will?”

“Not yet; but he intends to make it this week. I shall start the new year, thank God, with my mind at peace.”

“Very much so, I should think. I suppose it won’t be long now before we have to congratulate you on another happy event—I am glad for Miss Crane’s sake; she has had such a very bad time.”

“Miss Crane! What on earth do you mean?”

“Simply that as Mrs. Gerald Arkel, Miriam Crane will at last say good-bye to the rough and tumble of life, of which up to now she seems to have had a good deal.”

“Hilda! How can you talk like that? You know what my feeling is for Miss Crane. I respect her and I like her sincerely, but I have given her no cause to think anything else. Hilda, you know it isn’t true—you don’t really mean it. You know that for me there is no other woman in the world but you! You must have guessed it long ago.”

“Guessed it? Dear me, no; how should I? I quite thought you were devoted to Miss Crane and she to you. Besides, you know it’s very wrong

of you to—to care for me. I am sure Mr. Barton would disapprove most highly if he knew.”

“What has he got to do with it?”

“A very great deal, I imagine, seeing that if he likes he can revoke his will any day, and leave you without a penny.”

“Uncle Barton wouldn’t be such, a beast!”

“I’m not so sure about that. He has considerable capacity for being a beast. And you know how he dislikes me. But if you really do care, Gerald—”

“Oh, Hilda, you know I do—you are everything to me. Tell me that you care for me a little—that you will be my wife.”

“Are you *quite, quite* sure you mean what you are saying—that you really—”

“A thousand times yes; I love you with my whole soul.”

“And you are quite willing to take the risk?”

“Anything, everything—so long as I have you!”

“Then I will confess—I do care for you, Gerald.”

She dropped her eyes, the very essence of humility. Her acting was beyond praise, and calculated to deceive a man very much less simple than Gerald Arkel.

“Dearest!” He clasped her in his arms; “and you will be my wife?”

“Don’t, Gerald; you mustn’t—besides, someone might see!”

“Well, let them—I don’t care!”

“But I do.” She released herself and sat down on the stile—the same by which Gerald had met Miriam for the first time. “Now do sit down, and do be sensible. You really must not behave like this. If I engage myself to you it must be on certain conditions.”

“Make any conditions you like, darling, so long as you say ‘yes.’”

“Very well, then, I make two. The first is that you are to keep our engagement an absolute secret until I give you leave to announce it. And the second is—well, the second is, you must be just the same before people.”

“Well, naturally—if I agree to the first I must agree to the second. But I confess, dear, I don’t like this sort of thing. Besides, I can’t see the necessity for it. You aren’t ashamed of me I hope?”

“Oh, Gerald, you dear goose—what nonsense! Haven’t I told you that Uncle B. will make an awful fuss about it? That of itself should be enough for you. He is quite capable of altering his will.”

“And in that case you wouldn’t marry me, I suppose?”

“Indeed, yes; but I should hate to think that I had spoilt your chance—that I had been the cause of your losing five thousand a year. You must allow that what I say is common-sense.”

“I suppose it is; then I hate common-sense, and I detest this secret business. At least, dear, when we are alone you will—” and Gerald proceeded to demonstrate how it should be when they were alone. But Miss Hilda was not inclined for such endearments. They were, to her mind, a trifle premature. She had her own little game to play, and for the present, at all events, they did not form part of it.

“Hush!” she said, “someone is coming.”

He listened; and a light step fell upon the frosty air. It was Miriam. Her face was flushed, and her eyes seemed unusually bright. She was walking very quickly. She saw this Corydon and Daphne on the stile, and was quick to divine, from the expression on Corydon’s face, what had been happening. She waved her hand and smiled, and passed on hurriedly. They watched her graceful figure dwindle in the distance, and returned to the discussion of themselves; with the result that Miss Marsh went home, as she had fully intended to do, under tacit engagement to the future Squire of Lesser Thorpe, and well content with her afternoon’s work.

“They are engaged,” she thought to herself; “I am sure of it: and I am dismissed! My life here is at an end, for I cannot—I will not lend myself any more to Mr. Barton’s schemes. I must go back to Jabez, there is no help for it—back to the old life. Oh, how horrible it is!—and how hard! But he must swear to spare poor Jabez—he *shall*. If he refuses, I must force him to.”

She walked on swiftly until she reached the house. The Squire was at home and in his library. She sent in her message, and was received at once. He looked more wrinkled, and if possible, more evil than ever, she thought, as he croaked out a welcome and placed a chair for her. Anxious to get it over, she came to the point at once.

“You are surprised to see me?” she said.

Barton’s eyebrows went up at once.

“No, indeed; is it so very strange that you should visit an old man who has tried to show some interest in you? Perhaps you will allow me to say I am delighted!”

“Oh!” Miriam waved her hand. “I think you and I can dispense with compliments, Mr. Barton. I had better say at once that I have come here for a definite reason—to ask you a question.”

“By all means; please don’t hesitate.”

“Well, then, is it true that you want to have Jabez arrested?”

“Let me answer you with another. Who told you I did?”

“The man you call the Shadow.”

Barton frowned.

“Did he, indeed? I thought he was more discreet. I must speak to him. Well, and suppose I do wish to have Jabez arrested, what then?”

“I forbid you to!”

He could scarcely believe his ears.

“You forbid *me*—well, really,” he sneered. “So far I cannot congratulate you on the object of your visit. And pray may I ask how do you intend to enforce this prohibition, for I take it you are prepared—or rather, think you are—to enforce it?”

“By exposing you to the parish—to the world. I know Mother Mandarin, sir; therefore I know you. You are an opium smoker—and worse!” she said.

Then she waited.

Chapter XI Unmasked

Miriam’s accusation came on Barton like a bolt from the blue. For a moment he seemed utterly incapable of speech—while of emotion he showed not a trace. Casting a terrible look on the woman who at once defied and threatened him, he rapidly counted his chances against her. A very brief survey of the existing circumstances sufficed to assure him that the power to coerce her was his. Then an ironical smile broke over his withered face. He glanced at door and windows to assure himself that they were closed. The subject under discussion was too dangerous a one for him to run any risks in that direction. When he spoke it was with all calmness and some irrelevance.

“Won’t you sit down, my dear?” he said. “We can talk as easily sitting as standing—more easily perhaps.”

As composed as himself, Miriam took a chair, and prepared for the encounter.

“I won’t have Jabez harmed,” she repeated, “especially by you, who are every wit as bad, if not worse than he is. In a moment of weakness you extorted from me his real name, and thereby you learned more about him than I intended you should learn. But why you should desire to have arrested a man who, whatever his sins, has never harmed you, I do not know. But, understand, I shall stand between you and Jabez—I will protect him. I know too much about you, Mr. Barton, for you to treat me with impunity, and I think you know it.”

“And this is gratitude,” said Barton, casting up his eyes. “I drag you from the gutter, feed you, clothe you, introduce you to respectable society, and you turn on me!”

“What you did, you did for your own ends,” retorted Miriam coldly, “and you know well that I am not from the gutter. There can be no question of philanthropy on your part, or of gratitude on mine.”

“Do you think I counted on your gratitude, you jade! If you did, you were wrong. I know that you, like the rest of your sex, would turn on me the first time your uneasy virtue touched your conscience. However, enough of this. As you say, you gave me sufficient information to enable me to obtain more, and I did. So you may as well realise that I am in the position to talk of force, and not you!”

“Not if you harm Jabez, for it is only through him you have any hold over me.”

Barton stroked his chin, and looked at her strangely. She was unpleasantly concise—for a woman. He changed his tone.

“Miriam, Miriam, you are but a child after all; you believe all that is told you. Why this man should have informed you that I meant to harm Jabez I cannot say, unless it was to make bad blood between us, and to thwart my scheme in which you are concerned. But I shall find out his reason, and make him pay—as I *can* make him pay—for his interference. But you may set your mind at rest, you silly child. I have no intention of molesting Jabez, if only because by doing so, as you say, I should lose my hold over you. So long as you do my bidding, Jabez is safe; of course, if you don’t—well, we won’t talk about that for the present. As to your threatening to disclose my secret vice—I am not afraid of that threat. To tell every one here about me would do you no good—and it certainly would not do me much harm. But if you were to do anything so spiteful, I may tell you that I should have Jabez under lock and key in a week.”

“So long as you do not harm him I will be—as I have been hitherto,” replied the woman wearily. “It was only from what your Shadow Man gave me to understand that I spoke as I did. I will do all I can to meet your wishes.”

“Marry Gerald then!”

Miriam shook her head.

“I said I was prepared to do what I could,” she observed, “but so far as Mr. Arkel is concerned, I can do nothing. I may as well tell you at once that he is engaged to Hilda Marsh.”

“Damn her!” said Barton, without moving a muscle. “How do you know?”

“I saw them sitting together on the stile near Farmer Bell’s. One glance at them was quite sufficient for me. They are engaged, Mr. Barton. You will find that I am right.”

Barton mused.

“I am not surprised,” he said, after a pause. “I have no doubt you are right. I fancy I know, too, what has brought it about. Last night I told Gerald that I intended to make him my heir; he has, of course, gone straight to her, the hussy, with it, and she—by Heaven, what fools men are!—well, she’s lost no time in bringing him to the point. Well,” Barton chuckled, “it is not too late to remedy my little mistake. I shall just contrive to let Miss Marsh know that I have changed my mind—that for Gerald I intend to substitute John Dundas, and I fancy you’ll see that she’ll change hers pretty quickly too.”

“Even if she does, it can make no difference so far as I am concerned. As I told you before, I tell you again, there is no chance of my marrying Mr. Arkel.”

“But I thought you said—your feelings—!”

“Yes, I know that to my cost, but he does not love me, and will never, never ask me to be his wife. He respects me, he admires me—I am sure he likes me very much. But I must have more than that, Mr. Barton—or less. Let me go, please. I have tried to win Gerald; but he is not for me.”

“But think of *him*—you would not see the boy ruined? With Hilda for wife and my fortune his ruin will be very complete. As his wife you could save him—you know you could! And you have three times the brains of that minx. Surely you could manage—”

“Enough, Mr. Barton. I will not hear what you are going to say. I could save him. Yes, I know I could,” cried Miriam, and the tears rose in her eyes. “But, much as I love him, and God alone knows how much that is—I cannot lower myself in his eyes and in my own. I cannot do more, Mr. Barton. The salvation of Gerald is in your hands, not in mine. If you hated his mother, who wronged you, that is no reason you should ruin him, a young man, who has done you no harm. It is a villainous, mad, horrible thing to do!”

“You think so? Well, it must suffice for you that I know what I am doing. If Gerald, after all my kindness and care, had shown any love for me—if he had been even ordinarily grateful, I might have spared him. But he is a brainless, selfish, cold-hearted fop, who abuses me even while he eats my meat. He is useless to man, ruinous to woman, so the sooner he drinks and debauches himself into an early grave, the better it will be for humanity in general. I brought you down here thinking to give him a chance, but he has thrown that away. I have no pity for him!”

“Let your will in favour of Major Dundas stand,” urged Miriam, “and Gerald will not lose his chance. Hilda is a mere fortune-hunter. She will throw him over as soon as ever she hears that he is poor.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” replied Barton coldly. “He shall have my money, and, since he is so blind, he can marry Hilda. You—since you refuse to save him—can stand aside and watch his downfall.”

“I tell you it is beyond my power to marry him, even if I wished to. I cannot achieve the impossible. Gerald’s future cannot depend upon me.”

“Then, if it is to depend upon me, a cruel future it will be for him. By a new will I am leaving everything to him.”

“Mr. Barton, you are an incarnate devil!”

“Nothing of the kind—only very much a man.”

“A coward, since you revenge yourself on a dead woman.”

At this Barton was seized with a sudden fury.

“I revenge myself on the son of a woman who ruined me,” he almost shouted. “I would have lived and died a decent man but for her. Within me I had the seeds of a wicked heredity, which drove me, if not to crime, at least into contact with crime. The woman I loved would have saved me from myself, and my sister stepped in to prevent my salvation. I hated her for it, I hate her son, and the knowledge that he will go headlong to ruin after my death, will be the sweetest of my dying thoughts.”

Miriam looked at the old man with amazement, as he shook with fury and impotent rage. His face became positively brutish, his eyes glittered with insane light, and he shook from head to foot, as though seized with a palsy.

“You say that I am an opium-eater,” he continued wrathfully. “I am—I am! For years I was possessed of seven devils which tore at me, and, in despair, I took to the drug. Mother Mandarin! you know her well, and she knows me. Many a time have I crept down that foul lane in Lambeth to the foul den of that old hag, and there with many a pipe have I sought to smoke myself into oblivion—into an imaginary paradise where at least I might hope to dream of her who was lost to me. But did oblivion come—was Paradise opened? No, no! I was taken into hell—to suffer the tortures of the damned. My waking life was agony—my sleeping, pain everlasting; yet I could not tear myself away from the thing. It gained too strong a hold on me, and I am a slave to it even now—I confess it, a slave to Satan, to Apollyon, to Beelzebub. You know now why I go to London, and seek to deliver myself into the grip of those things which lie in darkness.”

In his agitation he rose and paced the floor, rent and torn by the devils which, as he said, and which Miriam, with the spectacle before her, was constrained to believe, possessed him.

She remained silent, stunned almost by the outburst of this terrible nature—brutish, animal, horrible. It was as though the cold ground underfoot had opened to spout fire and destruction. Barton went on,

“Do you know my fear, Miriam? It is that some day I shall kill some one. That is the gift that I inherit from my ancestors. A thousand times the impulse has seized me, but, so far, I have had the strength to hold me

back. A wife—a good, fond, loving, tender wife, could have saved me from the tortures which that bloody instinct inflicts. She would have exorcised the devil within me. Of that, my only salvation, I was robbed by my sister. I hate her!” he hissed.

“Flora, dead or alive, I curse you! I will ruin your son, as you ruined me, and when he dies a drunkard and an outcast, I shall laugh—yes, even though I am in hell, I shall laugh.”

Shaking his fists, the old man dropped into his chair, and burying his face in his hands, burst into tears. His paroxysm of anger had exhausted him, and he was now weak as a child.

Miriam was amazed and terrified by what she had heard. Here was a man with the awful instinct of murder in his blood, possessed of a hideous love of crime. Within him lurked a monster ravenous as a tiger—a source of danger to all around him, although they knew it not. Miriam wondered whether in truth he might not already have followed the promptings of his mania—whether his hands were not even now stained with blood. Or, perchance, he had watched others do this devil’s work at his bidding, while he had stood aside, and thus kept himself within the limits of the law. She could not say, she could not guess; but, silent and aghast, she looked at the sobbing man. Filled with the instincts of terrible crime, what a life he must have led! What tortures he must have experienced! Was he really sane or insane? Should he be allowed to go free or not? She could not decide. She could only sit there fascinated as it were by the sight of him—a human being abject and impotent from abandonment to the vile instincts which had clamoured for expression. She could almost find it in her heart to pity him!

Chapter XII

Miriam Keeps An Appointment

Of all things in this most inexplicable world, one of the most inexplicable is why some people, deserving of real happiness, should be predestined by circumstances to a misery they cannot avert. They may be honest, kindly, intelligent, industrious, praiseworthy in many respects, deserving in all; but some malignant fate misguides them, and drags them, as with invisible chains, to that abyss which is the scoundrel’s natural goal. Every step they take is in the wrong direction,

on the downward path; every act they do, however deliberate, leads only to trouble. With the ingenuity of a fox pursued they may twist and turn and double, only to end in running directly into the foreseen trap. How Fate must laugh at their futile efforts to avoid the inevitable, and sneer at their attempts to fend off a danger which is destined to overwhelm them. Kick against the pricks they may for a longer or a shorter period, according to their capacity for stubborn resistance; but in the end, worn out, terrified, despairing, they must perforce submit their bodies to the relentless whips of the gods. Why this should be so, why these innocents should suffer a fate than which no malefactor can suffer worse, is unilluminable by the light of either science or religion.

Poor Miriam was a prominent example of such relentless and predestined misfortune. Born with a noble nature and a kindly heart, gifted with beauty and with talent, she had been dragged down to the depths by some power she could not defy. When Barton had come to her aid she had thought that the tide of fortune had turned at last in her favour, and would drift her into a haven of peace. Such she had trusted to find in this quiet country village; but even here it seemed she was to be pursued and crushed by the same ubiquitous fate. Mrs. Darrow, on no reasonable grounds, hated her; Gerald, the one man whose love she now craved, withheld that love from her; Barton had her in his toils; Jabez was coming out of the darkness to haunt and trouble her; and on every side she was surrounded with difficulties. Since Mrs. Darrow had given her notice, she had almost in despair resolved to take what money was due to her and disappear—to break off with the past, and try once again to begin her life afresh and unhampered by the sins of others. But a very brief reflection showed her that she could not even do this. She was too keenly conscious of her duty to shirk her responsibilities—to do that would be with her only to carry remorse in addition to her other burdens. So she resolved to abide where she was, and face the worst. But her spirit was broken, and her power of resistance to evil fortune well-nigh gone.

Mrs. Darrow still held to her intention of dismissing her governess; but at the same time she had no fancy that Uncle Barton should know anything about it for the present. That would inevitably mean direct conflict in which she was sure to be worsted. It would be well, she thought, to put things to Miss Crane from that point of view.

“There is no need because we are going to part that we should do so in anger, Miss Crane,” she said frigidly. “For my part I am quite willing that things should be just as they were until you go. Nor is it necessary really that Mr. Barton knows anything about it—it would only upset him, and lead to unpleasantness all round. Indeed, it might even hasten your departure, so I don’t think if I were you—”

“I understand perfectly, Mrs. Darrow,” interrupted Miriam. “I will say nothing to Mr. Barton for the present. I am quite willing to go.”

“You must understand, Miss Crane,” pursued the widow, egotistic and tactless as ever, “that I must be mistress in my own house. I approve of you in many ways, and I admit that you have fulfilled your duties with discretion. At the same time I confess I do not like the mystery with which you choose to surround yourself.”

“There is no mystery about me, Mrs. Darrow. Mr. Barton made such inquiries as he thought necessary, I presume, before he engaged me.”

“Then what satisfies Mr. Barton does not satisfy me. I find it impossible to reconcile your very mysterious behaviour with an absence of mystery in your life. You lock your bedroom door, and write letters to mysterious people of whom I know nothing, and you are intimate—far too intimate—with Mr. Barton himself, for that matter. I speak only for your good.”

“If, as you suggest, we are to remain friendly until I go, I think you had better not speak at all,” replied Miriam coldly.

“Miss Crane, this insolence—”

“Had better come to an end—so I think. You will observe, Mrs. Darrow, that hitherto I have treated you with scrupulous politeness, and I demand the same in return. Whether I go or stay is a matter of complete indifference to me, but I decline absolutely to put up with impertinence from you. Any further interference with my private affairs, and I complain to Mr. Barton—either that, or you behave properly to me, and I remain till the end of the month, as you wish. I don’t think that leaves much room for misunderstanding, Mrs. Darrow. At least, there is no need to continue this very undignified wrangling.”

And Miriam, with her head in the air, walked out of the room.

“Miss Crane, come back!—I insist—I command!” screeched Mrs. Darrow, like an angry parrot.

But Miriam paid no heed, and the worsted one was constrained to take refuge in tears.

“To be treated so in my own house!” she wept, “and by one of the lower orders, too! Bad woman—and red-haired minx that she is!”

But all Mrs. Darrow’s expletives could not alter the situation. If she turned Miriam out of the house, as she would have dearly loved to do, there would be trouble with her uncle; and if, on the other hand, she kept her for the month, she would have to treat her civilly, since Miss Crane did not—as she put it—know her place; the word “place” being construed by Mrs. Darrow to mean a capacity for swallowing meekly as much of her bullying and bad temper as she might choose to indulge in. And as for this Miriam showed no kind of aptitude, she perforce had to make up her mind to the inevitable. So she went to bed, and dosed herself with a wondrous mixture of the combined “bromides,” and brooded over her wrongs. She was a spiteful and malicious woman, with an element of hysteria thrown in, and she would freely have given a year of her life to do Miriam an injury. For the next few days she kept a cat-like watch on her. Possessed of a trifle more brain power she might have been dangerous. But, as it was, she inclined more to that peculiar class of cantankerous and neurotic female for whom the ducking-stool was surely designed.

Meanwhile, Miriam anxiously awaited a reply from Jabez. Two days before Christmas she received it. A dirty envelope, containing an even more dirty half-sheet of paper, was thrust into her hand by Mrs. Darrow herself, who, noting the particularly soiled appearance of it, immediately became suspicious. On the paper was scribbled a curt announcement from the writer that he would be at Lesser Thorpe on Christmas Eve at ten o’clock. Miriam was to meet him in the churchyard at that time, or, as he put it, “it’ll be worse for you and me!”

There was no help for it, the appointment must be kept, though how she was to manage to get out at such an hour she did not know. When the night came, it was fine and frosty, although snow had been falling

heavily during the day. She decided to put a bold face on it, and about nine o'clock presented herself to Mrs. Darrow in her hat and cloak.

"With your permission," she said briefly, "I am just going to run over and see Mrs. Parsley."

"Why on earth should you want to see Mrs. Parsley at this hour?"

"Well, the truth is, I have received a very important letter from London, and I want to consult her."

She felt half inclined to refuse, but remembering that Mrs. Parsley was a close friend of Miriam's, and had, moreover, anything but a soft tongue, she thought better of it, and consented. But she firmly believed her governess had some very different object for her errand, and determined to follow her.

"You can go," she said rudely, resuming her book.

"Thank you," replied Miriam, too grateful at receiving permission to be punctilious about the tone in which it was given. Then she went out.

As soon as the gate clashed after her, Mrs. Darrow put on her cloak, and followed swiftly.

The sky was clear of clouds, and though there was no moon, the frosty twinkle of the stars threw a steely light on the mask of snow covering the earth. Through the cold luminosity of this white world Miriam glided like a shadow, and after her stole Mrs. Darrow. There was no wind, no sound of any human voice. They two might have been the only denizens of that frozen landscape.

Resolved to give some colourable pretext in accordance with the excuse she had made, Miriam went straight from Pine Cottage to the Vicarage, at which Mrs. Darrow was not a little disconcerted, not to say incensed. She asked herself whether after all the girl might not have spoken the truth.

"But I'll wait and see you home, my young lady," she decided. "It is not Mrs. Parsley alone you are after at this hour, I'll be bound."

For a long time she waited, and waiting nursed her wrath. Several of the villagers passed along the road, more or less merry in honour of the festive season. But Mrs. Darrow was well hidden in the shadow, and they did not see her. When ten clanged from the square tower of the church, she was getting very tired of it, and had almost made up her mind to go home. She was nearly frozen, and there seemed to be no chance of catching Miriam in any mischief. But fate was kinder to her than she deserved, for hardly had the last boom of the hour died in the frosty air, when Miriam suddenly emerged from the Vicarage gate, and crossed the white road into the churchyard.

“Ah!” murmured Mrs. Darrow, with a thrill of pleasure, “so you are up to something after all, my lady!”

She hugged herself with malicious glee that she had at length got Miriam under her thumb, and darting across the road, followed stealthily in her wake. On the white surface of the snow she saw the girl’s black figure turn the corner of the church. If discovered, she could always say that she had been alarmed by Miriam’s long absence, and had come to look for her. But Mrs. Darrow had no intention of being discovered. There was too much at stake for that.

Keeping well in the shadow of the church walls, the widow stumbled over the tombstones ankle deep in the snow, turned the corner, and crept along the chancel wall under the great rose-window. Then the murmur of two voices struck on her ear, and she slipped behind a buttress where she could both see and hear. The friendly snow muffled her tread, and the deep shadows lent their aid in concealing her, and Mrs. Darrow found herself in an excellent position for the work she had in hand. Now at last she felt that Miriam was delivered up to her, and she rejoiced accordingly.

There, but a few yards away, stood two figures. The one was Miriam, the other that of a tall man, whose features Mrs. Darrow could not discern. But she gathered that he was ragged and unkempt, and, from the way he kept looking over his shoulder, evidently apprehensive. Miriam had her hand on his arm, and was speaking hurriedly and low, but in that rarified atmosphere Mrs. Darrow had no difficulty in following every word.

“Oh, Jabez, why *did* you come here—it is so dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than it is in London,” growled the man. “Besides, no one bothers about me now.”

“You are mistaken—Mr. Barton does for one.”

“Barton!—what, the chap who took you up? What does he know of me?”

“Everything.”

“You told him then!”

“No. But that night, weak and ill as I was, somehow he seemed to exert a power over me which I couldn’t resist, and I told him your real name but nothing more, Jabez; I swear, nothing more!”

“You fool—what more need you tell him. That was quite enough to put him on my track anyway.”

“God forgive me, yes!” wept Miriam, wringing her hands. “I know—he employed some man to find out all about you. Oh, Jabez, that is why it is so mad for you to be here, for I fear he knows the truth!”

“Who was the man?”

“I don’t know his name. Barton calls him ‘The Shadow’—he is a tall, dark, lean man, with a deep voice.”

Jabez started.

“I’ve seen him. I know—he comes to Mother Mandarin’s, but I have never spoken to him. The old hag knows his name right enough, but she keeps it mighty dark. So he has been hunting me down, has he?”

“Yes, yes—but he is friendly to you, Jabez. It was he who told me to advise you against coming here. That was why I wrote to you.”

The man stamped impatiently.

“Now look here, Miriam, if that Barton of yours crosses my path, I’ll slip a knife into him straight, so I tell you!”

“Jabez, don’t—don’t say it. Keep away, and I’m sure he won’t harm you.”

“Then why does he set this man on my track?”

“Only to gain power over me. He knows how afraid I am, lest—lest anything should happen to you, but I would do anything or suffer anything rather than you should come to harm. And so, knowing what he knows, he is able to force me to obey him. And, besides that, Jabez, I have an enemy in the person of this Mrs. Darrow, whose little boy I am teaching. She has dismissed me, and, if by any chance, she came to know my past, and my connection with you—well, I am afraid to say what might happen. You see how foolish you have been to come here!”

“So you are dismissed! Well, I’m sorry for that. I thought you were well provided for. I can’t help you. But I won’t bother you. I’m going off to America, to make a fresh start—that’s really why I came down here. I want some money, Miriam.”

“I can only give you twenty pounds,” said the girl, feeling in her pocket “Here it is in gold. I knew you would want some.”

“Lord, is that all?”

“Yes, Jabez. It is every pound that I have—it is the remains of the cheque Mr. Barton gave me to buy my outfit when I came here.”

“Well, I’ll take it, but it’s little enough,” he grumbled, slipping the purse into his pocket “I suppose I’ll get to America somehow.”

“Oh, dear, do take care of yourself—perhaps I shall never see you again. I feel so terribly alone, Jabez, and when you are gone—”

She burst into tears almost uncontrollable.

“Come, keep up your pecker, old girl—you’ll be all right. Why don’t you fix it up with the old man?”

“Ugh!”

Miriam’s ejaculation expressed the greatest loathing.

“Jabez! I would as soon marry a snake! You don’t know what he is.”

“Yes I do—a meddlesome old devil, who goes poking his nose into other people’s affairs—”

“Hush,” cried Miriam, grasping his arm, “someone is coming.”

“They can’t hurt—”

But he got no further, for the sound of footsteps crunching the snow came rapidly nearer.

“Good-bye, Miriam,” he whispered. “You’ve been a brick to me. Take care of yourself,” and hastily kissing her, he made for the low wall of the churchyard, scaled it, and disappeared into the pine woods beyond.

Miriam looked after him until he was lost in the darkness, then hastily made her way home.

Chapter XIII **Mrs. Darrow Becomes Refractory**

Mrs. Darrow’s first impulse was to follow and confront her victim; but on second thoughts she considered she might do better than this. It would be more to her advantage she thought to go straight to the Manor House, and demonstrate to her uncle the terrible and awfulness of his *protégée*. It was late, and, as a rule, she knew he retired early, but she had a very shrewd idea that she would find him up on this particular night. The servants would no doubt want to attend the carol singing, and he would surely wait till they returned. It was his invariable habit to see personally to the locking up of his house, and he insisted on the inmates going to bed long before he did so himself. Indeed, she had often wondered at his scrupulous precautions in this respect, since such a thing as a burglar was hardly known in that part of the country. But then even Mrs. Darrow did not know everything about Uncle Barton.

Passing through the still lighted village she gained the Manor House gates, walked swiftly up the avenue, and climbed the steps on to the terrace of the house, directly opposite the library windows, which were still illuminated. She rapped smartly. She heard a sudden cry, and then the over-turning of a chair, as though someone had risen in mortal terror. Finally, the Squire’s voice tremulous and low.

“Who is there?—who is there?” he asked.

“It’s me,” replied Mrs. Darrow. “Let me in, uncle; it’s me, Julia!”

“Julia!” The old man pulled up the blind and opened the window. “What on earth are you doing here at this hour?”

Mrs. Darrow stepped into the room.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

The old man closed the window carefully, and turned on her. She saw that he was shaking and white.

“Why the devil can’t you call at a reasonable time?” he demanded furiously, “and enter a man’s house like a Christian? You know I am old, and not very strong, yet you deliberately shake my nerves in this inconsiderate fashion.”

The widow, thoroughly exhausted, dropped into a chair.

“I am very sorry, uncle,” she murmured. “I feel faint—is that wine? Give me some.”

Barton poured out a glass of port and gave it to her. The colour began to return to her cheeks, and with it the spiteful sparkle of triumph in her eyes.

“Well, what is it?” asked the Squire irritably.

“It’s about Miss Crane,” replied the widow, plunging at once into the middle of her story. “She received a letter yesterday from London which made me suspicious. This evening she asked leave to go out at nine—a most unreasonable hour—but out of consideration for what I thought would be your wish, I gave her permission. But, at the same time, I thought it right to follow her, and see what she was up to.”

“Very good of you I’m sure,” sneered Barton, now more himself. “Well?”

“Well, I found your Miss Crane in very intimate communion with a man behind the church—a ragged, disreputable-looking person, whom she called Jabez.”

To all appearances the Squire was not in the least impressed by this information. He betrayed no sign of emotion, but fixed his eyes steadily on the triumphant face of his niece.

“And you listened to their tittle-tattle, I suppose?” he said gravely.

“It was my bounden duty to do so, uncle—and, indeed, it is well I did, for now I am in a position to warn you. That is why I came at once. You are in great danger!”

“Oh, you think I’m in danger, do you? Well, go on, and repeat what you heard, and I’ll tell you whether *I* think so.”

“I can repeat it every word,” said Mrs. Darrow, whose memory was stimulated to more than ordinary activity by the venom which had prompted her action.

Barton listened attentively, though outwardly perfectly immobile.

“Well,” he said, when she had finished, “is that all?”

The lady was a trifle confused. She continued,

“Of course I shall not keep Miss Crane after this. Indeed, I had intended that she should leave at the end of the month. But now, of course, she must go at once. She is evidently associated with the criminal classes—we may have robbery and murder here in no time if she remains.”

“Really, Julia, your imagination is positively repulsive in its abnormal activity. I am sorry in this case to have to deprive you of the pleasure of giving rein to it to other people.”

“Indeed, I shall tell everybody,” replied Mrs. Darrow viciously. “This wolf in sheep’s clothing shall be known for what she is—she shall be punished!”

“That is my affair solely. About what you have heard you will maintain absolute silence—do you understand—absolute silence? Not a word either to Miss Crane or anyone else.”

“Indeed, I refuse to do anything of the kind—the whole of Thorpe shall know—and, what’s more, she shall go.”

“In that case your income ceases from this day.”

This was unexpected. Mrs. Darrow took counsel with herself, and realised that her position was hopeless. She made one final attempt.

“I’m sure I only did my duty,” she wailed. “How can you ask me to allow my boy to grow up in the contaminating presence of such a creature? It is too bad, uncle—too cruel of you to place me in such a position.”

“Julia, far from contaminating the child, Miss Crane has already done much to counteract the effects of your very injudicious management of him. What I have said I will do. You know I am not the man to break my word.”

“Gracious Heavens! I believe you are in love with the woman!”

“No, you know better than that. My relations with Miss Crane are not of an amorous nature, but they are important, nevertheless, to me—and must be respected.”

“Well, if this is all the thanks I am to get for warning you of a danger that threatens your life, I hope you’ll be able to protect yourself—but, mark me, uncle, you will be sorry for having behaved so cruelly. What can I do? You know I am dependent upon you and must submit. But it is wicked and wrong of you to take advantage of that to force upon me the presence of a creature I detest. And for what good?”

And Mrs. Darrow once more opened the flood-gates wide, and with them her whole battery of accompanying gesticulations.

“There, there,” said Barton, pouring out another glass of wine for her, “drink this, and have a little more confidence in me. You are quite wrong about Miss Crane. Be a sensible woman, Julia, for once in a way, and drop this. I have told you I won’t have it, so there’s an end of the matter.”

She drank the wine, adjusted her cloak, and stepped towards the window which he held open for her.

“I must do what you wish,” she blurted out, “because I am poor and defenceless—but the day will come, and that soon, Uncle Barton, when you will be sorry indeed for having trusted that wretch instead of *me*.”

Without another word he shut the window on her. Then he returned to his seat, and gazed moodily into the fire.

“I must see Miriam,” he muttered, “there is danger—great danger.”

Chapter XIV On Christmas Night

Christmas Day dawned—the day of peace and goodwill, of renewed friendships and Christian forgiveness. Mrs. Darrow was very careful to observe the day as behoved a righteous and gentle spirit. Compelled by the weightiest of reasons to keep silence, she restrained the horrid words which were on the tip of her tongue, and at breakfast addressed Miriam with something like a show of kindness. The girl looked terribly pale and ill; but was, as always, complete mistress of herself. She had gone straight to bed on her return from the church, and had of course no idea that Mrs. Darrow had followed her; she did not even know she had been out. But the change in Mrs. Darrow’s demeanour in nowise imposed on her. She accepted it gravely and quietly for what it was worth, and welcomed it only as tending to lessen the chances of friction for the time being.

“I have been thinking over things, Miss Crane, and I have come to the conclusion that I owe you an apology,” said the widow, after having passed the customary compliments of the season. “I lost my temper the other day when I spoke of your leaving. But my wretched nerves—mother’s side, you know—must be my excuse. You are too pleasant a companion and too valuable a teacher to my beloved child for me to lose you. You must please forget the words I said, and accept my sincere apology for them. Miss Crane, I ask you, will you stay?”

This was a very neat little speech, and glibly enough expressed, but Miriam at once detected its falsity. Still, she accepted Mrs. Darrow’s apology, and agreed to remain.

“I’m sure I like you very much,” said the widow effusively, “and I think someone else does too—someone who will be at the Manor House dinner to-night. Need I say that John is in my mind?”

“Major Dundas and I are very good friends,” replied Miriam gravely.

“Yes, indeed; and some day you may be more than friends!”

“I think not, Mrs. Darrow.”

“Well, we shall see. At all events, we are all going to enjoy ourselves to-night. Besides ourselves, Dr. and Mrs. Marsh are to be there, and Dicky by special desire—fancy the dear boy at a grown-up dinner-party! Uncle Barton’s Christmas dinners are always excellent. I must say he does it very well. He seems to love to gather us all around him on this day, dear man,” concluded Mrs. Darrow sentimentally.

Miriam had to restrain a smile.

“Really! You surprise me; but of course I have never yet seen Mr. Barton at Christmas time.”

“Oh, believe me, there is much good in Uncle Barton, although he is rough. He does not understand me, it is true, but there, I am a problem even to myself—I am one of those complex natures. Dear! how they suffer! Nor does he like everyone. There is Mrs. Parsley, for instance; I know he hates *her*, and I’m sure I don’t wonder. By the way, you saw her last night—at least,” added the widow pointedly, “you went out to see her.” She looked directly at Miriam, who bore her scrutiny without flinching.

“Yes; I saw Mrs. Parsley, and remained with her for some time. I suppose you had gone to bed when I returned. I was careful not to disturb you.”

“No; I was half asleep in the drawing-room,” lied Mrs. Darrow glibly, “dozing over a stupid novel. I hope you had a satisfactory interview.”

“Very, thank you,” replied Miriam, and there the matter dropped.

At six o’clock the Squire sent his carriage, the coachman explaining that he came thus early, as he had to go on to fetch Dr. and Mrs. Marsh and

their daughter. At this Mrs. Darrow grumbled loudly, for it meant she had to hurry over her toilet, and Mrs. Darrow's toilet was one of those things which did not do with hurrying. However, at length it was achieved, and the good lady, excited and flushed, allowed herself to be conducted to the carriage.

On arrival at the Manor House they found Major Dundas and Gerald Arkel in the drawing-room. The Squire was not there to receive them, but almost immediately after they had entered, a message was brought to Miriam that he wished to speak to her alone in the library. Mrs. Darrow was alarmed. Surely the man was not going to chose this opportunity for betraying her eavesdropping? Then she reflected that even if he did she had it in her power to make it equally unpleasant for Miriam. Thus comforted, she fell to chatting with Major Dundas.

In the library the Squire received Miriam. He looked particularly frail and old, she thought. Bidding her sit by the writing-table, he recounted to her all that had passed on the previous night between himself and his niece. But Miriam expressed little surprise.

"I knew she hated me," she said, "and would gladly ruin me if she could. Why, goodness only knows. I am not aware of ever having done anything to offend her."

"I know," snapped Barton. "You have committed the greatest offence you could commit in her eyes—that of being beautiful and young. That is more than enough to secure the enmity of the perambulating mass of vanity which we know by the name of Julia Darrow. But let us leave her for the present. She will keep—unfortunately. What about Jabez? Is there any truth in what she told me?"

"Yes; it is quite true he came here last night—to get money from me. He is going to America; indeed, he may have started by this time. I feel that I shall never see him again."

"That oughtn't to trouble you."

"Perhaps not—but bad and selfish as Jabez has been to me, I can't help feeling it. What I have done for him I did freely; I expected no gratitude."

“And you didn’t get it. Well, that’s the way of the world. But tell me, Miriam, what is he like, this worthy?”

“You couldn’t call him handsome. He is tall and very spare. His eyes are blue, and he has a freckled complexion. His hair is red.”

“No, it doesn’t sound attractive. However, he’s out of the way now, and I for one am glad; though I don’t suppose he would have tried any tricks on with me.”

“I’m sure he meant no harm to you. Of course, if you had interfered with him, I can’t say what might have happened. He has always had the most ungovernable temper. But I have never known him do anything right down wicked in cold blood.”

“Well, so much the better. I’ve enough enemies and to spare as it is. I shouldn’t have interfered with him, even if he hadn’t gone. I utilised him, as you know, merely to control you.”

“All that is past and done with now. There is no possibility of my carrying out your scheme. I want you to let me go back to London, Mr. Barton.”

“And there, what will you do?”

“God knows! Begin all over again, I suppose.”

“You are absolutely without means!”

“Yes, that is true. I gave him all I had.”

“Like you,” growled Barton, going to his desk. “You must take this, Miriam”—he handed her a bank-note—“for the present. And when you are in London you must stay at the Pitt Hotel. I have told Mrs. Perks to look after you, and to leave the rest to me.”

“I really am to go, then?”

“It is your own wish, isn’t it? I can see there is no hope for my plans about Gerald. He and Hilda will make their way to the devil together, in a very short space of time. *Facile est*, etc.”

“Then you still intend to leave your money to Gerald?”

“I have done so.” He took a legal-looking document from the still open drawer. “Three days ago I sent for my lawyers in London to come here, and I executed this will. By it the whole of my property goes to Gerald, excepting three hundred a year to Julia, and the same amount yearly to yourself.”

“To me!” exclaimed Miriam in surprise. “Mr. Barton, why should you leave money to me?”

“For one reason, because you are the only decent woman I have ever met—save one. For another, because in spite of what I told you the other night you had some pity for me.”

“God knows I pity you!” cried Miriam with emotion. “I can imagine how awful it must have been for you to battle continually against what is born in you. You have resisted the devil and he has fled.”

“I have resisted him these many years,” said Barton moodily, “but he has not fled; he is as strong within me as ever. God, Who created me thus, alone knows how I have fought against my overwhelming desire—the desire for the blood of my fellow-men. So far, by His aid, I have succeeded in my fight, and my daily and hourly prayer is that the end may even now not be far off.”

“You have done well—it is terrible for you. Indeed, you have my pity—I would do anything to help you, Mr. Barton. But you must not, please, leave me this money. For one thing, Mrs. Darrow—”

“I have foreseen all that, and have, I think, effectually provided against any molestation from her. I have seen all along how she has plotted against you. You need fear nothing from her. While I live, Miriam, I shall look after you; when I die, you will have money of your own.”

“I had rather a thousand times you did not mention me. There is Major Dundas—he would make good use of your wealth. But Gerald—poor weak Gerald—”

“My mind is made up, Miriam. This will supplants the will in favour of Dundas, which is at my lawyers’ in London. As soon as I send them this

in its stead, the old will is to be destroyed. With the new year I intend publicly to proclaim Gerald my heir. Now come along to dinner—that is what I wanted to say to you.”

She saw that all protestation was useless, supplication futile. Without a word she took his arm and returned to the drawing-room, there to find that Dr. and Mrs. Marsh had arrived meanwhile with Hilda, who was looking her best. Her mother was dressed untidily as ever, but there was also evident about her an air aggressive as it was unusual of splendour, significant of a desperate attempt on her part to make herself presentable. Dr. Marsh, in the immediate expectation of an uncommonly good dinner, saluted the Squire with positive unction, and an immediate adjournment to the dining-room met with his most unqualified approval.

To attempt to single out this Christmas dinner in particular from Christmas dinners in general would be a task as superfluous as unprofitable. Suffice it to say that Dr. Marsh’s anticipations were more than realised, and that when the ladies left the room he was in a state of mind bordering upon the transcendental.

Barton, ever the most unconventional if not the most genial of hosts, took refuge in the seclusion of his library, and remained there for the rest of the evening. Chatter worried him, and that was the one spot in the world where he could depend upon enjoying complete immunity from it. But he had reckoned without his guest, for on this occasion Mrs. Darrow had decided he should come out of his shell, and was now casting about in her mind for some method of accomplishing her aim without risk to herself. It was rather more than she cared to venture upon in person. An expression came upon her face which seemed to intimate that she had an inspiration. Dicky!—yes, Dicky should go and ask his uncle to join what she termed the “circle.” So away the boy sped on his errand of mercilessness, when of a truth he should have been in bed and fast asleep.

“If anyone can persuade uncle to play a game of forfeits, Dicky can,” piped Mrs. Darrow, when the door had closed behind the little fellow; “he is such a dear, nobody can resist him—he has my own nature,” this last in all seriousness.

“And your high spirits, Julia,” added the Major.

“Yes, I never seem to lose them, though it’s wonderful I don’t in the face of my many trials. Miss Crane, you will sing to us till Mr. Barton comes, won’t you?”

Miriam assented, with the result that song followed song, and the time flew by unheeded. As the clock struck eleven she rose quickly.

“Whatever has become of Dicky?” she said; “he can’t be with Mr. Barton all this time. I must go and look for him.”

She left the room hastily.

“Such a good creature!” exclaimed Mrs. Darrow. “If she only knew her place she would be quite perfect.”

“I think Miss Crane *is* perfect,” retorted the Major with some asperity.

“So say I,” echoed Gerald.

At that moment Miriam appeared at the door, pale, terrified, and scarcely able to articulate. Mrs. Darrow saw that something was wrong, and shrieked,

“My child! my child!—my precious Dicky! Is he ill?”

Miriam shook her head, and beckoned to Marsh.

“Come, doctor, quick—Mr. Barton!” she gasped, and everyone made a rush for the door.

On entering the library they found the window wide open, and poor little Dicky lying prone upon the floor. In the chair before his desk sat Barton, with his head embedded in his outstretched arms. With another shriek Mrs. Darrow fell on her knees beside her son. Dr. Marsh walked swiftly up to Barton and raised his head. He stepped back a pace in horror.

“Dead!” he said. “The man is dead!”

Again they raised the lifeless head. A black line was distinctly visible round the throat.

“Strangled!” exclaimed the doctor. “He has been murdered!”

Chapter XV **A Nine Days' Wonder**

The murder of Barton made a considerable stir not only in the parish of Lesser Thorpe but throughout the county. From Southampton came the police to take charge of the body and the case; to discover, if possible, the murderer, and close the black chapter of the Squire's life. Barton had evidently been strangled about ten o'clock. Upon this Dr. Marsh insisted; the child had come into the library at half-past and had taken a fit from fright. Half an hour later they had both been found. The window was open, there were confused footmarks on the terrace, and the assassin—whoever he was—had had ample time in which to effect his escape. On such evidence did the police begin to build up their case. Needless to say that they were completely unsuccessful.

But the strangest part of the whole strange business was, that the will in favour of Gerald had disappeared. And upon this disappearance Mrs. Darrow, if no one else, was inclined to base the motive for the crime. Her mouth was now no longer closed—the only person who could close it was dead—and she was not long in venting her spite on Miriam. Communication with Barton's lawyers had elicited the fact that a new will had been executed by their client a day or two before his death. The old will in favour of Dundas still remained in their office. But although search was made everywhere for the more recent document, it could not be found. No one at the Manor House had seen it, Miriam alone having done so, but she thought it best to keep her own counsel; and indeed she was only too pleased to think that Gerald would now be compelled to earn his own living.

As soon as the will leaving the property to Major Dundas was read, and Mrs. Darrow learned that her three hundred a year was secure for life, she sent for Miriam. The moment of her triumph and revenge had arrived, and she determined to make the most of it. Throned in an arm-chair she threw off all disguise, and received her governess like the culprit she held her to be.

“You wish to see me, Mrs. Darrow,” said Miriam quietly. She knew pretty well what was coming.

“Yes, Miss Crane, I sent for you to request that you leave my house tomorrow.”

“I am quite willing to go,” replied Miriam quietly; “indeed, if you wish it, I can go to-day.”

“You will go when I please, and not before,” cried the widow quivering with petty spite, for Miriam’s impassiveness exasperated her beyond endurance. “And be good enough to remember that while you *are* here you are my servant. You forget yourself. Because Mr. Barton engaged you is no excuse for the insolence to which you treat me. I am of course not liable for your money.”

“In that case, Mrs. Darrow, I must apply to Major Dundas, as Mr. Barton’s heir.”

“Oh, I daresay you will,” sneered Mrs. Darrow, “but there is no chance there; I know your tricks and your sly deceit. You think you’ll catch him, but you shan’t, not if I can help it. The county gaol—not the Manor House—is the proper place for young women of your stamp!”

“If you have nothing more to say I will go,” said Miriam, keeping her temper wonderfully well under the woman’s insults.

“But I have more to say. Don’t be insolent, I tell you. I hold you in the hollow of my hand.”

“What do you mean?” asked Miriam imperiously.

“Mean! you know well enough what I mean. You know you were in love with Gerald Arkel and tried your best to marry him; and as Hilda Marsh beat you and upset your little plans, you thought you would steal the will so that her husband should not get the property. Yes you did—and you are Mr. Barton’s murderer—that’s what I mean!”

“You must be mad!” gasped Miriam, thunder-struck. “I gave my evidence at the inquest as everyone else did; and the jury brought in a verdict that Mr. Barton had been murdered by some person unknown. You know what you say is a dastardly falsehood. I was in the drawing-room singing when Mr. Barton met his death; and Dicky saw the body half an hour before I did. I found the poor child in a fit, and rushed back

to call you all. How dare you make such accusations against me—dare to say that I killed one of the few men who have been kind to me?”

“Oh, I daresay there are plenty of men who have been kind to you,” scoffed Mrs. Darrow venomously. “We know all about that, Miss Crane—if Crane is your name, which I very much doubt. But I don’t want your infamous London life dragged up here, thank you!”

“Mrs. Darrow,” cried Miriam in a cold fury, “if you dare to slander me in this way I will bring you into Court to prove your charges.”

“Do—do. It’s what I wish. I have held my tongue so long for my dead uncle’s sake, but no longer now, my young lady—no, I go straight to the inspector of police.”

“There you will have to give some proof of what you say!”

“I can do so—in one word—Jabez!”

Miriam reeled, deadly white, and but for the support of a chair she caught she would have fallen. The blow was so unexpected, so suddenly delivered, that she knew not how to parry it.

“Jabez,” she murmured, pale to the lips; “Jabez!”

“Yes, Jabez,” cried Mrs. Darrow, following up her advantage. “Fie on you, you horrible woman! meeting low creatures behind the church and plotting murder!”

“Ah! you followed. Yes, Mr. Barton told me you did.”

“Yes, I did follow you in the interests of purity. And it is well I did, for I found out what you are, a low, wicked—”

Miriam held up her hand and stepped forward so suddenly that Mrs. Darrow stopped short.

She saw how perilous was her position; and she nerved herself to cope with it.

“Silence!” she cried peremptorily. “You shall not abuse me in this way. If you have any definite charge to make, state it, and the evidence on which you have it.”

“I accuse your lover, Jabez, of killing my poor uncle to steal that will and ruin Gerald Arkel, and I accuse you of aiding and abetting him.”

“That is at least concise,” said Miriam bitterly; “and your evidence?”

“I heard Jabez say that he would ‘knife’ Mr. Barton if he interfered with him.”

“Quite so; well, as Mr. Barton did not interfere with Jabez, evidently the motive was wanting. As to my having been a party to anything calculated to harm either Mr. Arkel or Mr. Barton, that is a foul lie, such as only yourself could invent.”

Mrs. Darrow rose and drew her shawl round her.

“We shall see what the inspector says,” she said savagely. “I shall tell him all I overheard, and formally charge you.”

“There is no need for you to do that,” replied Miriam. “I shall go to the inspector myself and tell him everything.”

“You dare not,” cried the widow.

“Not only dare, but will! I leave your house at once, and apply to Major Dundas for the salary due to me.”

“Yes, and take to your heels, no doubt—but I’ll see you don’t get very far, my lady.”

“As far as Southampton, whither Major Dundas will, I have no doubt, accompany me. There, fortunately, I shall be able to put it out of your power to harm me. I will not say what I think of you further than to pity from the bottom of my heart the poor dear little child who has the misfortune to call you mother.” Then, without another word, Miriam left the room.

Upstairs she packed her box, dressed herself, and went off to bid good-bye to Dicky. The child’s nervous system had received a severe shock at

the sight of the dead man's body. Since the fatal night they had been obliged to keep him in bed. Now, although more composed, he was still acutely nervous. When Miriam entered the nursery he started up with a slight cry. She took him in her arms, and could feel that he was trembling.

"Hush, Dicky dear!" she said, kissing him, "I have come to say good-bye to you just for a little while."

"Oh!" the boy clung to her and wept. "You are not going away, Miss Crane?"

"Yes, dear—I must." She had not the heart to tell him the whole truth. "But I shall come back and see you again very soon. I am only going up to London; and while I am away Dicky is going to be a brave boy, isn't he?"

"I promise—I promise; but I was so afraid when I saw Uncle Barton like that."

"Yes, dear, I know. But poor Uncle Barton is very happy now; you mustn't think any more about him. Tell me, Dicky, do you remember if the library window was open when you went in to see him?"

"Yes, wide open, Miss Crane." Dicky shuddered. "And when I touched Uncle Barton he fell on one side just like a doll. And when I saw his face I was so afraid, and I felt so giddy and I fell right down—"

"Did you see anyone, Dicky?"

"Oh, no, I saw no one."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Oh yes, the wind. I was so afraid of it. And I was so afraid of Uncle Barton too—he was so white, and he couldn't speak, and his mouth was open, and his eyes looked funny. Oh, Miss Crane, dead people are horrid—I can't bear them!"

"Yes, dear; we won't talk any more about it. Look, here is my gold chain, and while I am away I want you to wear it for my sake—will you?"

Dicky's fancy was caught at once.

“Oh, thank you; thank you, Miss Crane,” he said, kissing her. “Now I will be your knight. The Knight of the Golden Chain. Oh, I shall always wear it, and I shall never forget you, Miss Crane, never! Must you go?”

“Yes, dear; I must go now. But some day I'll see my Dicky again. Perhaps he'll be a big boy then, and be going to school. You'll think of me even then, dear, won't you?—and of the walks and the talks we used to have? Oh, Dicky, it is so hard for me to leave you! You won't forget me? You must never forget your Miriam!” She pressed the boy's face to her own and let the tears run freely. Then with one last effort she dragged herself from him, and passed quickly out of the room.

She went straight to the village inn and ordered a fly to call and take her to the station in an hour. Then she walked up to the Manor House, and inquired for Major Dundas. He was in, and saw her at once. Indeed, so marked was the eagerness of his greeting that Miriam instinctively became more reserved.

“Major Dundas,” she said, coming to the point at once, “I am indeed sorry to trouble you, but I thought it only right to come straight to you and tell you how I am placed. Mrs. Darrow has dismissed me. That of itself is nothing; but on the plea that she did not engage me, she has refused to pay the salary due, so I—”

“My dear Miss Crane,” interrupted the Major, “you astonish me. Surely Mrs. Darrow—”

“Mrs. Darrow hates me,” said Miriam bitterly. “In that you have the explanation of everything. She is only gratifying her spite by turning me out of her house. Not, as I say, that I mind that; but I felt sure in the circumstances you would rather I came to you.”

“Of course; you did perfectly right. I shall certainly remonstrate with Mrs. Darrow about this. Let me see, your salary is—”

“Fifty pounds a year,” said Miriam coldly, “and there are six months due to me.”

Something in her tone prevented the Major speaking further. In silence he sat down to write a cheque, and in silence he handed it to her. She put it in her purse.

“I should like to write you a receipt for this, Major Dundas, if you don’t mind.”

“My dear Miss Crane, there is not the least necessity.”

“Oh, thanks, I think I should prefer to be quite business-like. And perhaps you will show this to Mrs. Darrow.” She sat down to the table, and producing a stamp from her purse, affixed it to her acknowledgment of the money. “There,” she said, handing it to him, “I think that is sufficient. And now, before I go, there is something else I must speak to you about. When I leave here, I am going straight to the Police Station at Southampton to see the inspector.”

“In Heaven’s name what for!” exclaimed the perplexed Major.

“Because Mrs. Darrow accuses me of having aided and abetted someone to murder Mr. Barton and steal his will.”

“Mrs. Darrow has dared to say that? She is mad!”

“No, hardly mad—malicious,” replied Miriam with a faint smile. “But you will hear all she has got to say very shortly. She is sure to come to you with it.”

“But I can’t understand how such an idea could enter her head. It is monstrous!”

“Let me tell you something,” said Miriam. “Not long ago a young man—who for the present must be nameless, save to tell you he is known as Jabez—came down from London to see me here. His object was to obtain from me money to enable him to go to America. This young man and I were brought up together, and I was devoted to him. Years after we met in London. I was in terribly poor circumstances, and he—well, I must confess it, he had reached the lowest depths of dissipation and despair. I was sorry for him even so, and I helped him in the only small way I could. Whenever I had the money to give him he had it. Ever since he has always looked to me for help. He knew I was here and

comfortably placed, and he insisted upon coming down to see me. Very much against my will I met him by appointment one evening—it was Christmas Eve—in the churchyard. Mrs. Darrow followed me and overheard my conversation with him. It is upon what she says she heard that she bases this charge. It is of course a very serious charge, and because of this clandestine meeting I feel more strongly impelled than I might otherwise do (seeing the sort of woman Mrs. Darrow is, and is known to be) to take immediate action to clear myself.”

“But the facts! my dear Miss Crane—I don’t see how—Oh, the whole thing is too ridiculous for words. Now come, you really must leave this to me. I will see Julia at once. This is going a little too far. Believe me, your character will be quite safe in my keeping. I—”

“Yes, yes, I know, Major. You are more than good. But I feel it is a matter in which I should act for myself. I shall go to Southampton and forestall Mrs. Darrow.”

“But you will let me know where you are—we shall meet again soon?”

“That I cannot say. You see from Southampton I shall go straight to London. It is very unlikely that we shall meet.”

“But, Miss Crane, you must not take yourself away like this. Don’t, I beg of you. It is not quite fair on—I mean, at least you will tell me where I may find you in London? Believe me, I—”

“After Mrs. Darrow has said to you all she has to say about me, you may not be so anxious to resume our friendship, Major. Indeed, I sadly fear, quite the contrary.”

“Miss Crane! You are unjust—how unjust you do not know. I—”

“Oh, I admit, you have been all kindness to me. But—However, there is my address; come and see me if you will.”

She handed him a card upon which were written her name and address. The address was the Pitt Hotel, Craven Street.

Chapter XVI

A Little Feminine Diplomacy

On her way from Lesser Thorpe to Southampton, Miriam, alone in a third-class carriage, was reading Jabez' letter for the fifth time. Short as it was, utterly selfish too as it was, it seemed to give her some sort of satisfaction. It bore a post-mark in the vicinity of the London Docks, and its contents were these:—

“28th December.

“Dear Miriam,

“I am not going to the States after all. From all I can hear there's too much of a crowd in the beastly place already. I have got hold of a tub off to the Cape—going to kick around there in search of what she can snatch in the way of cargo. I've managed to persuade the skipper to let me work half my passage money, so I shall arrive in Table Bay with a pound or two in my pocket after all. But if you can manage to screw some more out of the old man do, and send me on a P.O.O., and I'll look in for it at the office at Cape Town when I arrive. The old tub's called the 'Firefly,' though there's precious little 'fly' about her, and altogether she's about as sick a hulk as ever you saw. If I make a pile, I'll come back under another name, and look you up. If I don't, well, then you've said good-bye to me for bad and all. You won't wipe your eyes out over that, or I'm much mistaken. Good-bye. Yours,

“Jabez.”

She sighed deeply as she finished reading, and her eyes were full of tears. How utterly callous and selfish he was! She wondered did he ever think of all that she had sacrificed for him—of the agony of mind, which, through him, she had been made to suffer. The letter was dated 28th of December. This was the third of January. He would be well away by now. How glad she was of that! At least she would be able to begin her life again without his burden to hamper her. She had thirty-five pounds in all, and, thanks to Barton's generosity, a roof at the hotel as long as she needed it. She had been worse off in days gone by. Then she fell to thinking of the unpleasant work before her. The mere thought of contact with the police repelled her. Still, she could see no help for it. Beyond reach of Mrs. Darrow she must be. Then came that other awful thought upon her: could it be possible—oh, the horror of it!—could it be possible

after all that Jabez—She put it from her. She could hardly bear to think of it. And yet—But surely for his own sake he would not have risked that? It was not as if Barton had interfered with him. His hurried departure though, would of itself look suspicious she was afraid. And Mrs. Darrow would not fail to make the most of that injudicious threat of his against Barton. If only the letter had been dated the 25th instead of the 28th, she might have shown it to the inspector. It would have gone to prove an alibi. As it was she judged it would be wiser not to show it. She almost wished now that Jabez had waited. He might easily have been able to prove that he had returned to town on the morning of the 26th. But there again—no, he would not have dared even to come forward to do that. She feared that the past would be highly prejudicial even to him now if he were known. He was best away. She wondered if she were wise in stirring in the matter at all. But if she didn't Mrs. Darrow certainly would, and now, for once, she must consider herself. But she would screen Jabez if she could. The thing was how best to do it.

As Miriam was musing thus, the train ran in to Southampton. Depositing her traps in the cloak-room, she took a fly and drove straight to the police station. If possible she was very anxious to be able to return that night to London. She was received by Inspector Prince with all courtesy, for not only was the inspector well known in Lesser Thorpe, but he on his part had at his fingers' ends all that was worth knowing about everybody of any account in that not very extensive neighbourhood. And although he was by no manner of means a Vidocq, this genial officer, he was intelligent—highly so. To his present position he had risen deservedly if not with either rapidity or brilliance.

In appearance he was of ample figure and of fresh complexion, and his eyes were, Miriam thought, the lightest blue eyes she had ever seen. His whole bearing was nothing if not military. And like most men who have a very soft side to women, he was apt to convey that much when first coming into contact with them. Miriam therefore did not take long making up her mind that with him her course must be one of complete frankness and confessed weakness combined. With such weapons—and it must be confessed she knew well how to use them—she had every hope of achieving success with Mr. Inspector Prince.

“Well, Miss Crane, and what is it I can do for you?” he asked, when the door was closed upon them.

“I have come to see you about Mr. Barton’s murder, Mr. Prince.”

The pleasant smile vanished from his face, and gave place to an expression of extreme officialdom.

“Indeed!”

“Yes. I have something to tell you, which perhaps you will say I should have told you before. Mr. Barton’s niece, Mrs. Darrow, accuses me of having inspired her uncle’s murder!”

“Miss Crane, you surprise me,” said the inspector. “That would mean that you were an accessory before the fact—a very serious charge, very serious.”

“Exactly, and that is why I am here, Mr. Prince. I place myself unreservedly in your hands. It is, I need hardly say, as false a charge as it is malicious, and against such malice I feel I must protect myself. I felt that you were the proper person to come to. This Mrs. Darrow, I must tell you, hates me. I have been for some time, as I daresay you are aware, in her house as governess to her little boy. Not long since she contrived to overhear a conversation between myself and a friend of mine who came down from London to apply to me for help. She actually followed me to the place where I was to meet him, and in hiding listened to what passed between us. It so happened that my friend spoke of Mr. Barton in terms which he should not have used, and it is upon this that she has made this charge against me.”

“May I ask the name of your friend?”

“Jabez—” Miriam gave a cursory glance round the room. “Jabez Tracey,” she added, after a pause.

Now if Inspector Prince had been as clever as the cleverest of his kind, he would not have failed to notice that glance of Miriam’s, and, having noticed it, to remark that the name Tracey was there in all the largeness of print upon a list of voters hanging on the wall. As it was he noticed nothing of the kind.

“Jabez Tracey,” he repeated. “Well, let me hear some of the conversation, please, Miss Crane.”

Miriam complied readily, suppressing nothing, not even the fact that Jabez had threatened to “knife” Barton should he molest him. To do so would have been to make a false move she knew, since Mrs. Darrow was sure to make a feature of it.

“And who is this man?” asked the inspector.

“That I have never told to anyone, but I will tell you now,” said Miriam, in such a tone that the good inspector’s protective shell of professionalism was so far pierced as to permit of the relaxing of his facial muscles visibly.

“He is an old playfellow of mine,” she went on. “I must tell you I am the daughter of a sea-captain, and was brought up in the little fishing village of Brixham in Devonshire. Jabez Tracey was the son of a retired naval officer, and lived in the next house to ours. He became the teller of one of the banks in the West of England, and in a weak moment he embezzled some money. He was prosecuted and sent to prison. After he had served his sentence he went to London, where he fell into a life of dissipation and evil ways. About that time my father died, and I, too, had to go to London, and try and earn a living as a governess. One day I met Jabez in the street. He looked so miserably poor and ill, that in spite of everything I felt sorry for him, and I gave him what money I could. When I was engaged by Mr. Barton as governess for his little grand-nephew, I told him about Jabez. He, being intensely interested, as you probably know, in everything to do with crime and criminals, made inquiries about Jabez, and found out that he was once again in danger of arrest. Then I received a letter from Jabez saying that he was coming to Lesser Thorpe to see me, and asking me to help him to go to America, and make a fresh start there. By appointment I met him, as I have told you, near the church one evening, and gave him all the money I had—some twenty pounds. He took it gladly and went, saying that he was leaving for America at once *via* Liverpool. Since then I have not seen him.”

“Nor heard of him?”

“Nor heard of him!” replied Miriam coolly. “But at that I am not in the least surprised, for he is the most selfish and ungrateful of men. There is another thing too; Mrs. Darrow, not content with her accusation of

murder, says that I induced this man to steal Mr. Barton's will—you have heard of course that he made a will almost immediately before his death, and that it is nowhere to be found?"

"Certainly—that is so, Miss Crane. But excuse me, did Mr. Barton know this man?"

"No, I don't think he ever saw him."

"Will you be good enough to describe his appearance?"

"He is small and slight, very dark, and clean-shaven. His eyes are jet black, and he was very shabbily dressed in a suit of blue serge."

"And he said he was going to America—by that he meant the United States, I suppose?"

"Yes. On the night I saw him he left me with the expressed intention of joining the steamer at Liverpool next day."

"Rather strange, isn't it, that he didn't go by Southampton, since he was so near?"

"That I can't say. It never struck me. I have told you everything, Mr. Prince, exactly as it happened, because I feel I can trust you," and the look with which she accompanied her words was altogether too convincing for this very human inspector. "You see how absolutely baseless and spiteful this accusation is," she went on. "What interest could I possibly have in the theft of poor Mr. Barton's will? On the contrary, if she only knew it, I had a very strong interest in the opposite direction, since I believe it contained a legacy in my favour!"

"What's that, Miss Crane?"

"Mr. Barton was always very good to me. In fact, well—" and here Miriam cast down her eyes, "in fact, he wished to marry me!"

"Gad, I don't wonder at that, miss. And may I make so bold as to ask why you refused him? He was eccentric we all know, but he did have a lot of money."

“Our ages alone made it quite impossible,” replied Miriam. “I was obliged to tell him I could not marry a man I did not love, and I believe it was in the first instance that that made him think of me in his will. He told me I was the only woman he had ever known who put love before money, and that he intended leaving me a small income in his will.”

“And did he?” asked the wily inspector, unable to resist laying a trap for her.

“Well, of course I don’t know. I never saw the will. I only know he promised to, and I only tell you now to show you that it was presumably to my interest that the will should be forthcoming, not stolen.”

“Most certainly. I have no hesitation in saying that from what you have told me, Miss Crane, there is not the slightest foundation for any sort of charge against you, and so I shall tell Mrs. Darrow if she comes to me.”

“Then you won’t require me to remain? I am quite willing to stay if you wish.”

“Why, you’re not leaving Lesser Thorpe?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am doing, Mr. Prince. You can imagine it is not possible for me to remain with Mrs. Darrow after this. I am going to London to-night, to the Pitt Hotel in Craven Street, which will be my address for the present. Wherever I am, in fact, that will always find me.”

“Well, so far as this matter is concerned, miss, there is no need for you to remain here. If I should want you I know where to find you.”

“You may rely upon my doing anything that is in my power to help you, Mr. Prince, towards bringing to justice the murderer of my old friend. For Mr. Barton was the best of friends to me, and even if Jabez Tracey were to turn out to be guilty, which, mind you, I don’t for one moment think likely, I should feel it my duty to do none the less on that account.”

“Well, there’s no denying it, miss, it is very strange that he should take himself off so very soon after he was heard to threaten Mr. Barton.”

“But you forget; Mr. Barton was strangled—Jabez’ threat was to ‘knife’ him!”

“Quite so. However, miss, these aren’t the sort of things for you to meddle with. I may at some future time require your evidence, and in that case I’ll let you know. Meanwhile, what you have told me, and your description of this young man, will be most useful. They shall have it in Liverpool within half an hour. Good-day to you, Miss Crane, good-day.”

As Miriam turned the corner from the police station, she drew one long sigh of relief. For once it seemed as though Fortune were on her side. Inspector Prince might have been a very different kind of man, and then, well, Miriam had an uncomfortable conviction that her interview might have had a very different kind of ending. As it was she made her way to the station with a comparatively light heart, feeling that not only she herself but Jabez was perfectly safe. By means of the description she had provided, he would never be found in Liverpool or anywhere else.

There was the best part of an hour before her train left for London, so she went into the restaurant and ordered a chop.

When she came out the platform was already crowded, although there was still a quarter of an hour to wait. She was strung up and impatient, and the time seemed an eternity to her. At last the train was signalled and the bell rang. She stood beside the porter who was carrying her things. Suddenly she drew back with an exclamation of terror. There, on the platform before her, showing himself boldly to the world, was Jabez!

Chapter XVII

A Roman Father

“Do you mean to tell me you are actually engaged to that penniless scamp,” raged Dr. Marsh, bringing his fist down on the table.

“For Heaven’s sake, George, take care of the china,” implored his wife; “four cups already are broken, and it’s so difficult to match this—”

“Answer me, Hilda!”

The young girl raised her head, in no wise daunted by the paternal wrath.

“If Gerald were not poor, he would not be so much of a scamp in your eyes, father,” she said bitterly. “Engaged?—I am not so much engaged but that I can be quickly disengaged. I have only to tell Gerald you refuse your consent and the reason, play the part of a dutiful daughter generally, and the thing’s settled, or rather unsettled.”

“You should not have engaged yourself to the fellow without being certain of what you were doing,” fumed Marsh.

“I couldn’t be more certain,” retorted Hilda. “When an old man goes the length of announcing a nephew as his heir, and actually makes a will in his favour, you naturally think that nephew will get the money. It isn’t my fault that the will disappeared. I wasn’t to know that.”

“Of course not, dear,” put in Mrs. Marsh; “but as it is now you must give up Gerald.”

“And marry the Major, I suppose? What do you think I’m made of, I wonder, to turn like this from one man to another? I love Gerald as much as I could love any man. Why should I give him up now?”

“Because he can’t keep you,” retorted her father. “Marry Arkel without a penny; why, child, you must be mad!”

“I am sure Major Dundas is a very nice man, Hilda,” put in her mother.

“Very nice,” assented the girl with irony—“altogether too nice to buy me. I am for sale to the highest bidder, I know, but it doesn’t say because I am for sale that Major Dundas is going to buy me. He’s got his own little fish to fry. He’s in love with Miriam Crane!”

“What! the governess?” scoffed the doctor, holding out his cup for another cup of tea. “You needn’t trouble yourself about her. From what Mrs. Darrow hinted that young lady is no better than she should be. I couldn’t quite get at the facts, but there’s a good deal that’s queer about her, and Dundas is not the man to marry a woman with a doubtful past.”

“And he most certainly is not the man to marry a girl who jilts another man because he happens to be poor.”

“There will be no jilting about the matter,” replied Dr. Marsh irritably. “You engaged yourself to Gerald Arkel without my knowledge. Now that it has come to my knowledge I refuse to sanction it, that’s all.”

“And unless I obey you’ll cut me off with a shilling, I suppose,” sneered Miss Hilda.

“Don’t be insolent, girl!” shouted the doctor, colouring with rage. “I won’t have it. I’ve been more than a good father to you. Haven’t I given you a first-class education, dressed you like a princess, and allowed you to do absolutely nothing, as if you had a thousand a year of your own?”

“Oh, you’ve done all in your power to make your Circassian a saleable article, I admit.”

“Circassian! what does the girl mean?”

“Simply that I have been fed and dressed and pampered just like a Circassian for the Sultan’s harem.”

“Harem!” shrieked Mrs. Marsh. “Hilda, you positively shock me! Where do you learn such language?”

“I shock myself when I think of myself, mother. They sell Circassians in Turkey, and what do you and father intend to do with me—what have you always intended to do with me—but sell me to the highest bidder? Simply because it turns out now that Major Dundas has this money I am to be put on the market for his inspection. A little while ago I should not have minded—I did not mind; but now, oh!”—she was on her feet by this time and white with anger—“it is too degrading to be treated like a bale of goods. You think nothing of my heart—of my feelings. I believe you would throw me gladly into the arms of the Prince of Darkness himself if he was rich enough. I hate you both for it, and I hate myself, and—and I won’t stand it! I won’t!” And the wretched girl, unable to contain herself, ran out of the room. For she had discovered for the first time that she could feel, and her feelings had been touched, and all the training of past years was powerless to prevent a little outburst of nature.

The parents looked significantly at one another. This their first taste of Hilda, the matured woman, did not augur well. If rendered obstinate and driven into a corner, she was quite capable of destroying all their

fine aerial edifices, and of marrying Gerald in spite of them. The doctor looked round at the untidy room, at the ill-appointed table, and thought of his many debts and small income, and incessant endeavours to make two refractory ends meet. And his brow grew dark at the thought, and he struck the table again.

“She shall not marry that pauper,” he cried fiercely, “she shall marry Dundas. He’ll turn to her right enough now that the Crane woman is out of the way. Cheer up, Amelia, we shall see Hilda at the Manor House yet.”

But the wife of his bosom was not thus to be comforted.

“Any day the will might be found,” she suggested, rather timidly.

“It won’t be found. Search has been made in every hole and corner. There isn’t a doubt but the blackguard who murdered the old man carried it off. And he daren’t produce it again, you see, even as a means of blackmail, without risk of putting his head in a noose.”

“Oh, George, you don’t think the man is at large—you don’t think he’s about here, do you?”

“How the devil do I know where he is. There’s not much doubt about his being at large I should say, seeing it’s now three weeks since the funeral, and the police haven’t progressed an inch. Prince told me they had a clue, and traced it to Liverpool, but there it ended. The man’s got away safe enough.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a man, George!”

“Of course it was. You don’t suppose a woman would have had the strength to strangle Barton, do you? The thing was done deliberately, I tell you—by his friend, most likely.”

Mrs. Marsh squeaked again.

“His friend, George?”

The doctor nodded.

“I was talking over the matter with Prince,” he said, “and he agrees with me that the assassin was known to Barton. If you remember the window was open. Well, Barton must have opened it to admit his visitor, whoever he was. They talked about the will, no doubt, and Barton probably produced it. While he was reading it, or some clause from it, his good friend must have slipped a scarf or a rope or something of the kind round his neck, and the thing was done. I don’t suppose he uttered as much as a cry.”

“But what could anyone want with the will, George?”

“Ah! that’s more than I can tell you. There’s nothing in the will itself to help us there, although Dundas let me read the original draft: the lawyer brought it down to show him. You see, Barton,” here the doctor shook his head and looked exceeding wise, “Barton was a queer customer, and what’s more, he knew all manner of other customers a good deal more queer even than himself. Those journeys of his to London brought him into contact with a heap of rascality. I shouldn’t be surprised if some of his slum friends had polished him off. But, as I say, whoever he is, the assassin can never produce the will. It is gone, Amelia, and you can take my word for it, it will never turn up again. Dundas will remain in possession of the Manor House for his time. So Hilda will be perfectly safe in marrying him.”

“But Hilda says he is in love with Miss Crane!”

“Stuff and nonsense. Don’t I tell you she’s gone away? Besides, Mrs. Darrow’ll soon stop anything in that direction. She’s only got to tell Dundas a little of what she knows about this precious Miriam creature.”

Mrs. Marsh was alive with curiosity.

“Oh, George, what does she know?”

“Can’t say; but I gather it’s something by no means to Miss Crane’s credit. More than that I couldn’t get out of her. But I can tell you that if Dundas shapes that way, Mrs. Darrow will make him open his eyes pretty wide, though I don’t believe myself Dundas even knows where the woman is. She seems to have vanished like a drop of water in the ocean of London. Take my word for it, he’ll stay here, my dear, and helped by

Mrs. Darrow our little girl will before long be occupying her proper place at the Manor House.”

“And Gerald?”

“I’ll settle him. He’s coming here to see me this morning. I sent for him directly I heard of this affair. It’s got to be cut root and branch, Amelia, for I tell you what it is, if we don’t get money soon from somewhere, the bailiffs’ll be in the house; so now you know!”

Indeed, poor Mrs. Marsh had cause to know; she had already quite a bowing acquaintance with the shabby personality of the man in possession. With terror in her heart at the mention of him, she hurried upstairs to her daughter, whilst the doctor, in his character of Roman father, remained behind. The dining-room was not only untidy, but peculiarly shabby, and for that reason he had decided that it was especially well adapted for his interview with Gerald. Surrounded thus by the undeniable evidences of his poverty, he hoped the better to drive his very trenchant remarks well home. Indeed, he was anticipating his lecture with no little pleasure, for if there was one thing upon which Doctor Marsh prided himself more than another, it was his oratorical powers, and the present he judged an admirable opportunity for exhibiting them.

Gerald made his appearance with the air of a man about to be hanged. He guessed well enough why Marsh wished to see him, but even in his dejection he was resolved upon making a fight of it. He had lost his inheritance, but he was determined, in his weak, mulish way, that he would not lose Hilda. And he was depending no little upon the girl herself helping him, if indeed she had not done so already. But in this he was destined to disappointment. Miss Marsh, in spite of her recent little outburst, was not the young lady to defy the world and console herself with love in a cottage. By no means; the tree must grow as the twig is bent, and although at first she had been a good deal disturbed at finding out the nature of her own feelings, it was not long before she returned to her old self, and the conclusion that in the existing circumstances Gerald Arkel was not for her, nor she for Gerald Arkel. Poor fond lover—his very moustache drooped with melancholy!

“Sir,” began the Roman father, for the younger man left him to open the ball, “I am astonished and pained to learn that without my consent, that utterly unknown to me, you have had the audacity to engage yourself to my child; under such provocation I have no hesitation in saying that many a father would break off such a connection, root and branch, without vouchsafing reason of any kind. But I condemn no man unheard. You will therefore perhaps grasp the opportunity I hold out to you to explain your—your part of this affair.”

“I love her,” said Gerald, sitting miserably on his chair, “and she loves me, and what’s more, I shan’t give her up.”

“Sir! I need hardly say you astound me. But once again in justice I ask you if you are in a position to support my child?”

Gerald cast a cynical glance round the shabby room.

“I can give her a better home than this,” he said sullenly.

At this the Roman father threw off his classic yoke and took refuge in a more vehement and less stately method of expression.

“Confound you and your damned impudence, Mr. Arkel. What the devil do you mean by calling my house names? We are poor if you like, but honest—and that is more, yes, a damned deal more than you are.”

“I am poor enough, I know, but—”

“I know that; you are a pauper—an absolute pauper, yet you have the brazen impudence to want my daughter to marry you!”

“I can work for her, I suppose?”

“No, sir, that’s just what you can’t do. Idle and dissipated you have always been, and idle and dissipated you always will be. Oh, I have heard of your goings-on in London, Mr. Arkel. You spent Barton’s money freely while you had it, now you haven’t got it, you are certainly not likely to make any for yourself.”

“If the will is found—”

“Will!—found!—stuff and nonsense! Do you think the man who murdered your uncle for the sole purpose of stealing it is going to emerge from his hiding and make you a present of it? Don’t be a fool, sir! Go and ask Dundas to give you a leg up, and try and do something to earn a pound a week. As to Hilda, put her out of your head.”

By this time Gerald was almost beside himself.

“Mind your own business, Marsh,” he shouted, jumping up. “I will not touch a penny of Dundas’ money. But how I make my living, and what I decide to do, has nothing to do with you.”

“Right! it hasn’t. If I gave my consent to your marrying Hilda, it would have; as I decline to let my child throw herself away on a pauper, it hasn’t. The best thing you can do is to quit this house and try and preserve your few scattered wits.”

“You are beastly rude. But allow me to say that before I go I must hear what Hilda says,” and with a very dogged look upon his face Master Gerald sat down.

“You will find that although Hilda has lapsed so far as to engage herself to you, she has still sufficient regard for the wishes of those in authority over her to obey them.” The doctor was becoming classic again. “However, you shall see her.”

Again Gerald cast an ironical glance round the room, as though mutely inquiring if he could possibly take Hilda into surroundings more impoverished than those amid which she was at present. But Marsh ignored the look entirely, for the very good reason that its contention was irrefutable even by him. So he stalked away, leaving Gerald to gnaw his moustache, and curse the fate which had robbed him of his money and now threatened to rob him of “the only girl he ever loved.”

“But Hilda will be true,” he thought. “She is too fond of me to lose me!”

She entered the room alone, red-eyed and pale, but with a look of determination on her face which sent a chill through Arkel’s heart the moment he saw it. He rose to meet her, holding out his arms in welcome. Her name sprang to his lips. But she waved him back.

“No, no, Gerald! I cannot! I cannot! We must part.”

“We will not part!” cried the man furiously. “You love me and I love you—no one has the right to part us.”

“I must obey my parents.”

“Not if they counsel you wrongly.”

“Do they counsel me wrongly?” asked Hilda. “Gerald, do be reasonable—you are poor; I am poor. How can we marry?”

“I will work for you, Hilda—with you I can do anything!”

The girl shook her head sadly.

“If you were any other sort of man than what you are, perhaps,” she said with relentless common-sense. “But I know you better than you do yourself. You love pleasure and you hate work. You have always pursued the one and avoided the other. I hate poverty with all the loathing of a lifetime. We should soon tire of each other. Believe me, Gerald, love in a cottage would not suit either of us. It would be madness to attempt it. Fond as I am of you I cannot contemplate it. It isn’t to be thought of.”

“So you really give me up?” cried he in anger.

She bowed her head.

“For both our sakes I give you up.”

“You never really cared for me!”

“I did—I do. You are the only man I ever loved; but I cannot blind myself even so. If you had only a small income I would marry you; or if you had a strong will or a clever brain I would marry you. But, Gerald, dear Gerald, you know you have neither. You are the dearest fellow in the world; yes, and the handsomest, and the nicest, but—but without an income! No, dear, it would never do. We should grow to hate each other in no time. Take my advice: marry a rich woman, and you will be happy.”

He looked at her for a moment, and tried to speak. Then his fury overcame him, and he grew scarlet in the face and inarticulate. Alarmed at his violence Hilda ran out of the room. As she opened the door her father appeared.

“Arkel, Arkel, what is this?” he said. “Control yourself, man, control yourself.”

Gerald staggered forward and clutched the doctor’s arm. Again he tried to speak, but failed to articulate a word. Then, with a pitiable cry, he fell senseless to the floor.

“Ah,” said the doctor, bending over him with professional calm, “even were you rich as Crœsus, you are not the husband for my child.”

“What is it?” cried Mrs. Marsh coming on the scene.

“Nothing—don’t alarm yourself. Just a little exhibition of the Barton family nerves, my dear, that’s all. Neurosis, neurosis: that ever tabooed word! It came out queerly enough in the uncle, goodness knows! I wonder what shape it’s going to take now in the nephew?”

“Has he given up Hilda?”

“Well, no; but she’s given him up. Wait here, Amelia. I must get something from the surgery.”

Chapter XVIII **The Reward Of Miriam**

Mrs. Perks received her quondam lodger with much show of heartiness. During those few weeks’ stay at the Pitt Hotel, while she had been recruiting her shattered health prior to taking up the engagement at Lesser Thorpe, Miriam had endeared herself to the little woman. And Mrs. Perks, although snappish, distrustful, and burdened by the many cares and hardened by the experience of sordid London life, was, nevertheless—as she said herself—not slow to recognise a good woman when she saw one, and she had long since admitted Miriam in her own mind to that category. She had regretted Miss Crane’s departure sincerely, and now welcomed her even more so.

“You shall ‘ave your own bed and sitting-room,” she said, drawing her shawl tightly round her spare form, “and that for as long as you likes. Don’t offer me money, or I shall refuse it with scorn; so don’t offer it, I begs.”

“But I can’t live on you for nothing, Mrs. Perks.”

“If it’s pride which sticks in your throat,” said the landlady rubbing her nose, “there is the ‘ouse accounts which I can’t do nowise, not ‘aving an intelligent ‘ead for figures. Do them for me, Miss Cranes, and you’ll be paying me ‘andsome.”

“I’ll do the accounts with pleasure,” replied Miriam, thankful for the opportunity of thus paying her way; “and if you accept payment for my board and lodging like that, I shall be only too pleased.”

So the bargain was struck, and Miriam undertook to balance the finances of the Pitt Hotel, which, to speak truly, were in a sad muddle. Mrs. Perks was a good landlady, an excellent housekeeper, but when it came to figures, Mrs. Perks was not in the first flight. The hotel, though by no means a high class one, paid well enough. Those who patronised it were of the shabby-genteel order. Would-be authors, frowsy foreigners, shabby ne’er-do-weels, came here for bed and board; and Mrs. Perks, as hard as a diamond if not so brilliant, screwed money out of them somehow. But the fact that they generally came again argued that even pertinacious and dogged as she was, Mrs. Perks had something on the other side which more than counterbalanced her capabilities in this direction. There were those who could speak very feelingly of the natural kindness within Mrs. Perks, and of her invariable readiness to hold out a helping hand to the unfortunate. A hard woman, a sordid woman, yet a true woman withal, and therefore capable of a great tenderness. There were many worse people than Mrs. Perks.

As the days went by and Miriam grew in favour, the landlady contracted the habit of taking tea with her in the bed-sitting room which was her abode for the time. And on these occasions, softened by the tea and mellowed by the toast, the old lady was wont to wax confidential, and talk a great deal about the late Mr. Barton. But what had been the true state of affairs between them Miriam never learned. Mrs. Perks was quite able, and evidently intended, to keep that to herself. For the rest

she spoke both good and ill of the Squire, though on the whole she seemed in nowise to grieve that he was no more.

“Ah, Miss Cranes,” she sighed on one of these occasions, “he was a bad ‘un, was Mr. Barton; in fact, I don’t think I ever knowed a wuss. Yet he ‘ad ‘is good points too. You couldn’t call ‘im ‘oly and you couldn’t call ‘im wicious; he was betwixt and between like—a Moses and a Judas—and where he’s gone to is more than I can tell.”

“I suppose you know all about his life in London?”

“I do and I don’t, Miss Cranes. He ‘elps me to take this ‘otel, and I paid off the money ‘e advanced, so ‘im and me was quits. But although I was ‘ouse-keeper at the Manor House some time, and ‘e put me ‘ere in the way of earnin’ my own livin’, it wasn’t a good ‘eart as made ‘im do it—oh dear no, not at all. He wanted a home ‘ere where ‘e could go and come without bein’ talked about.”

“Why, where did he use to go?”

“Ah!”—Mrs. Perks sniffed significantly—“where didn’t he go? Slums was pleasures to ‘im and criminals delights. Lor’, Miss Cranes, if you only knowed the awful people as called ‘ere to see Mr. Bartons, your blood would freeze in your veins!”

“Did you ever happen to notice a tall dark man, wearing a black cloak?”

“Wot, with a white face and a scar on it? Ah, that I did. What ‘is name was, I didn’t rightly know. The Shadder Mr. Barton called ‘im, and shadder ‘e was in his comin’s and goin’s, an’ no mistake. ‘E was a bad ‘un, that Shadder, and I believe ‘e did all Mr. Barton’s wicked work for ‘im. I never looked in the noospapers, Miss Cranes, but I expected to see a ‘orrid murder by the Shadder and Mr. Bartons, but some’ow they managed to keep clear of the gallers.”

“It was extraordinary his connection with that man,” assented Miriam. “I can’t think what he kept him for—there’s no doubt he employed him regularly.”

Mrs. Perks tossed her head, rose and tightened her shawl again.

“Oh, I don’t know. I never saw anything wrong except that Mr. Bartons came ‘ome at all hours, and let all kinds of ‘orrid creatures call on ‘im; but I’m sure there was some devilment goin’ on. Not that I ought to be surprised,” cackled Mrs. Perks, “for the Bartons family was all of ‘em mad as March ‘ares.”

“Mad?”

“Yes, Miss Cranes. His father drank ‘orrid, and he was fond of low company for some wickedness I couldn’t rightly make out. Mrs. Arkel, his sister, ‘ad the temper of a demon, and Mrs. Darrow, his niece, ‘as the same, as no doubts you know well. As for young Mr. Arkel, ‘e’s on ‘is way to die of strong drink.”

Miriam felt a thrill.

“You don’t mean to say that Mr. Arkel drinks to excess?”

“I should jus’ say ‘e do. ‘E comes ‘ere at times and is drunk for days! Can’t ‘elp it, ‘e sez—I’d ‘elp ‘im if I’d my way. There was another of ‘em in an asylum; she was always stealin’, couldn’t ‘elp it, it seemed no’ow. As for the morals of ‘em, I blushes to think of the way they used to carry on. It’s a blessin’, I’m sure, that some of ‘em’s committed suicide.”

“Major Dundas seems to be perfectly normal in every way.”

“Oh, ‘e’s the proud and ‘aughty sort, ‘e is. I never ‘eard anything worse than that about ‘im. But ‘e’ll break out some day, Miss Cranes, never you fear. What’s born in the Barton bones’ll come out in the Barton flesh, mark my words if it don’t.”

Apparently Major Dundas was the only member of the house of Barton for whom Mrs. Perks had even comparative approval. And Miriam had little doubt but that she was correct in her judgment, if not in her prognostications. At least she had had a lengthy experience of the family. An hereditary weakness had undoubtedly exhibited itself in various manners, none of which was either trivial or attractive. Theft, or to give it the more scientific name, kleptomania, uncontrollable rage, alcoholism, and—in the Squire—distinct and avowed homicidal mania, which characteristics left little ground for doubt as to there being decided mental aberration in the Barton family. But of the last, and

more serious failing on the part of the late Squire, Mrs. Perks seemed to be wholly in ignorance. To her he was an eccentric, and a dilettante in crime—a seeker after the lower strata of humanity, but nothing more.

As soon as she arrived in town Miriam had at once proceeded to investigate the fact of Jabez' being in England. Her first visit was to the hovel of Mother Mandarin, for there she knew he was wont to take refuge when in London. But to her surprise Mother Mandarin knew nothing of his present whereabouts. She had not seen him indeed since he had left for Lesser Thorpe. Shorty, too, although he looked knowingly at her and seemed once or twice on the point of being confidential, denied all knowledge of him. For Jabez' own sake she inserted a cypher advertisement in several of the daily papers, warning him of the great danger he was running by remaining in England. But he made no sign of any kind, and Miriam gave up in despair.

She heard from Inspector Prince that in spite of the thorough search of all outgoing steamers for America, both at Southampton and at Liverpool, no trace had been found of the man she had described. And from the mere fact of the inspector writing to her thus ex-officio, she gathered—and rightly—that she had not failed so far as he was concerned. So she was forced to rest content with the knowledge that for the present, at least, Jabez, wherever he was, was safe.

Then one morning Gerald Arkel made his appearance at the Pitt Hotel. He was very much changed. His former expression of light-hearted gaiety had given way to one of dejection, even sullenness. His dress, usually so irreproachable, was conspicuous now by his untidy carelessness; and the springy gait, which had always been so characteristic of him, was gone. It was almost as if the breath of old age had passed over him, and in the passing had roughed the outlines of his youth.

“My! you do look bad, Mr. Arkel!” was Mrs. Perks' greeting. “Wot ‘ave you been doin’?”

“Mourning for my uncle,” retorted Gerald with a discordant laugh. “Having lost my benefactor, Mrs. Perks, you can't expect me to be very sprightly, eh? Is Miss Crane in?”

“Yes, sir, she is—you’ll find ‘er first door on the right there. I wonder what ‘e wants with ‘er,” she mumbled, as Gerald made his way along the passage. “No good, I’ll be bound. You’ve been drinkin’ ‘ard, young man, and wot’s more, you’ll come to no ‘appy end, unless I’m much mistaken.”

A knock at the door of the room in which Miriam was occupied at her morning’s work caused her to bid her visitor to enter. She did not raise her eyes from her work. She was accustomed to be thus disturbed for some trivial matter or other in the morning. For half a minute Gerald stood there looking at her. How beautiful and composed her expression was! He faltered out her name. She paled at the sound of his voice, and rose slowly to her feet, repeating his name in a tone hardly less faltering. In silence their eyes met.

“You are surprised to see me?” said Gerald, throwing his hat on a chair and sitting down. “I got your address from Dundas. I thought you would not mind if I came and saw you.”

A more serious expression came over her face as she looked at him.

“I am very glad to see you, Mr. Arkel,” she said; “but you look to me terribly ill. Is anything the matter? I am afraid—” She hesitated.

“That I’ve been making a fool of myself?” he finished bitterly. “Well, you’re right as usual—I have. And what’s more, I’m afraid I shall go on making a fool of myself until I can find someone to give me a helping hand.”

“But is not Hilda—?”

“Hilda!” His face crimsoned, and he bit his lip. “Hilda has given me up. That’s all over now!”

“Given you up?” She did not know whether she felt glad or sorry.

“Yes; given me up. When through the theft of that will I lost everything, she flatly declined to marry me. Her father forbade her to. I saw him—I saw her—and the whole thing was too much for me. I had a kind of fit, I believe.”

“Poor Mr. Arkel!”

“Still Mr. Arkel?—you used to take an interest in me. You used to be my friend.”

“That I am still; but surely Major Dundas is your friend. Surely he—?”

“Oh yes; in a cold-blooded sort of way,” replied Gerald listlessly. “He has helped me. He gave me three hundred pounds, and said he would try and get me something to do. Considering that he has all that I should have had, that is not a great deal.”

“It is very good, I think,” replied Miriam. “And what do you think of doing?”

“Blessed if I know.” He spoke fretfully and with discontent. “The thing is, what am I fit for?”

“What are you fit for?—what any man worthy of the name is fit for—work—hard work. Do you remember how I always told you it would be your salvation. Well, now it has come—no longer is it a matter of choice with you, but one of necessity. Will you be angry with me if I say that I am glad it is all over between Hilda Marsh and you? She was not the woman for you. She was not fit to be any poor man’s wife. You have everything before you now. In robbing you of what you had come to think of as your inheritance, Providence befriended you—not the opposite. Your uncle’s money would have been your ruin, Gerald.” His face brightened at the sound of his name on her lips. “Yes, you know it would. You know how weak you are, how you love pleasure, self-indulgence—how already you have indulged your love of it far too much. Oh, do try now, I beg of you. Let me help you if I can. I will do anything if it will help to put you on your feet again. Who is there you can go and see? Tell me you will try.”

She had risen from her seat and was standing by his side. He looked so dull, so heavy-eyed, so despairing.

“Gerald, this chance is thrown right in your way. Don’t neglect it.”

“You put new life in me, Miriam—and indeed I have tried. I have vowed that I would overcome my weakness. And when I am with you I feel as if I really could. But somehow, when I am alone, the feeling goes, and I can’t go on. You know I am not religious, but I tell you I have prayed for

help to do what you would have me do. But it hasn't come to me. Life is too much for me alone. If I had you to help me—”

“I will help you!”

“Oh, Miriam, if only you would—if I could think that I should have you by me, that you would not leave me, I believe I could succeed, Miriam.” He looked at her, and took her hand and grasped it hard. “I know I am a wreck compared to what I was, that I am weak, and poor, and helpless. You know how I am handicapped. But I feel that with you—if you would take me—life would all be different. I could work for you. With you I should feel safe, without you I am doomed. Will you take pity on me?—will you marry me, Miriam?”

She looked at him and smiled so sadly.

“I will help you, Gerald. I will stay beside you—always. Your life shall be my life—but not because I pity you, Gerald—because I love you!”

Part II

Chapter I

5A, Rosary Mansions

The neighbourhood of West Kensington is nothing if not genteel. It is, moreover, by no means a costly area, and is thus in every way calculated to recommend itself to those about to marry on an income somewhat sharply defined. And the income of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Arkel was somewhat sharply defined. They accordingly looked around West Kensington, and succeeded in finding, on the fifth floor of a palatial red-brick erection, a flat to suit their requirements at the very moderate rental of fifty pounds a year. This they took on a three years' agreement, and proceeded to embellish with a sufficiency of furniture and upholstery, which if not valuable, was in eminently good taste. But their good fortune did not stop here—it extended even to the securing of a “cook-general,” a model of her kind, who not only spared the china to an extent almost uncanny, but did not object to “do” the dining-room, and asked for no more than three nights out a week. Thus blessed, and with a gross income of three hundred pounds per annum, Mr. and Mrs. Arkel

commenced their married life for all the world as content as if their address had been Grosvenor Square.

For two years Fortune had continued to smile on them in an unobtrusive yet perfectly satisfactory manner, and they were now celebrating the second anniversary of their wedding-day by witnessing the performance of a certain masterpiece of farcical comedy from the centre of the dress-circle of the Avenue Theatre. To those who may think such an extravagance unjustifiable in the circumstances, let it be said at once that the tickets had not been paid for, but were a present from the hands of the author of the piece himself, who was for the time being finding a Klondyke in the, to him, wholly inexplicable mania of the London public for the child of his brain. For the rest the evening's expenditure was strictly limited to a sixpenny bill of the play, and two second-class return tickets by the Metropolitan Railway.

The play over, Mr. and Mrs. Arkel returned home to a cold supper, at peace with themselves and all the world. With the temperature at something under forty they considered themselves justified in lighting the fire. But this was easier said than done, for the West Kensington chimneys, excellent as they may seem to the naked eye, are at times disconcerting in their refractoriness, and on this especial evening this especial chimney chose to be unusually so. At last, by the aid of his morning paper—carefully brought home in the pocket of his tail-coat—and a rather alarming expenditure of faggots, Gerald contrived to induce something approaching a cheerful blaze. That done, he got into the arm-chair, and prepared to enjoy his final pipe.

The excursion to the theatre had been so “out of the usual,” so wholly commemorative in character, that it was natural that, after expression of appreciation or otherwise of their friend's production, they should fall into a gentle retrospect.

“It was a lucky day, Miriam, old girl, when I dropped in on you at the Pitt Hotel,” said Gerald. “If you hadn't consented then to become my domestic angel, I suppose I should have been dead by this time, or in a lunatic asylum, or worse!”

“Gerald, don’t. I won’t have you talk like that. You have worked hard, and I am proud of you. Lots of men have done for less without half your weaknesses.”

“Well, there’s no denying it is jolly rough on any man to have to give up a life like mine, and go and grub in a beastly office.”

“I say you have done more than well, dear. But don’t call the office ‘beastly,’ Gerald. They have done everything to show their appreciation of you. Remember, you started with three pounds a week, and they are now giving you six. I often think it was very good of the Major to get you so good a start.”

“I owe nothing to the Major,” returned Gerald hotly. “What he did, he did as a salve to his own conscience, that was all. It’s no use, Miriam, I can’t forget that it was through him I lost everything—not that I regret the exchange so far as Hilda is concerned. You are worth a hundred of her any day. You know, dear, I don’t regret that. Still, I can’t help feeling sore when I think that Dundas got everything and I nothing. I can see now that Hilda was no loss. She showed her hand pretty plainly. I believe she’d have married Beelzebub himself for money. Anyhow, directly she knew I was out of it, she made very short work of me.”

“But, dear, you told me yourself that her father made her give you up!”

“I don’t fancy she required so much ‘making.’ But don’t let’s talk about her now. Do you know, Miriam, I used to think Dundas was rather sweet on you.”

Miriam shook her head and laughed.

“Nonsense, dear. He liked to talk to me, nothing more. Besides, if he had been ever so in love with me, I wouldn’t have married him. I’m afraid I had too soft a spot for someone else!”

The young man chuckled inwardly at this allusion to her preference for himself. He was as vain as ever. But to Miriam’s mind there came back the recollection of a certain day at the Pitt Hotel—it was strange how indissolubly connected was that hotel with the greater issues of her life—when Major Dundas had come to her and asked her to be his wife, only to be told that she was already engaged to his cousin. She recalled, too,

his great generosity—so ill-appreciated, she was forced to confess, by the recipient of it—in straightway using every endeavour to procure for his more successful rival a berth in a shipping-office where he had some influence. He had even gone so far as to offer her an income, which of course she had refused. And he had promised always to be her friend. After that she had seen him no more. He had drifted back to Lesser Thorpe, there to do his work as lord of the manor, and twelve months later had capitulated to Hilda. She could see it all in her mind's eye—the good-natured, simple, easy-going soldier, and the pretty, covetous, artful girl, backed by her poverty-stricken, designing parents, and, as a result, Miss Hilda Marsh the lady of the manor of Lesser Thorpe.

All this passed rapidly through her mind now as she sat gazing into the fire. Her two years of married life had not engendered in her any admiration for her husband's character. She was obliged to confess that it was not to be admired. By dint of much exertion of her superior moral force over him she had so far succeeded as to keep in check his innate tendencies to lapse. She had kept him to his work, and it was only fair to him to say he had worked. He had even proved to have more capacity than she had ever credited him with. Strong as her feeling was for him, there had been times when she had come very near being ashamed of it. She could not account for it. She only knew that it existed—had existed from the moment when they first had met. It was a thing almost apart from her life, and yet wholly of it. There were times when she tried to persuade herself that it was pity she had felt for him—that pity which is so akin to love. But in her heart of hearts she knew better—she knew that it was rather that fierce passion which no woman can control; which exists of itself and for itself, and is outside and utterly unaffected by any admiration or lack of it, and which comes but once in the lifetime of any man or woman. This was the feeling inspired in her by Gerald Arkel, and she had not been proof against it. It had whirled her off her feet, and she was now irrevocably committed to it. She had married a child—a weak, vain, selfish, pleasure-loving child, with instincts tending all towards destruction. The tinkle of a glass aroused her from her reverie. She looked up at him.

“Gerald dear, don't take any more whiskey; you have had two glasses already.”

“Luck in odd numbers,” he replied gaily, “we don’t celebrate our anniversary more than once a year. Just one more, Miriam, and then to bed.”

She looked at him in reproof.

“It’s the thin end of the wedge, Gerald—you know your weakness!”

He turned on her angrily.

“I ought to; you’re always telling me of it.”

“Gerald, that is unjust. You know I speak only for your good.”

“People invariably do when they have anything disagreeable to say. Hang it, Miriam, you might leave me alone for once in a way. I am awfully sick of your everlasting preaching. Goodness knows I’ve given up quite enough for you as it is. I never get the taste of a glass of wine; a drop of whiskey at night’s my only comfort.”

“A comfort which means ruin to you, Gerald—you know it.”

“Jove! how like a woman that is—always ready to picture the worst of horrors. Why, I’d like you to see some fellows! What they drink in a night would keep me going a twelvemonth.”

“Gerald, how can you speak so foolishly when you know how it is with you! Didn’t you beg of me—”

“Oh, damn it, do leave me alone. Preach, preach, preach, from morning till night. After all you’re not such a purified saint as all that yourself. You forget you sang in the chorus at a music-hall once!”

“I did, and you knew it, and why I had to do it, before you married me.”

“Perhaps I did; but there are some things you took precious good care I should not know—Jabez, for instance! Who is he?”

She did not flinch, although she was hurt to the quick. She looked into the fire, with her head resting on her hand.

“Jabez is a man with whom you can have nothing to do. He passed out of my life two years ago. I have never seen him since.”

“He was evidently very much in it once. Oh, Julia told me all about your little goings on—how you met him on the quiet, and gave him money, and worse even than that!”

“Gerald, what do you mean?”

“Why, what I say. According to Mrs. Darrow, you primed this chap to steal Uncle Barton’s will.”

“And you believe that?”

“I—I don’t know. I can’t say. At all events he threatened to kill my uncle, and the old man *was* killed the very next night!”

“He was not killed by Jabez.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I am sure of it. Jabez had no reason to harm Mr. Barton. As to the will, I will only ask you—to put it on the lowest possible grounds—what had I to gain by its disappearance?”

“This, that you wanted to see me done out of the money. You know how you were always preaching to me on that subject, and urging me not to take it, saying that it would be my ruin, and I don’t know what else!”

“And so it would have been. You know well that if you had inherited that money you would have been in your grave by now.”

“Now look here, Miriam, I’ve had about enough of this. I’ll drink what I jolly well please. Here goes.” He poured out nearly half a tumbler of whiskey, and drank it down. “Now then, what have you to say?”

“Nothing, Gerald—for the present—further than I think you had better go to bed.”

“Oh, that’s just like you—after you have riled a chap. ‘Pon my soul, Miriam, you’re the most exasperating woman I know. You’re always

ready to go for me; you take precious good care, though, not to tell me much about yourself.”

“You know everything about me, Gerald.”

“No, I don’t. That Jabez business is precious queer. Who is he?—what is he to you I should like to know?”

“Jabez is not unlike yourself—a weakling and an ingrate. I tried to save him from himself, as I have tried to save you.”

“Oh, you seem to be a pretty old hand at experimenting with men. I don’t believe you’re any better than you ought to be!”

The drink had mounted to his brain now, and he was quite beside himself.

As Miriam left the room, she saw him pour out another half-tumbler of spirit.

“I shall sleep in the small bedroom to-night,” she said. “You will probably sleep on the floor.”

It was not the first time she had occupied that little room. Indeed, the number of occasions upon which she had been forced to do so, had been increasing all too frequently of late. She had made a huge mistake—she recognised it now. With such a man as this there could be no sense of security, hence no real happiness, though the sun of prosperity shone ever so brightly. With the pitying love of an angel she had put out her strong arm to pluck him from destruction. And for a time she had succeeded. But now he was eluding her grasp. The instinct within him was too strong for her to combat. His employer would soon come to complain of him. And then the end would soon be. Already he complained of her. Her very virtues were fast becoming faults in his eyes. But even now it was not of herself she thought, though her intellect was being starved, and her soul was sick with the sorrow of despair. No longer could she feel any hope for the future—for his future. Worn out and utterly dejected, she threw herself on the bed in the bare little room, and cried herself to sleep.

Next morning Gerald rose late, and, it seemed, repentant. In truth, he rose from the floor which had been his bed that night. He took a cold bath, and so braced up his shattered nerves a trifle. She received him with a smile, and made no reference to what had been. He apologised, and she forgave him, and there the thing ended—for the time. She alone knew how her heart ached. It was Sunday. He went to church, and rebuked her because she said she felt unable to accompany him. From the window she watched him, smartly dressed and for all the world the most punctilious of men. His tendencies were strongly ritualistic. He would probably confess his sins and take holy vows about the future. But the future would be no better than the past for all that.

With the assistance of the “cook-general” she made the beds, and dusted the rooms, and laid the table. Then she took a book and sat down in the drawing-room to read. But her thoughts would not follow her page. They drifted back to Jabez. Where was he now she wondered? What had become of him? It was two whole years since she had seen him.

There was a ring at the bell, and the “cook-general” entered with a card held between a floury thumb and a buttery forefinger.

Miriam looked at the card.

“Mr. Maxwell.” She did not know the name. She wondered who it could be. Probably some friend of Gerald’s.

“Show Mr. Maxwell in, Jane.”

A tall man in a frock-coat, with a flower in his button-hole, and the most shiny of silk hats in his hand, stood in the door. She stepped forward to meet him, and recoiled, pale to the lips.

“Jabez!” she gasped. “You here!”

Chapter II

Jabez Redivivus

It was Jabez. The prodigal had returned, though by no means in the rags of his Biblical prototype. Rather was he like the rich man in the parable—clothed in purple and fine linen. In modern parlance there was about him the look of a man with a balance at his bank. A vastly

different person from the scarecrow who had met Miriam under the wall of Lesser Thorpe church.

“Jabez,” she repeated—her voice was hoarse and low—“what are you doing here?”

“Not much yet; thought I just drop in and look you up, dear,” replied the man, tossing his hat and gloves on to the sofa and making himself comfortable. “You don’t seem overjoyed to see me though.”

“No, I am not. Can you expect me to be? I thought you had passed out of my life for ever. How did you find me out here?”

“Shorty! There you have it. I looked in at the old shop where Mother M. still hangs out, and sure enough there the rascal was.”

“And how did Shorty know?”

“Ah, that’s more than I can tell you. You’d better ask him if you’re curious on the point. For some reason of his own—and you may bet your bottom dollar it’s a good one—he seems to have been keeping his wicked eye on you and your husband ever since you joined forces. It was Shorty told me you were married.” He looked round the little room with a sneer which well became his Mephistophelian countenance. “But I say, Miriam, I should have thought you might have done a bit better than this! West Kensington, and cheap at that, isn’t it?”

“I must ask you if you have anything of importance to say, Jabez, to say it and go. My husband will be home directly. He must not find you here.”

“And why not, pray? You can introduce me as your old friend, Harry Maxwell—that’s my name now. Thank the Lord Jabez is dead and buried for ever.”

“You think so?” said Miriam, with a searching look and dropping her voice. “I should not advise you to be too sure about that. There is always the possibility of his being dug up, and then all the fine clothes in the world won’t disguise him.”

The man drew his hand across his throat with a significant expression.

“Not much fear of that,” he replied, “especially with this beard. I flatter myself it’s rather a neat growth.” He stroked his chin complacently.

She pointed to his high bald forehead, on which was scarred a purple cicatrice—evidently the result of some terrible blow.

“That alone is always enough to betray you,” she said in a whisper. “Jabez, it was sheer madness for you to return to this country. Remember Mother Mandarin knows everything.”

“Oh, the old girl’s right enough. I always take jolly good care to keep her in good tune. Besides, if it comes to that, I know enough about her to make it pretty hot for her. But you don’t ask me what I’ve been doing, Miriam—I should have thought you’d have taken a bit of interest in a chap, especially when he’s done as well as I have. The Cape’s treated me pretty well all round, and I’ve come home with a tidy sum, I can tell you.”

“Honestly, Jabez?”

“Rather—led a dog’s life though to get it. I went shares in a claim with a pal. We struck gold, and struck it pretty rich, in no time—in fact, my luck changed as soon as ever I turned my back on this old country. I left my pal out there to look after our little patch; he’s a good sort, and I shall be off out again to join him in a couple of months. Perhaps it is a bit risky my knocking about in a free and easy way like this; but to tell you the truth, Miriam, I got such a twist on me for the old place, that I had to pack up my traps and come just for a mouch round. I’m not really afraid. That old affair of mine is pretty stale now—shouldn’t wonder even if they’d forgotten all about it by this time.”

“*That* business—perhaps, Jabez, though I don’t think so. But they are after you for another now!”

The man stopped twisting his red moustache, and stared at her in genuine consternation.

“What do you mean? What other? There’s no other that I know of! ‘Pon my soul, Miriam, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mr. Barton was strangled in his house at Lesser Thorpe the night after I met you by the church and gave you twenty pounds!”

“Yes; I heard that. It was in the papers a few days after. But what has that to do with me?”

“Can’t you guess?” cried Miriam vehemently. “They suspect you of the murder!”

He jumped from the sofa, and looked round wildly.

“Is—is my—do they know my name?” he asked harshly.

“No; that is, they know your first name, not your other. They think it’s ‘Tracey’—Jabez Tracey. I told them so.”

“Go on; what description have they?”

“Small and dark, in fact in every respect the opposite of what you are. About to leave, I said, for New York, *via* Liverpool. Oh, Jabez, you don’t know how hard it was to do it, but I did it to screen you—to keep you safe!”

“How on earth did you get at them?—how did they come to suspect me?”

“We were followed, and our conversation overheard that night in the churchyard. I knew it was dangerous, Jabez, I told you so. Mrs. Darrow hated me. It was she who did it. She listened to everything hidden away somewhere. She taxed me to my face with being implicated in the murder of Mr. Barton and the theft of his will. So I thought it best to go straight to Inspector Prince at Southampton, and put the whole thing before him. I told him how I had met you, and even what you had said—that you would kill Mr. Barton if he interfered with you. I knew *she* would make capital out of that. But I made it quite clear to him that you had had no provocation from Mr. Barton, and of course from the description I gave of you I knew they were not very likely to find you.”

“You don’t believe I killed him, Miriam?”

“No, dear, I never did. But that woman heard you say you would.”

“Yes; if he had interfered with me I believe I would, but he didn’t. I never thought any more about him till I saw the account of the affair in the papers.”

“You did go back to London, then?”

“Yes; you got the letter I wrote you from the Docks?”

“I did; but a day or two afterwards I saw you on the platform at Southampton Station. Don’t deny it, Jabez; I know it was you!”

“Why should I deny it? As a matter of fact, I missed the boat I intended working my way out in. She swung out on the early morning tide, after they had told me she wouldn’t be leaving till the evening. So I got back to Southampton as sharp as I could, and booked a steerage berth on one of the Union boats. But about the murder of that old man, Miriam, I swear to you I know absolutely nothing.”

“I believe you, Jabez. Nevertheless, in the face of the evidence, and your—your past history, it might go badly with you for all that if they were to catch you. Oh dear, I am perfectly terrified when I think of it! Good Heavens, what’s that? I’m so nervous I can hardly contain myself this morning.” They could hear the front door open and someone enter the hall.

“Quick, it’s Gerald, I expect—my husband. What is it you call yourself?—Harry Maxwell? Very well, remember we are old friends.”

He nodded, and took a seat with his back to the window. The door opened to admit not Gerald Arkel but Major Dundas. Smart and well-groomed as ever, he came forward and shook Miriam by the hand.

“My wife and I are up in town for a few days with Dicky,” he said, “so I just dropped in to ask you when she might bring the boy round, Mrs. Arkel; he is so anxious to see you again.”

“Dear little fellow—I shall love to see him. But let me introduce Mr. Maxwell—my friend, Major Dundas.”

The two men turned towards each other. As their eyes met Jabez winced, and a puzzled expression came across the Major’s face.

“Surely,” he said, “I can’t help thinking we have met before, Mr. Maxwell, I seem to know your face, I—”

“If so, you have the advantage of me, sir; I cannot say yours is familiar to me. It’s quite possible, though, we may have come across each other at the Cape.”

“I was never at the Cape,” replied Major Dundas bluntly.

“Then I fear our acquaintance must date from to-day, Major, for I’ve been out there for about fifteen years, and have only just got back. I’m sorry.” Then he turned towards Miriam. “Good-bye, Mrs. Arkel,” he said, “I’m afraid I must be going now. I have to lunch with some people a little way out, and I have not much more than time to get there. I’ll wish you good-day, Major Dundas.”

“I must let you out, Mr. Maxwell; my maid-of-all-work is hardly presentable, I—”

“Oh, please don’t trouble—”

In the passage she whispered hurriedly in his ear,

“Do you know him?”

“No, not to my knowledge—seems to know me though!”

“Where can I find you if necessary?”

“Mother Mandarin’s.”

“Still at that loathsome place? Do go to a decent hotel!”

“I am at one, thank you; but Mother M.’s will be sufficient address for you. I shan’t come here again. Good-bye.”

In the drawing-room the Major, looking out of the window and twisting his moustache, was indulging in a brown study.

“I’ve met that man before, or I’m a Dutchman,” he mumbled. “‘Tisn’t a face I should be likely to forget—that red hair and moustache, and those

shifty, ferrety eyes; and that scar on the forehead too—that fixes it. Where the deuce was it? Strange I can't place the man for the moment."

His soliloquy was interrupted by the return of Miriam. He did not think it necessary to make any mention to her of what was in his mind. She took her seat beside him and settled down for a chat. It was the first time he had been to see her since her marriage. But he felt in nowise embarrassed, and the pleasure he had always taken in her society came back strongly upon him. It had not taken him many months of married life to discover that *he* had drawn blank in the matrimonial lottery. And he wondered whether she had been more fortunate. He rather fancied not. He was well aware that he had been caught on the rebound by Mistress Hilda—in fact, that he had let himself go, caring but little with what result. As lord of the manor it was in every way more convenient that he should be married, and although he was by no manner of means a selfish man, his own convenience counted for a good deal with the Major. He had always been accustomed to take life easily. The Manor House and everything with it had come to him most unexpectedly, and more or less it had forced him into matrimony. Since he could not have the wife of his choice, the next best thing he thought was to be the man of his wife's choice. And there was no denying that Hilda was an attractive and in many respects an engaging little lady. So it came to pass.

But with her—Miriam—it had been different. She had married Gerald in preference to himself. To her lot had fallen that which every woman craves—the ability to marry the man of her choice. Yet surely those were lines of care and trouble upon her beautiful face! She did not look happy.

"Now I really think I ought to scold you, Major," she said, "for having kept yourself away so long. Do you know this is the first time you have called upon us since—since we came here? However, now you are here you will stop to luncheon. Gerald will be in directly. He will be so glad to see you and have a chat."

"I don't know so much about that, Mrs. Arkel. You must not misunderstand what I am going to say, but in a manner I took some responsibility in introducing Gerald to his firm. It was not, therefore, very pleasant for me to hear complaints of him when I called there the other day. I had intended dropping in to see you alone one day during

the week, but something turned up to prevent me. You know, this sort of thing won't do. Can't you put it to him pretty strongly? You are the only person I know who ever had any influence with him; and they gave me to understand pretty clearly that if it went on Mr. Gerald would have to go."

"My dear Major, I have tried; if you only knew how I have tried. But he is getting beyond me altogether again. I can do nothing with him lately."

"Is he really drinking hard?"

"What he takes would, as he says himself, be nothing to some men. But the least drop makes him like a lunatic. You know what an excitable brain he has."

"I know; I know. I am more than sorry for you, for if you cannot hold him, no one can. What a big mistake it all is. If only—" He checked himself and looked at her, and saw the tears were in her eyes. That was too much for him. "At all events, you know whatever happens I will never see you in any trouble. We are always friends. More than that we might have been if you had—"

She stopped him. "My husband and I are one, and must stand or fall together, Major. I took his life on my shoulders of my own free will. You are more than good; but—" she broke off, and withdrew her hand which he had taken in his. "But come, tell me about Dicky. How is he?—a tremendous boy, I hope. When will you bring him?"

"I shall not bring him at all," replied the Major a trifle resentfully. "Hilda hopes to come with him if it is quite convenient to you to-morrow afternoon."

"Hilda!—well, I shall be delighted to see her, of course. I didn't think for one moment she would care to come—" She stopped suddenly, for the Major had risen abruptly to his feet. "Good gracious, Major, whatever is the matter?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, looking a trifle abashed, "but the fact is—I—I have just remembered where I saw that man. My mind has been running upon him ever since he left the room."

“Man?—what man?”

“Your friend Mr. Maxwell—that is, I hope he is not your friend, Mrs. Arkel, because I feel it is my duty to tell you he is a thorough-paced scoundrel!”

“Major—why, what do you know of him?”

“This, for one thing—he deserted from my regiment six years ago. It will be my duty now to have the scamp arrested.”

“No; no—don’t do that. I beg of you—I implore you; don’t do that!”

“Why, Mrs. Arkel, who—what is this man to you?”

She shook her head, and buried her face in her hands.

“I must tell you; yes, I must tell you,” she moaned. “Don’t have him arrested, Major, for he is my brother—my unhappy brother!”

Chapter III

Mrs. Parsley’s Protégé

It was with unfeigned amazement that Major Dundas heard Miriam’s revelation. He recalled now the man’s military career, and he marvelled at her relationship with him only the more as he did so. She would have confided in him further he knew, but at that moment her husband’s key grated in the lock, and it was all the distraught woman could do to compose herself.

“Not a word about him to Gerald,” she whispered hurriedly. “I can trust you—he knows nothing. I will tell you everything later on.” How much later on it was to be Miriam little thought then.

For two years she had enjoyed comparative immunity from trouble—trouble, that is of the kind with which she had for so long been beset. But, heralded by this reappearance of Jabez, there was to come upon her a long list of disasters, following so close one upon the other, that in comparison Jabez and his misdeeds dwindled into insignificance.

“Hullo, Dundas; is it you in the flesh?” said Gerald, shaking the Major by the hand. “How are you?—all right, I hope. And your wife?” Before the

Major could answer he had seen Miriam's face in the light. "Why, hullo, old girl, what's up? you've been crying!"

The Major felt a trifle embarrassed, and Miriam flushed as her husband glanced suspiciously from one to the other of them.

"Yes, Gerald, I have been crying about poor little Dicky. Major Dundas seems to fear he will go into a decline. I was so fond of the dear little child. I can't bear to think of his being ill."

"Gad, you take it to heart a good deal more than his mother does, I'll bet. What's wrong with him, Major?"

"Oh, the child's constitutionally weak. I'm going to take him to Briggs tomorrow—got the greatest faith in Briggs. If he can't put him right none of 'em can. After he's seen him, I'll bring the boy along—in fact, I dropped in to ask your wife if she would be at home. The little chap's dying to see her again."

Advisedly the Major made no mention of Hilda's coming. He knew that if he did so, the office would most certainly not see Gerald all day. And from what he had heard, there had been quite enough of that kind of thing with Mr. Gerald already.

At luncheon they fell to talking of Lesser Thorpe and its shining lights.

"And how is Julia—amiable as ever?" asked Arkel.

"Yes, if anything, rather more so," replied Dundas smiling. "She has, of course, been horribly badly treated according to her own account. It's an extraordinary thing how Julia always is badly treated, and more extraordinary how she not only manages to survive, but actually fattens on it!"

"Jove! I wish I had one half as good a time," grumbled Gerald. "She gets her three hundred a year without doing a hand's turn for it. I've got to slave like a nigger for mine."

"A judgment on you' says Julia, 'for all your wickedness.'"

"Wickedness?—well, upon my soul, I like that. She's evidently lost none of her feline and back-biting propensities. I wish everyone had done as

little in the way of wickedness, as she calls it, as I have—what do you say, Miriam?”

“Well, Gerald; I agree it is not quite the word I should use to describe your shortcomings. Wickedness implies deliberation. No, I don’t think your worst enemy could call you deliberately wicked.”

“Enemy? I haven’t got any, my dear—your husband is the most popular of men.”

Miriam made no reply.

“Tell me, Major,” she said, “how is Mrs. Parsley? I haven’t heard from her for ages. She and I used to be such good friends—she was always kind to me.”

“Another old cat,” interpolated Gerald.

“Oh, she’s much the same,” replied the Major; “meddlesome and well-meaning and good-hearted as ever. She’s always most happy, you know, when she’s got some philanthropic scheme in hand. Her last fad is really funny. She’s got hold of a young street Arab, and has taken him in tow. Her idea is, I believe, to educate him and then send him amuck amongst his fellow-Arabs, in the hope that he may exude the Gospel—sort of spreading by contagion idea, you know.”

“Lord, that’s just like her. Where did she get hold of the urchin?”

“Well, they say she found him begging in the village. Little devil ought to be in a reformatory. I gave him some weeding to do round my place to oblige her, of course, but I couldn’t stand the sight of him—preferred the weeds, so I sent him off. But he seems to have got round the old lady properly; and what’s more, he’s pocketing a good deal of her money, unless I’m very much mistaken. Oh, he’s a sharp young beggar!”

“But you don’t mean to say she trusts him with money?” asked Miriam. It was not like Mrs. Parsley, as she remembered her, to do that.

“Oh, I suppose the whole affair’s a mere trifle. I only mentioned it to show how wrong-headed she is. This sort of indiscriminate charity does such a lot of harm.”

“She’s as obstinate as a mule,” put in Gerald. He hated the vicar’s wife, she having snubbed him somewhat severely on one or two occasions. Indeed, it was only to the fact of her having married Gerald that Miriam could put down Mrs. Parsley’s neglect of her since she had been in London.

“And what is this precious brat’s name?” he asked.

Dundas looked puzzled.

“Upon my word, I don’t believe he had a proper name in the first instance. Anyway, if he had, the vicar suppressed it. You know how cracked he is on Hebrew symbolism. Well, I suppose he saw a good chance here of indulging in it, so what do you think he christened the chap? Gideon Anab! Upon my soul he did! Gideon Anab! for a gutter whelp like that!”

“Construe, Major.”

“Well, I believe it means ‘one who breaks asunder’—so the old man says. I told him to look out for himself, or the chap might try and live up to it. No, by the way, that’s the meaning of ‘Gideon’ only. Anab means thick, round. Well, he is thick and round now—thanks to plenty to eat and nothing to do. Of course the whole thing is perfectly crazy.”

Miriam was becoming very nervous. An idea had flashed across her mind which she could in no way get rid of.

“But surely, Major,” she said, “the boy had some sort of name when Mrs. Parsley came across him?”

“Yes, I believe he had. Shorty or Snorty, or something like that. However, that’s nowhere now. Gideon Anab he is, and Gideon Anab I suppose he will—My dear Mrs. Arkel, are you ill?”

Miriam, her worst suspicions confirmed, had turned deathly pale. It *was* Shorty then—Shorty at Lesser Thorpe—with Mrs. Parsley. Fate was indeed relentless. He was an iniquitous young scoundrel she knew, and cunning beyond words. And he knew the whole of that black page of her life in London. She wondered had he betrayed her to Mrs. Parsley.

Perhaps that was the reason she had not come to see her. She pulled herself together, and put as brave a face on it as she could.

“It is nothing, Major, thank you. The room is a little close, I think. I have been feeling out of sorts all the morning. I think, if you don’t mind, I’ll go and lie down for a bit.”

Gerald glanced sharply at her, and then at Dundas. Like most weak natures he was an easy prey to suspicion. It came strongly upon him now. His wife was much agitated—there was no doubt about that. But the Major seemed perfectly calm and self-possessed. He rose and opened the door for Miriam, and expressed his wish that she would soon be better. Then he returned to the table.

Gerald had it in his mind to remark upon the strangeness of his wife’s behaviour. He felt convinced that the Major had something to do with it. And he would not have hesitated to tell him so but for the very weighty reason that he had every intention of getting a cheque out of him before he returned to the country.

“Is your wife with you in town?” he asked.

“Yes, she is with me,” replied the Major finitely.

“Are you in rooms?”

“We are at the Soudan Hotel in Guelph Street.”

“Ah, it’s well to be you. You couldn’t do much better than the Soudan. I know it—one of the best tables in town. What the deuce did Providence give me a palate for without the means to satisfy it?”

“Gerald, you’ve no business to talk like that—it’s paltry, not to say the worst of bad form.”

“Oh, it’s all very well for you from your eminence of five thousand a year; but I tell you what it is, John, I was treated beastly badly by the old man. He always gave me to understand I was to be his heir.”

“Well; and he acted up to his promise. It was not his fault that his will was stolen. In that will he did make you his heir.”

“If you believe that, you ought to allow me anyhow a thousand a year.”

“I don’t agree that I ought to allow you anything, strictly speaking. But I certainly would do so if you were a different sort of man. Unfortunately you are not; and to allow you an independent income would simply be to encourage you to drink, and degrade yourself and your unhappy wife.”

“It would be nothing of the kind. I won’t allow you to speak to me like that, John—even to salve your own conscience. And let me tell you straight, if the day ever comes when that will turn up, I’ll have my rights—every penny of them. So you know.”

“In such circumstances I would not attempt to deprive you of them. You would be dead within the year—or locked up. Look here, Gerald, you know I’m not a man to mince my words. When you married Miriam Crane, you married a woman in a thousand. What have you been to her? Have you made her a decent husband? For a time, I grant, you kept pretty straight, and did your work well, but now you are drifting back to your old tricks as fast as you jolly well can. Only the other day, when I was in the city and dropped in to see Crichton at the office, he was complaining to me about you—”

“It’s like his damned impudence,” retorted Gerald at white heat. “For two pins I’d chuck him and his beastly office, and clear out.”

“And live on your wits, I suppose, or on your wife. You’re quite capable of it.”

Things were not going to Gerald’s liking at all. The cheque he had promised himself was vanishing rapidly. So he made no retort to the Major’s last remark, and submitted with the best grace he could muster, to the lecture that warrior did not hesitate to administer to him. Then, having promised and vowed everything that was demanded of him in the future, he made so bold as to ask for a trifle of fifty pounds, and was straightway refused.

The Major had been subject to discipline all his life, and was not one to relax it, more especially in the case of such a man as his cousin. “Spare the rod and spoil the child” was a precept upon which he had always laid the greatest stress. Gerald had been spared—and spoiled.

From the bottom of his heart he pitied Miriam. “How awfully things have gone askew,” he said to himself, as he spun east in a quick-going hansom. What would he not give to be in that young rascal’s shoes—yes, even without the Manor House and its five thousand a year.

By the time he reached the Soudan Hotel he was getting horribly sentimental. But he looked with confidence to his wife to dispel all weakness of that sort. Where Hilda was, he knew, sentiment could not be.

He dismissed his cab, and inquired if his wife was at home. He was somewhat surprised to hear that she was not. He presumed she must have gone to pay a call. But the porter informed him that a boy was waiting to see him—a boy, who it appeared, had called already once or twice during the week when he had been out. He had not the least idea who it could be, the *genus puer* being one in nowise affected by the Major. However, he would seem to be a youth of no little pertinacity, so he gave orders for him to be shown in.

A few moments later the lad appeared—a short, squat, leering creature, somewhere in his teens, and clothed in a tweed suit of aggressively severe design. There was upon his face an expression of extreme sanctimony, which was horribly repellent to the Major. He recognised him at once as Gideon Anab, alias Shorty.

“Well, what is it?” he asked sharply. “What can I do for you, lad?”

“I ain’t arter you’re doin’ nuffin’ fur me, sir; but I ken do a ‘eap fur you!”

“What the deuce do you mean, you—?”

Shorty glanced at the door to make sure that it was fast closed. Then he shifted nervously from one leg to the other, and finally his facial muscles began to describe what he evidently intended for a smile. It was a very weird achievement, and for the moment quite disturbed the Major.

“Well, I ken put yer on a lay as you’ll be glad to get a ‘old of, Mister Major!”

“Go on, explain yourself—out with it, or I’ll out with you; quick! if you’ve anything to say.”

“Guess I ‘ave, if I’m treated proper. P’r’aps yer don’t know as I was down at that there village when the old ‘un was scragged that time? Well, I wos, guvnor, and wot’s more, I wus round ‘bout the ‘ouse on that night, ‘cos it wos Chris’mus time, and I wos bloomin’ ‘ungry, and yer see there’s ofen times some pickin’s to be ‘ad about big ‘ouses at them times—”

“Go on, go on!” urged the Major, getting excited. “You know who did it?”

“No I don’t, guvnor; but I know who cobbled that there will!”

The Major sat back in his chair. This was not what he had expected. In a flash he saw his position.

“Who was it?” he demanded harshly of the boy.

“No yer don’t, sir, yer not goin’ to git it that way. It’s worth summat, my little bit o’ noos!”

“You young devil you! here take this.” He took from his pocket a five-pound note and held it out. The boy clutched at it eagerly. Then he leaned forward and whispered hoarsely in the Major’s ear a name, the mention of which secured for him as thorough a shaking as he had ever experienced in his eventful life.

“You young liar!” cried the enraged soldier; “say that again, and I’ll break every bone in your wretched body!”

“S’elp me, it’s true, guvnor,” gasped Shorty when he could get his breath, “I seed ‘er grab it!”

Chapter IV **Dicky’s Discovery**

The name whispered by the unhappy Shorty into the Major’s ear was that of Mrs. Dacre Darrow—or, to use his peculiar phonetic variation of it—“Mrs. Darrer.” As has been related its effect upon the Major was immediate, and fraught with, to Shorty, very tangible consequences. The sound of his cousin’s name in the boy’s mouth had upset his equanimity altogether for the moment. But the expenditure of his indignation physically, upon that very ample frame, soon brought the Major into a

calmer state of mind, and resulted eventually in recourse to less forcible methods on his part. He came to the conclusion that for a time at least verbal tactics might prove of vastly more advantage to himself. So he released the boy, and submitted him instead to the fire of cross-examination. And from the look of relief on Shorty's face, he was quick to appreciate the change.

Not for one moment did the Major believe there was any truth in the accusation brought against his cousin. He had no high opinion of her, to be sure, but he felt quite certain that she would never stoop to an act of this kind. Besides, even granting that her sense of moral rectitude were sufficiently flexible to allow of such a lapse on her part, he failed to see what motive she could have had. She must be aware that even to suppress the existence of this will would be to put herself within reach of the law.

But Shorty held firmly to his story of that night. Seeing a light in the library he had gone on to the terrace, and the blind being up, he had been able to see into the room without himself being seen.

“And you say Mr. Barton was alive then?” queried the Major.

“Oh, the ole cove wer' alive right enough then—I seed 'im go out o' the room an' leave a long paper—that wer' the will—on the table.”

“And how, pray, do you come to know a will when you see one?”

“I didn't know wot it was then, but a'rterwards Mrs. Parsley, she told me as 'ow a will 'ad been nabbed, an' it didn't take me long to twig as 'ow it must ha' been that paper wot I saw Mrs. Darrer bone. She slipped into the room jest as the ole cove 'ad gone out—then 'er eye catches the paper on the table, an' she gives a kind o' jump, an' begins a-readin' of it. An' lorksy, didn't she look mad when she'd read a bit! Then she slips it somewhere in the stern of 'er, an' clears out. I thought then as 'ow it were about time I cleared out too, so I hooked it down the steps, and back through the medder that way.”

“What time was this?”

“Oh, arter supper—leastways I s’pose it wer’ supper. I’d seen yer all eatin’ an’ drinkin’ ‘bout ‘alf a hour before, an’ it dudn’t make me feel no better, I kin tell yer!”

Dundas reflected. It was just possible the boy was speaking truth. He remembered how Barton had shut himself up in the library while he and the other men had had their smoke in the dining-room. It was quite possible that Julia should have dropped into the room just as he had described. But what could there be in the will to cause her to purloin it?—a revocation of the clause relating to her income? Surely not. He continued to question Shorty.

“Did the old gentleman enter the room again after that?”

“Well, as I tell yer, I cleared out, sir. I never thought no more about it till I ‘eard as ‘ow a will had been prigged, and as ‘ow you ‘ad got the tin wot t’other cove ought to ‘ave ‘ad. Then o’ course I seed ‘ow it was, so I thought I’d just come ‘ere an’—”

“Do a little blackmailing, eh?”

“No, sir, only I thought as ‘ow ‘twould be worth a tip to ‘ave yer mind made easy like. ‘Tain’t much of a tip though as yer’ve parted with—strikes me I’d do better to go now to t’other cove, an’ see what ‘e’s got to say!”

“Look here, you young blackguard, not another penny do you get from me, do you understand? And I’ll take very good care that Mrs. Parsley knows the sort of scamp you are. Now clear out of this!” thundered the Major, bringing down his cane on the table, “or I’ll give you as sweet a hiding as you ever had in your life.”

At this Gideon Anab made a hasty exit. He had no fancy for any further chastisement at the hands of the irate Major. After all a fiver with a whole skin was better than nothing with a damaged one, and he had a very shrewd idea that that was how it would be with him if he remained. So he left the Major to reflect on his position.

It was not a pleasant one which ever way he looked at it. On the one hand he was liable at any moment to lose everything by the production of the lost will; on the other he was placed in the position of

compounding a felony, or at least of retaining and enjoying what he knew was not his to enjoy. If he took what he held to be the only right course open to him the result would be very far reaching. For himself he did not care so much, although he was in nowise insensible to the difference between some five hundred—which was the amount of his private means—and five thousand a year. But he really did not like to think what the effect would be upon Hilda, when that young lady was called upon to give up all that she had schemed for—he knew well by this time that she had schemed for it. And upon Miriam too this reversal of fortune would fall hardly, since it would mean the speedy and inevitable degradation of her husband. As he turned all this over in his mind, he was sorely tempted for her sake and for his wife's to leave things as they were.

There was just one loop-hole of escape!—that Mrs. Darrow might have destroyed the will. In that case no possible good was to be achieved by exposing her. He would let her see that he knew her for what she was. But a scandal was a thing he had a loathing of, and would never be the one to bring about. Of course all this was based upon the hypothesis that Shorty had told the truth. There was always the possibility that he had not.

Hilda arrived home for dinner in the best of tempers. Her visit had been to her thoroughly successful, since not only had she been the best looking and best dressed woman in the room, but had been told so, which was infinitely more important. Her husband told her of the arrangement he had made for her to take Dicky to Rosary Mansions the following afternoon. She was pleased to express herself delighted. It, too, was likely to be a highly successful visit from her point of view. She, the mistress of Thorpe Manor, conferring her presence upon Dicky's quondam governess now married to the man whom she had jilted, and resident in one of the meaner tenements of West Kensington, was a picture in which she could see herself quite plainly. Still she was prepared to be cordial.

When Miriam came to welcome her she was surprised at the warmth of her manner. Dicky of course was embraced and made much of.

“And how is the doctor, Hilda, and your mother?” asked Miriam.

“Oh, they are pretty well, thank you—they are better off now, of course, and the children are at school. But the house is much the same, dirty as ever. Sometimes when I drive round to see them, I wonder how I ever managed to support existence in that poky place. I hate small rooms, don’t you?”

Miriam did not reply.

“And Mrs. Darrow—how is she?” was all she said.

“Oh, I believe much the same. I don’t see much of her, you know. In fact, I was obliged to give her clearly to understand that I was mistress in my own house. As a result she has no great love for me, you may imagine. However, she keeps out of the way, and that’s the great thing.”

“I wonder she entrusted Dicky to you!”

“Oh, she knew Dicky would be all right; besides, the arrangement was that my husband was to bring him up to see Dr. Briggs. She didn’t know anything about my coming. I expect when she hears he’s been with me, there’ll be a nice old row. However, I don’t care. Nothing can make me dislike the woman more than I do. I think she’s the most detestable—”

“Hush, Hilda, the boy will hear you! Run along, Dicky, and have a prowl round the house.”

“But this is a flat, Miss Crane, isn’t it, not a house?” said Dicky dubiously.

“Well then, the flat, dear, since you are so particular.”

He looked terribly fragile Miriam thought. And the flush on his cheek and the bright light in his eyes indicated only too surely the road upon which he was travelling.

“May I go into all the rooms, Miss Crane?—even into the kitchen?”

“Yes, dear, anywhere you like—we have no blue-beard’s chamber here.”

“I suppose you are very happy,” continued Miriam, taking in the various details of Hilda’s splendour.

“Yes, I suppose so. As happy as I can hope to be. He gives me everything I want. But I wish he would leave the Army altogether. For most of this year we have been living in a horrible little garrison town, and the society there consisted solely of the wives and relations of the other officers. They were all so jealous of me that it really was quite unpleasant.”

“I suppose you would rather live at Lesser Thorpe altogether?”

“No, I hate Lesser Thorpe. I want to live in London, and go abroad, with now and then a week or two in Scotland.”

“In fact, you like a regular society life.”

“Well, I suppose you would call it that, yes; at least, I say, when one has the means let one live, not vegetate in some little hole and corner place. Of course John doesn't mind. One place is as good as another to him. I never saw such an extraordinary man; he never seems dull. He'll tramp for miles over the country—dirty, muddy, ploughed fields—and come back as hungry as a hunter, and say how much he has enjoyed himself. I can't stand that dead alive sort of existence. I must have my shops, and I love the theatre, and the ballad concerts, and the heaps of jolly things one can do in London. Don't you?”

“Well, you see,” said Miriam, “I haven't quite so much time on my hands as you have. For instance, we cannot afford more than one servant, and that means that there is a good deal for me to do at home, if the house is to be kept as I like it—that reminds me, I must just go and see about tea, if you'll excuse me a few minutes.”

Hilda made no attempt to conceal what she felt.

“Really. I think I should kick at that if I were you; it must be awful to have only one servant—in London of all places! Why don't you make your husband do without something? He'd appreciate you all the more.”

“I don't think he could appreciate me more—he is everything that is good to me. One must cut one's coat according to one's cloth, you know, and—well, we prefer to do with one servant. Will you just see where Dicky is while I go into the kitchen?”

As she left the room Hilda went in search of Master Dicky, and found him stretched out on the floor of the bedroom. He was very busily occupied with a heap of treasures he had found in an old ivory work-box which Miriam had managed to keep possession of in spite of her many vicissitudes. It was true it had for a few months reposed on the shelf of a pawnbroker in the Strand, to whom she had confided it during that terrible time just before she met with Barton. But it had been the first thing she had redeemed. It was a very old piece of Indian work, wondrously carved, and had always been a favourite of Dicky's at Pine Cottage. The boy welcomed it now as an old playfellow.

“Dicky, whatever are you doing?” exclaimed Hilda, when she saw him. “You'll catch it from Miriam, upsetting her things like that!”

“No, I won't,” replied the boy calmly. “She always let me play with this; there's such a funny little place in the lid she used to show me, I can't find it now—ah, here it is, I've got it.”

Hilda bent over him curiously. His little fingers had touched a spring, which, when pressed, caused the lining of the lid—a plain sheet of ivory—to fall inwards. As it opened an oblong sheet of bluish paper, folded—a typical legal document—fell out.

“Now, Dicky, see what you've been doing; you've—”

She stopped short, for she had read the writing on the paper: “The Will of George Barton. Dated December the 20th, 189-.”

Chapter V

Just In Time

At the sight of those words even Hilda's self-possession forsook her for the moment. The will of George Barton, dated December, here, in Miriam's keeping! There was only one conclusion to be arrived at from that. She had stolen it—that she might secure Gerald. As the thought flashed through her mind a great bitterness—a greater hatred for her rival came over Hilda. Dicky, absorbed as he was, saw that something was wrong. His keen little eyes had not failed to read the fateful heading. The word “will” was by no means without meaning for him. How often his mother had spoken of Uncle Barton's will! He had heard her not

once, but a score of times. Child as he was, he knew quite well what had happened to deprive Gerald of his inheritance.

Hilda glanced hurriedly, stealthily, through the contents of the deed. “I devise all my real and personal estate to my nephew, Gerald Arkel, absolutely”—those were the words her eye now caught, and they were more than enough. And she was the wife of John Dundas! Why had Fate played her such a sorry trick?—she who had given up so much—had schemed so zealously for the possession of this affluence. It had been her goal through life. She had sacrificed everything to it, only to have it snatched from her now that she had tasted the sweet of it. It was too cruel. What should she do?

Dicky looked up, all innocent inquiry. That look brought her to herself again. At any cost the truth must be kept from him. She smiled and put her hand upon his shoulder.

“Dicky dear,” she said in a whisper, “do you know what this is?”

“It’s a will, Hilda, isn’t it? Mother was always talking about Uncle Barton’s will. Is this the one?”

“Yes, dear, this is the one. It’s been lost for ever so long, and now that you have found it your dear Miriam will be so rich.”

“Oh, how jolly!—I am so pleased, aren’t you, Hilda?”

“Yes, dear; and I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll prepare *such* a surprise for Miriam.”

“Oh yes; how, Hilda, how shall we do it?” The little fellow’s eyes positively danced with delight.

“Well, first I must talk to Major Dundas about it, because of course he will have to give the money to Miriam’s husband. Now, Dicky, whatever you do you must not say a word about it. It must be a *great* secret. You must promise me that first of all. Very well—”

“But, Hilda, I wonder why Miriam didn’t know it was in her box?”

For a moment the woman was at a loss. Then she answered.

“Well, that we don’t know, Dicky. Perhaps she hid it there herself and forgot all about it, or perhaps Gerald put it there. That doesn’t matter—we’ve found it, that’s the great thing, and it will be such a surprise for both of them.”

“Oh yes, Hilda. I won’t say a word about it, I promise.”

“That’s a good boy. Now put away the work-box quickly, just as you found it, and don’t tell Miriam even that you were playing with it.” She kissed him, and slipped the deed into her dress. Dicky put back the trinkets and replaced the box.

She felt she could rely on the boy’s not betraying her, and she congratulated herself on the success of her plan. She could hear Miriam in the drawing-room now. Hurriedly she picked up a copy of the *Strand* Magazine which Dicky had been looking at and gave it to him.

“We must go to tea, Dicky. Come along, bring your book with you.”

At that moment Miriam called.

“That boy’s simply crazy about pictures,” said Hilda, as she entered the room. “I can’t get him away from them.” She looked at Dicky hard. He seemed to understand—it was to him all part of a glorious surprise for Miriam. And the element of secrecy appealed to him irresistibly.

“What’s he got—the *Strand* Magazine?” said Miriam, catching sight of the well-known cover. “Oh, that’s Gerald’s—he’s never happy without his *Strand*.”

“It is an awfully jolly magazine, Miss Crane—I wish mother would get it.”

“Ah, here is Gerald,” exclaimed Hilda, as at that moment he entered the room. “Speak of angels and you hear their wings.”

“That’s dangerously suggestive of another phrase more often applied in the same circumstances—and rather more apt in this case too, I fancy!”

With heightened colour he came forward and took her outstretched hand. He was quite unable to conceal his emotion at this unexpected meeting.

“I didn’t hear you come in, Gerald,” said his wife in surprise.

At the sound of her voice some of his self-possession returned to him.

“No, I stole a march on you—unawares—got awfully sick of the office, so I chucked it for to-day.”

Miriam looked at him uneasily. This sort of thing was continually happening. She was thankful at least he was himself in other ways.

“Well, Mrs. Dundas, I must certainly congratulate you—I don’t know when I’ve seen you look so well.”

“Why don’t you call her Hilda?” put in the convivial Dicky. “I hate Mrs. Dundas.”

“Do you? Well, you see, there are certain difficulties in the way, Dicky. In the first place we are all very much ‘grown-up’ now; indeed, I don’t know that strictly speaking we oughtn’t to call you ‘Mr. Darrow.’ Besides, if I were to call Mrs. Dundas by her Christian name, she might reprimand me severely.”

“What nonsense you talk, Gerald,” put in that young lady; “there, you see, I take the wind out of your sails at once—I am sure Mrs. Arkel doesn’t mind. Do you?” she turned to Miriam with the sweetest of smiles.

“I—indeed no. Surely you are old enough friends for that. Well, we’re relations too, now, in a sort of way, aren’t we, Hilda?”

“I suppose we are—cousins by marriage.”

“I’m a cousin by marriage too,” announced Dicky; with his mouth full of cake; “we’re all cousins.”

“In that case, Dicky, let me give you cousinly advice—not to speak with your mouth full!”

“No, Miss Crane—I won’t.”

“Hullo, young man,” cried Gerald; “and who’s Miss Crane I’d like to know?”

“This is, of course—your Mrs. Arkel, but *my* Miss Crane. She ought to have waited till I was grown up, and I’d have married her,” said Dicky with all the solemnity in the world.

“You precocious young rascal,” laughed Arkel, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Are you staying for any time in town, Hilda?”

“No, only for a few days. But, Gerald, this is an unexpected pleasure to see *you*. I thought you had joined the noble army of toilers in the city, and weren’t visible except by night?”

“Nor am I, as a rule. Needs must you know when a certain gentleman’s on the box. But, as I was telling my wife, to-day I felt I couldn’t stand the place, so I toddled home. It’s a case of reward for a lapse from virtue for once in a way.”

“Well, hard work’s good for you, I’ve no doubt. At all events, you had plenty of play once,” said Hilda, putting on her gloves and rising to go.

“Yes, this is the swing of the pendulum, I suppose. But, by Jove, if ever it swings back again, I’ll take jolly good care it sticks there until I shuffle off, anyhow.”

And Miriam sighed, knowing only too well how true that was.

“Well, come along, Dicky, we must be off; the Major’ll be waiting, and he hates that. I’ve managed a good many things with the Major, but I’ve never managed to imbue him with a sense of patience.”

The boy rose rather reluctantly. He would so much rather have stayed with Miriam. He had not had her to himself at all. Gerald put on his hat and coat.

“You must let me come some of the way with you,” he said.

“Oh, no, Gerald, you mustn’t leave Miriam—I’m sure she—”

“Oh, please don’t think about me. It’s so dull for Gerald. I’m only too glad for him to enjoy himself when he can.”

There was a rather embarrassing silence for a few minutes. Then Hilda imprinted upon Miriam’s cheek the kiss of Judas, and they left.

“Jove, she’s about right,” said Arkel, when they were out of earshot. “I should think it is dull. I never realised before, Hilda, how much London was the rich man’s paradise and the poor man’s Sheol.”

“Oh, come, Gerald, it’s not so bad as all that, surely. You’re out of sorts to-day.”

He did not reply, but hailed a four-wheeler that was passing.

“Oh, Gerald, why did you do that? I do dislike these dirty growlers,” she said.

“You won’t get a decent hansom in this God-forsaken part of the world. Better take this now.”

“Very well, I suppose we must.”

“And may I sit beside the driver?” said Dicky. “I should like to awfully.”

“Oh, I don’t know, dear. I am afraid of your catching cold.”

“No fear of that,” replied Gerald. “It’s quite warm, and he’s well wrapped up. Jump in, Hilda.”

He helped her in, and confided Dicky to the care of the cabby. The boy’s proposition suited him in every way. Indeed, it had been an essential part of his plan. As for Hilda, she had a very shrewd idea of what she might expect. It is only fair to her to say that she hesitated—but the eloquent appeal from those blue eyes of Gerald’s had been too much for her. She was surprised at herself now, for her heart was beating as she had never known it beat before.

“I wish you could get a hansom,” she said; “we shall be hours getting home in this.”

“And would that be so very terrible?” he asked. “It would not have been once, Hilda.”

“Oh, Gerald, don’t talk about that. You know that is all over and done with now.”

“It is *not* over, Hilda—it never has been over, we need never have parted but for you. For these two years I have been longing for a chance of seeing you alone. I have got it now, and I’m not going to lose it.”

“What is it you want? You forget Miriam—”

“Oh, hang Miriam! I wish I could forget her. But she’s not the sort of person one can forget, worse luck. Hilda, it was cruel of you to drive me to her—”

“Cruel of *me*? I drove you to Miriam? Really, Gerald, if that’s the kind of thing you’re going to say, I am sorry I allowed you to come at all. You know perfectly well things were not in my hands. I had to do as I was told. And you—well, you and Miriam were always what you call ‘good friends.’”

“You managed to console yourself pretty quickly any way.”

“Not so quickly as you, I believe,” retorted Hilda.

“I console myself? A pretty sort of consolation mine has been! You at least have the satisfaction of having plenty of money. If it were only the other way round, I tell you, Hilda, I wouldn’t hesitate for one moment; I’d clear out with you to-morrow.”

“Indeed, that’s taking me a little bit for granted, isn’t it? You don’t seem to count the cost—to me! Remember, the unfortunate woman always pays in these cases, as indeed she does in most others, as far as I can see. No, Gerald, you’ve got to stick to your bargain and I to mine. I was always fond of you, you know. But Fate evidently didn’t intend us for one another.”

“If only I thought you really cared for me still—Hilda, tell me you do; say you do care for me now as you used to do.”

“Gerald, I forbid you to behave like this. Are you crazy? What do you expect this sort of thing to lead to?—ruin, absolute ruin, in every way for me—yes, and for you too for that matter.”

“I don’t care—I care for nothing but you. I will have you, I—”

He was blind with passion now, and she saw it. Without another word she pushed his arm aside, and letting down the window, called upon the driver to stop.

“Very well,” he said, when he saw what she had done. “I have finished with you from this moment. Remember, whatever happens is your doing.”

“Will you help Dicky inside, please, and tell the driver to go on?”

Her intense placidity infuriated him only the more. He seized her wrist roughly and twisted it, glaring at her. Then he banged the door and strode away.

Without word or sound—though he had hurt her wrist badly—she jumped out of the cab and got Dicky down from his perch. She bade the driver go on to the hotel. Then she leaned back in her seat and smiled, well pleased with herself. Placed as she was she couldn’t have done better, she thought. He was as much in love with her as ever, that was quite certain. He would not be content to leave her like that. She had thrilled at his savage clutch of her, painful though it was. It meant that he was hers, body and soul. He would come at her bidding—he would be her slave. But not now was he for her or she for him. There might come a time, perhaps—

But that was another story. Now, she was face to face, she knew, with the crucial point of her life. On her immediate action depended everything. The will was in her possession to do with it what she would. What should she do with it? Destroy it—destroy it—destroy it—the words seemed to buzz continually in her brain.

She was so completely engrossed that she did not notice that they had arrived at the hotel. The porter came to the door. Taking Dicky by the hand, she went straight upstairs to their private sitting-room. Her husband was there reading the paper. She was surprised to see him.

“Dear me,” she said, “you here, John? I thought you surely would be at the club. You don’t mind if I leave the boy with you till Kimber can take him? I have such a splitting headache that I must go straight and lie down.”

“Sorry, Hilda—leave him by all means.” She certainly looked tired he thought.

In her own room, having dismissed her maid, she threw herself on the bed, and fell to thinking again. Five minutes after she rang the bell.

“Kimber,” she said, as the maid appeared, “I am shivering—just put a match to the fire. That will do, thank you; you needn’t wait.”

As the fire burned up she rose from the bed, and settled herself on the rug by the hearth. Then she took the will from the pocket of her dress and spread it out before her. She read it from beginning to end. And so she learned how Miriam, if she had done this thing, had sacrificed herself in the doing of it. Could *she* have sacrificed herself like that? No—emphatically no. Could Miriam? She was obliged to confess to herself that she thought she could—and had. But the confession galled her ever so, and she hated her the more for it. And then for a moment she gave way to her hate.

“She shall not have it,” she almost hissed; “nor shall she have *him* much longer. Yes, I’ll burn it I’ll teach her not to try conclusions with me!”

At that moment her meditations were interrupted. The door opened, and her husband, pale and short of breath, literally burst into the room. Their eyes met. Instinctively she knew that *he* knew. Without a moment’s hesitation she threw the will into the fire. Catching her round the waist he flung her quickly to one side and rescued it.

“Just in time,” he panted; “only just in time!”

Chapter VI Some Mutual Compliments And A Confession

In silence husband and wife stared at each other—she as furious with anger at discovery as with the knowledge that therewith all chance of her retaining wealth and position was at an end; he, astonished at the utter

want of scruple, at the horrid immorality in the nature of the woman whom he had chosen to bear his name. It was as much as he could do to contain himself. Every instinct within him revolted at the cowardly criminality at which he had caught her red-handed. He wondered she had not been afraid, if only of her own skin.

“Do you realise what I have saved you from?” he asked sternly; “that but for the innocent betrayal of you by that little boy downstairs, you would now be a common felon and answerable to the law—*you*, my wife, the mistress of Thorpe Manor! Hilda, speak—for God’s sake speak.”

For some moments she did not answer. One feeling now had come uppermost in her—the feeling of hate and loathing for Miriam, intensified by the knowledge of her husband’s admiration for her, while she, his wife, stood debased utterly in his eyes. The whole fury of her puny vindictive nature was striving to be let loose. At last she answered him.

“I have nothing to say,” she said, “beyond this—that I am glad at last you know your *friend* for what she is—that even if your wife, as you say, was in danger of jeopardising her liberty, the pure, beautiful, saintly creature whom you so admire *has* done so long ago, since she is nothing but a common thief!”

“Hilda, how dare you! Upon my word, I begin to think you’ve lost your senses.”

“Indeed; you’ll find that whatever I may have lost, I still have *them*. You must allow me to repeat that your friend is a common thief, and therefore a criminal. She stole this will.”

“*She stole that will?*—why, woman, how can you say such a thing. Mrs. Arkel is the soul of honour.”

“I thought you’d be surprised. Evidently Dicky didn’t tell you everything. As it happens, I myself saw it abstracted by him quite accidentally this afternoon from some false bottom, or rather, top, of her work-box, which no doubt has proved eminently useful to her before this, during her career.”

“Hilda, for God’s sake don’t be so spiteful—if you have any decent womanhood in you don’t crush it. Miriam Arkel is no thief. You may have found this will in her box, as you say. But she did not steal it. It was taken from Barton’s table on Christmas night by—by Julia Darrow!”

“Julia Darrow? Impossible! Who told you that tale?”

“The person who saw her take it.”

“I don’t believe it—what motive had she?—none; besides, if that is so, how came it in the saintly Miriam’s keeping—such *very secure* keeping too—at least she thought so.”

The Major listened to her no longer. He became intent upon the contents of the will, and motioned to his wife to sit down. She continued her verbal fusillade none the less scathingly for lack of reply. At last she seemed to be approaching finality.

“You may talk as you like,” she said (perhaps because he was not talking at all), “nothing will convince me that the woman is innocent. She stole that will out of sheer spite at me—to prevent my marrying Gerald.”

“Oh, indeed!” This had roused the Major. “Would not the fact of your having elected to marry me have been a little inconvenient?”

“Not in the least—I should never have elected to marry you in those circumstances.”

“Oh!” He looked at her in amazement. He was learning about women at a rate which threatened speedy disaster to his appreciation of them. He began firmly to hope that his education might become a trifle less rapid if less complete.

“You can look, and look, and look,” she continued, “I don’t care; you may as well know the truth, though goodness knows you might have guessed it long ago—I detest you!”

“Why—may I ask?”

“Why?—for lots of reasons. Chiefly I suppose because I love Gerald.”

“Then in Heaven’s name why didn’t you marry him?”

“Because this wretched creature by her thievish trickery ruined him. I couldn’t marry a man who had not the means of keeping me, could I?”

“That depends—on the man, and on yourself. In any case you and Gerald Arkel—you won’t mind the frankness being mutual, will you?—no matter how situated, would in my opinion have made an easy and expeditious descent into—well, shall we say oblivion?—that is, of course, unless you had chosen to achieve notoriety of a wholly undesirable order. You, Gerald Arkel, and ample means!—nothing could have saved you. So perhaps, even as it is, you are better off. What think you, Hilda?”

“I don’t know what to think—I don’t understand you. I don’t understand this universal outcry against Gerald, that simply because he is possessed of a few pounds he must go to the dogs altogether.”

“Then you evidently don’t understand the young gentleman himself. No self-respecting kennels would tolerate him, I assure you, for all the relegating to them we humans might choose to indulge in. You probably know nothing about dogs. They are plucky, honourable animals, with a maximum of virtue and a minimum of vice; and they resent pretty hotly, I can tell you, the arrival amongst themselves of a lot of our refuse. Now the young man whom you have chosen to honour with your ‘love’ must unfortunately be so described.”

“It is cowardly of you to abuse him when he is not here to defend himself.”

“He would not attempt to defend himself to me. Now come, Hilda—you are little more than a child after all. Let my attitude be parental, if you won’t have it marital. Believe me, if it had not been for that very noble woman whom you have been slandering for the last quarter of an hour, Gerald Arkel, as it is, would have already reached his disastrous end.”

“That’s right; praise her—you have nothing but blame for me!—I believe you’re in love with the woman still.”

“Do you? Well, I suppose it’s logical you should, from your point of view. Yet, if I were to admit it, I believe you’d have the audacity to be angry—or pretend to be! We’ve started well, Hilda—that is, you did—why not let us be wholly frank. You married me for my money and for the position you would acquire as my wife. That you admit.”

“Yes—I was forced to.”

“Never mind the force—you admit the desire. Very well, I married you, why? ‘Pon my soul I couldn’t tell you—that’s the truth. Because I wanted a wife, I imagine, or thought I did, in the new circumstances in which I found myself. Grant then that our motives tie—they are equally unworthy of each of us—I have been a good husband to you. Have you been anything of a wife to me—I ask you, Hilda, from the day we married, have you given me a thought?”

“I’m not good at sentiment—I don’t understand it. I never did.”

“I am well aware of that. I begin to think you understand nothing but the promptings of your own badly drilled—excuse my swearing—your damned badly drilled mind.”

“I had rather you swore than sat there preaching at me. For goodness sake say what you’ve got to say, and have done with it.”

“As you will. Then I have this to say. You are my wife—that’s a deplorable, unalterable fact. You will respect my name by keeping your own out of the mud; therefore in future you will be careful to refrain from these little amateur felonies of yours, as well as from risking prosecution for slander, which you certainly will do if you allow your tongue free rein. For the rest, if you are sensible, you’ll keep up appearances before the world.”

“It’s difficult to keep up appearances when one is thrown into contact with adventuresses of that woman’s class. God knows where she came from—the slums I believe. Ask Julia about her—ask her to tell you what she told me.”

“Surely you can tell me yourself, without my further imperilling Julia’s lot in the next world.”

She stamped her foot with impatience. She had never known him quite in this mood before. She wished he would get thoroughly angry, like he had been when he came in.

“You will be shocked at the downfall of your immaculate angel. However, if you want to know I will tell you. She was in the habit of

making assignations with some low man who came down from London and used to meet her about Thorpe—once they were caught actually in the churchyard late at night—some man named Jabez! What do you think of that?”

“Very natural under the circumstances!”

“Very—” She looked at him utterly perplexed. “Under what circumstances?”

“Under the circumstances that he is her brother, and that she lived with a cat.”

“Her brother! Her br-o-th-er!—as much her brother as you are, or would like to be! It’s just like you to believe a tale like that.”

“Not only do I believe it, but it is true. It is also true that Julia stole this will. The creature Shorty—Mrs. Parsley’s *protégé* that is—was prowling about the house the night we were all dining there—Christmas Eve, when the poor old man was killed—and swears he saw her enter the library during Barton’s absence for a moment. She picked up the will, read it, and pocketed it.”

“And how much, pray, did you pay this ruffian for this information?”

“That’s my business. You may be quite sure it’s worth double what I paid for it.”

“How then do you explain it’s being in Mrs. Gerald Arkel’s work-box?”

“Malice—pure malice on the part of that most malicious of women, Julia Darrow.”

“But she could know nothing of there being a false top to the work-box.”

“She could know anything—everything. Ask Dicky, and he’ll tell you that he showed his mother how the thing worked.”

“Well, I’m sick to death of the subject,” she retorted impatiently. “The question is, what do you intend to do with the will now you’ve got it?”

“Why, what do you think I’d do with it? There is only one thing that I or anyone else with a spark of honour,” he looked at her very searchingly, “*could* do with it—take it to Rosary Mansions this evening, and lay it before both of them.”

“John!—you are not serious? I implore you don’t do that. Consider what it means. Consider me. It is not fair to me. I was not meant to be a poor man’s wife.”

“You are not fit to be any decent man’s wife; but as you are, and I can’t descend to your moral level, you must rise to mine, that’s all.”

“If you do this you shall pay for it,” she said. She was losing all self-control and becoming perfectly reckless in the face of what threatened her. “I am your wife now. I married you for this money—the day you lose it, you lose me—understand.”

He seized her arm somewhat roughly and looked at her hard.

“And you understand this, young woman, I will be a party to no crime at your bidding. I will be no partner with you in iniquity. To restore this money is the honest course, the only course, and the course that I shall take without any delay. As for you, while you are my wife, poor or rich, you will respect my name!”

“*While* I am your wife—if you go on the way you are going I warn you that will not be for long.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you’ll know quick enough once it’s done. For the last time I ask you to pause, consider, compromise!—I don’t ask you to do anything dishonourable, but make some arrangement, don’t give up everything. By your own showing it will ruin Gerald; think of him, think of her—of Miriam. Think of the awful unhappiness it means for her. John! I will try and be different to you if you will only wait.”

“Stop it,” he thundered, “she-devil that you are, consumed by your disgusting lust for gold. Once for all I refuse to be coerced by you. Do I not know right from wrong? This property is Gerald’s, and whatever the consequences, to him it goes.”

“Very well; I have warned you. Now I know what to do.”

She entered the dressing-room and banged the door behind her. For some minutes he stood staring blankly at it. Then he quietly went downstairs.

He saw no more of her that night. She had her dinner sent up to her room, and refused to see him. He dined, therefore, at the restaurant instead of in their private room. In spite of his self-control he could not eat. He realised full well what this loss meant, not so much to himself—five hundred a year and his pay was all-sufficient for him—but to Miriam, and to Gerald, yes, and to the paltry little woman who, after all, was his wife. Yet the more he pondered over it, the more convinced he became that there was but one course open to him. There need be no scandal about Julia; that must be hushed up somehow; but Gerald must have his own.

He lit a cigar at the table, and turned the thing over in his mind for another quarter of an hour. Then he called a cab, and drove straight to Rosary Mansions.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he arrived, yet strange to say Gerald was at home—thanks to Hilda. But the Major of course did not know to what he might attribute this return to the domestic hearth on the part of Master Gerald, and gave him all credit for it. He was sorely grieved to think that his news more than anything else, was calculated to bring about a speedy return to the old order of things.

As for Miriam, she had been in nowise deceived by her husband's action. She had made a pretty shrewd guess at the sort of thing that had passed between him and his former lady-love. His expression had been quite enough to show her he had been dismissed, and she valued his presence accordingly.

The Major's ring roused them both. It was one of the “cook-general's” three nights out—she having with great resignation remained in the previous evening, “though it was Sunday and all”—so Gerald himself went to the door.

“Hullo, Dundas, is it you?—why, what brings you out here at this time?—nothing wrong I hope?”

“No; I’ve no doubt you’ll think it’s very *right*, so far as you’re concerned; but it’s important, or I need hardly say I wouldn’t be here. The fact is, the will’s found.”

“The will! What—the—the last will?—and the money’s mine?”

“Indisputably.”

Miriam was on her feet in an instant. Every vestige of colour had left her face. She looked at the Major and then at her husband, who, half-laughing and half-weeping, was scarce able to articulate. He called for air, and she ran to the window and opened it. Then he turned on Dundas almost savagely.

“Where—where did you find this?”

“I did not find it—Dicky did.”

“Where?”

“Here, in your flat.” He looked at Miriam as he said it, knowing well she could defend herself.

“Yes,” she said, confronting her husband, “here in our flat. It was I who took the will!”

Chapter VII Mrs. Darrow Sympathises

“I said it, I said it—I always said it. How well I knew what that woman was!”

A veritable *feu-de-joie* this on the part of the triumphant Mrs. Darrow, for needless to say “that woman” referred particularly in this instance to Miriam, though as a rule with her the term was generic, to be applied alike to anyone of the numerous and unfortunate females who happened to be in her black books. And her triumph at this moment was the more sweet in that her audience consisted of no less a person than the husband of the delinquent herself.

There he sat, Gerald Arkel, no longer clothed in the humble sartorial products of the Strand, such as in truth had befitted a young man whose

daily walk of life lay between Leadenhall Street and Water Lane; but in riding-breeches and gaiters, both of cunning and of wondrous design, and bearing on the face of them the unmistakable hall-mark of the West, for which so much is paid (or is promised to be paid) by certain young gentlemen of means ample or otherwise. From his “Quorn” scarf to his Russia leather boots, Gerald was immaculate. He was lord of the manor now, and monarch of all he surveyed—that is to say outside of Pine Cottage where for the moment he was.

Three weeks had passed since that eventful night when Miriam had confessed to having taken Barton’s will—three weeks passed by her in misery and alone, for on that night her husband had left her. In vain had she pleaded the innocence of her act—in vain she had tried to show him that what she had done, she had done for love of him, by sacrifice of self, in charity, and not in depredation—a pure great act of love, wholly for him, and counting not the cost to herself. Evil that good might come if you will, but evil only so. But all explanation had been futile; he had been deaf to all her pleading, and to her entreaty too. And not that alone, but worse. Without the strong arm of John Dundas to defend her, assuredly he would have struck her. For his puny brain could picture only the material deprivations of the past two years, and the thought of what his body had been denied roused all the brute in him. He refused altogether to believe what she, amid her tears, tried so earnestly to explain—his uncle’s mad scheme of revenge. He had railed at her, and stormed, had stamped his feet and sworn, and finally, having exhausted his pitiable rage, had left the house with the coarsest insult on his lips. Since then she had not seen him.

Upon John Dundas it had all come with overwhelming force. When the confession fell from her lips he could hardly believe his ears. Was it really she who stood there speaking, out of her own lips condemned—in the words of his wife, a common thief? It could not be. He would have staked his life that if ever honour breathed, it breathed in her. And as he listened there that night to what she had to say his faith in her was justified, nay, intensified a thousand-fold. More than ever—a thousand times more—did she call for admiration in his eyes, for love, aye, and for reverence. She had sacrificed all for her love—for the welfare of the soul of him with whom some strange fate had ordained she should be joined. Strange! more than strange, incomprehensible that such a man should have touched the spring of love in such a woman! With her, love

signified self-sacrifice. For it, for him she loved, she must immolate herself—for him, a worthless reprobate, whose only claim to leniency was through pity; while *he* who would have lived for her and her alone, could only serve her now by leaving her.

It was all very terrible to the Major, and taxed sorely his unpretentious little stock of philosophy. For he had a big heart and a single mind, and his life had to be spent beside a woman who had neither. He felt he had a right to growl at fate, and for the past three weeks he had been taking full advantage of that right.

For himself he wished fervently that Miriam had chosen any manner of self-immolation rather than this. He wished it had been as Shorty had said, that Mrs. Darrow had been the guilty party. With her it would have been sheer sinfulness inspired no doubt by cupidity equally as sheer. But one black mark more or less was insignificant in the dim total of Julia Darrow's score. As it was, Shorty must have been mistaken, or have lied to him. Altogether this, the more practical part of the affair, puzzled the Major greatly. In nowise could he make the boy's story coincide with Miriam's. She had related straightforwardly and simply how it had all come about. She had gone in search of Dicky, and had found him lying insensible on the floor—insensible she concluded from shock at seeing Mr. Barton dead, for she had realised in an instant that the old man had been murdered. In the desk beside him lay the will. At once she had recognised it, and with it her chance of saving Gerald. She had not stopped to think. Her instinct had impelled her. At all costs, to him, to her, to any one, she must save him. The whole thing had been a matter of two minutes—the result was one spreading alas, not merely over two years, but over a lifetime. He was obliged to confess that strictly speaking she had been, or, as he preferred to put it, her judgment had been wrong—very wrong.

True to his word, he had lost no time in placing Gerald formally in possession of the Manor House, and Miriam of her income under the will. Then he had betaken himself and his wife back to Brampton where his regiment was stationed, and tried to throw himself with renewed energy into his profession.

On his part Gerald's first visit had been to the tailor's, with the wondrous result already described. His presence now at the abode of

Mrs. Darrow was due solely to that lady's very considerable proficiency in the arts of flattery, and to the young man's even more considerable susceptibility to them. For, as we know, he was supposed to hold no love for Mrs. Darrow. But she had seen her chance and had taken it.

Immediately on hearing the momentous news, she had hurried back from Bournemouth, where she was staying, and had succeeded in being the first, not only to congratulate the new lord of the manor on his succession to his own, but to condole with him over his maltreatment in the past. And this had gone straight home with that young gentleman, who, truth to tell, was beginning to feel the need of a little moral support so far as his action in having left his wife was concerned. So seeing that from Mrs. Darrow he would be sure to get it, he had accepted with avidity her invitation to partake of tea at Pine Cottage. There he poured out to her his weak story while she poured out for him tea even weaker, with the result that both were comforted for the time, he being content to put up with the tea in return for the quieting of his already uneasy conscience.

"Well, if you had taken my advice, you would never have married the creature," she said, handing him his third cup. "You'll never be far out if you trust to me. I saw what she was the moment Uncle Barton brought her here."

"Then why did you take her as governess to Dicky?"

"What could I do?" Here Julia's handkerchief went to her eyes. "You know I was absolutely dependent on Uncle Barton; but you don't know how brutally he treated me. But for my spirit I should have died. He threatened to deprive me of every penny if I didn't keep her. I protested and protested, but it was no use."

"Yes, yes, I can quite imagine all you had to go through," said Gerald, getting restive. He had no fancy for a scene.

The widow resenting thus being cut short became more than ever spiteful.

"Perhaps you can imagine, too, the pretty little meetings that used to take place down here between your wife and her lover!"

“Lover!—what lover?”

“A man rejoicing in the very unromantic name of Jabez!—the name’s as ugly as himself.”

“Jabez?—why, he was her brother. Hilda told me so.”

“I gave Hilda credit for more sense—and who told her, pray?”

“Her husband. He had it from Miriam herself. Funny part of it is she never told me.”

“Bah—lies, lies—all lies. The woman’s a thorough bad lot, Gerald, and you did the wisest day’s work you ever did when you left her. The man was her lover I tell you—a part of her former slum life. Don’t you tell *me*. Left her? I should think you did leave her!”

“Well, then, Julia, let’s be content with that. You’ve thoroughly upheld my action—very thoroughly I must say, which is of course quite right.”

“Oh, you men, what fools you are! At all events I did give *you* credit for *some* taste—”

“Yes, I’m generally considered a man of taste. Hitherto I’ve not had much money to indulge it; but that’s not my fault.”

“Carrotty hair and freckles, and a figure bobbing out where it should go in, and sinking into a great hole where it should bob out, and feet! Well—”

“Oh, come, that’ll do, Julia—that’ll do. I ought to be well posted in my wife’s points by this time. I’ve left her I tell you for good and all, and she’s got her own income, and—”

“Got—her—own—income! What in the name of common-sense do you mean, boy?”

It was so naïve of Julia to invoke common-sense.

“Exactly what I say. She has three hundred a year under this will.”

“Three hundred—!” she gasped.

For the moment it was all she could do. A whiff at her ammonia brought her round.

“You mean to tell me that Uncle Barton left this woman an income equal to mine—equal—to—mine?”

“Certainly.”

It is difficult to say what would eventually have happened to Mrs. Darrow if a knock at the front door had not then brought her face to face with another and even more stern reality. She gave a hasty peep through the window. What she saw had an effect homœopathic in principle, though it certainly was not so in dose. It was surprise upon surprise—like curing like. What she had seen was the figure of Mrs. Parsley, and with the sight had come a great calm over her. For she hated Mrs. Parsley more than she hated anyone at the present moment.

“Oh, my dear,” she said, as the vicar’s wife entered the room, “I *am* so delighted—this *is* a surprise. How *are* you?”

“It’s easy to see there’s not much the matter with *you*,” returned her visitor, in her most aggressive manner.

“Indeed I am *very* ill,” said Mrs. Darrow, in the faintest of faint voices, “if you only felt my pulse. I can hardly speak, it is so weak.”

“Rubbish—*that* day’ll never dawn. It’s liver that’s the matter with you. Liver, my dear—torpid liver. Too much to eat and too little to do!”

Mrs. Darrow felt that something within her must give if this kind of thing went on.

“I don’t know how you can speak like that,” she said. “I don’t know I have a liver.”

“Of course you don’t—if you did you’d be more careful of it. But here, *you*—” She placed both of her sinewy hands upon her enormous green umbrella, and brought it down with a thud in front of Gerald. “It’s *you* I really came to see. I heard that you were here. Nothing escapes *me* in this village. Where is your wife?”

“She appears to have escaped you, Mrs. Parsley—she is in town!”

“Then she oughtn’t to be. Why haven’t you brought her down here to share your good fortune? She should be at the Manor House beside you.”

“I am shutting up the Manor House. I’m going abroad in a week.”

“Is that her doing or yours?”

“Mine. Perhaps I had better tell you at once that my wife and I have agreed to differ. We are not living together for the present.”

“That means you’ve been doing something—what is it?”

“I assure you he has been doing nothing,” put in Mrs. Darrow, “except what is right. He has been very badly treated. Don’t you know that—”

“Mrs. Parsley knows nothing, nor is it necessary she should,” said Gerald rising. “What has occurred between my wife and myself concerns us only.”

“Humph!” grunted Mrs. Parsley. “And where is Hilda, may I ask?”

Gerald flushed. He knew what she meant to insinuate.

“Mrs. Dundas is with her husband at Brampton, I believe,” he replied.

“And you’re going abroad?—well, that’s as it should be.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Gerald. He felt he was on rather rocky ground, and didn’t altogether like it. He turned to Julia. “I must be going now,” he said. “I’ll see you again in a month or two. If I come across anything pretty in Paris I’ll send it over. Good-bye.”

“Humph!” grunted Mrs. Parsley again. “Good-bye. Just a word with you, Julia. I must be off too.”

“Julia!”

“Well, I’ve known you for thirty-five years. I suppose I can call you by your name.”

In earnest whereof Mrs. Parsley again thumped the floor with her “gamp.”

Gerald hurried away, Mrs. Darrow following him to the door.

“Not a word to anyone about Miriam,” he whispered. “And see that Dicky holds his tongue. Mind, you know what depends on it!”

“I believe he’s got a sneaking kind of feeling for her still,” thought the widow, as she returned to the little drawing-room. Mrs. Parsley was seated in an attitude quite characteristic of her—her chin resting on her hands, and her hands clutching the handle of her huge umbrella. She came to business at once.

“I want you to take the Sunday School for a fortnight, Julia—I’m going up to town.”

“Oh, the Sunday School gives me a headache,” protested Mrs. Darrow, who had no notion of obliging her enemy. “I haven’t taught for years.”

“Time you began then. Lady Dane has promised to take a class.”

“Lady Dane!” Mrs. Darrow, like Tommy Moore, dearly loved a lord, and the prospect of teaching in the same room as an earl’s daughter was irresistibly attractive. “Well, I’ll do what you wish, Mrs. Parsley. I’m sure I’m the most unselfish woman in the world.”

“Then that’s all right,” sniffed the vicar’s wife. “I thought Lady Dane would fix it. If she isn’t above it, I don’t think you should be.”

“I’m always ready to take my share of the parish work,” said Julia. Then her curiosity began to assert itself. “What are you going up to town for?”

Mrs. Parsley waxed more amiable, and rubbed the tip of her nose.

“Well, my dear, I don’t mind telling you I’m worried a good deal. I’m sorry to say Gideon Anab hasn’t turned out quite what I expected. The scamp’s been spending the money I gave him for his heathen companions on himself, so I’m just going up to see about it.”

“You shouldn’t trust such creatures. He was a vile boy that.”

“He’ll be a sore boy when I get hold of him. I hear he lives at Lambeth, in a horrid slum, with his grandmother. She’s called Mother Mandarin. Odd name, isn’t it?”

Julia pricked up her ears. She had heard the name before. She remembered distinctly hearing it mentioned by Jabez to Miriam. Even after that space of time her memory wasn't likely to fail her regarding anything detrimental to Mrs. Arkel.

"I think you'll find Miriam can tell you something about that old lady."

"Miriam? What does she know about her?" asked Mrs. Parsley sharply.

"That's more than I can tell you," replied Mrs. Darrow. "I know I heard her mention the name, because it struck me as such a curious one."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Parsley to herself. To Julia she said no more on the subject. She knew how she hated Miriam, and was not therefore reliable in anything she had to say about her. She determined to find out for herself, nevertheless, how much Miriam knew concerning the grandmother of the wicked Gideon Anab.

"What has Gerald Arkel quarrelled with his wife about?" she asked.

"That I can't tell you either," replied Mrs. Darrow, "except that it was something pretty bad."

"Anything to do with Hilda Dundas?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, don't be violent, my dear, don't be violent. I thought there might be something of that sort. Hilda's not the kind of young lady to take a loss of this sort lightly. Gerald was in love with her remember before he married. He has quarrelled with his wife now, and Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do."

"I don't understand you at all," said Mrs. Darrow testily.

"No? Perhaps you will in time, my dear," and the vicar's wife marched out of the room.

It was not long before Mrs. Darrow did understand. For, within a month, it was common talk in Lesser Thorpe that Hilda Dundas had eloped to the Continent with Gerald Arkel.

Chapter VIII

Mrs. Parsley Sees A Ghost

One afternoon, some twelve months later, Miriam sat sewing in the drawing-room of the little flat at Rosary Mansions. The work she had in hand was a nether garment intended for old Mother Mandarin, whom for long past she had been trying to reform. But Mother Mandarin did not want to be reformed, though she sadly wanted nether garments. The only wants to which she confessed—which indeed she expressed—were gin, tobacco, and what she termed “blunt,” this latter being her playful way of referring to the coin of the realm. For years she had inhabited her den in the Lambeth slums, where she was wont to receive all sorts and conditions of men—Lascars, Chinamen, and Europeans of every nationality. At eighty-five she was not inclined for learning any new tricks, and though Miriam—now on outside charity bent, it having of necessity ceased at home—did everything she knew to bring her to a sense of what was right and decent in life, Mother Mandarin was not to be roused to any degree of enthusiasm. Cleanly ways were not her ways, and her ways for the last five-and-eighty years had been good enough for her.

Still Miriam continued to persevere, choosing this neighbourhood for her work because it was known to her, and because more than any other neighbourhood it appeared to her to be crying out in misery for help. It held so many who seemed hopelessly bogged in the mire of the great city, and the thought that she had succeeded in persuading some few of these young men and women to a better life, was the greatest possible solace to her in her own trouble. And so she came to be known in the purlieus of the Archiepiscopal palace almost as well as that venerable building itself.

She felt very lonely at this time. The ingratitude and utter heartlessness of Gerald had come upon her as a blow from which she seemed wholly unable to recover. Since his flight with Hilda she had received no word from him save one short message from Paris to the effect that she was quite at liberty to divorce him if she choose. But against this she held out firmly, although Dundas, who was less rigid in his views, did his best to persuade her to grasp the opportunity. He himself had done so long since, and had of course experienced no difficulty in the doing of it. But Miriam remained firm on the point. And the worthy Major felt this hard

to bear, for it closed his mouth effectually, and obliged him to refrain from asking the one question in the world he longed to ask. He could only live in hope that his constancy would tell, and that in the end she would give way. He sought what consolation he could in his profession. He withdrew from all social life, lived quietly on his income, and devoted himself body and soul to his work, striving thereby to drive into abeyance the one great longing of his life. For he loved Miriam Crane as he verily believed man never loved woman in this world before.

From the lawyers to the estate Miriam received her income regularly, and seeing that it had been left her by Barton himself, and in nowise entrenched upon her husband's moneys, she had no compunction in taking it. From Gerald she would have starved rather than accept a penny. She heard of him from time to time, and of the gay life he and Hilda were leading at various pleasure resorts on the Continent. They were, from all accounts, spending money lavishly and wallowing in what to them was the enjoyment of life. They neither of them possessed either heart or conscience to mar their happiness. They gratified every whim, and achieved at length complete satiety of the world, its pleasures—and themselves.

Furious indeed had been Dr. and Mrs. Marsh when they heard of their daughter's elopement, and still more furious when it became known to them that the two were passing under Hilda's maiden name. But righteous and deeply rooted as was their indignation, taking many divers forms in its expression, it did not take the particular form which might have made for a cessation of the income allowed them by the partner of their daughter's lapse from virtue. For in truth it was not so much the lapse from virtue itself which they deplored, as the consequent and inevitable social fall which it entailed. Never for one moment did it strike them that they themselves had been in any way to blame. They had sold her to the highest bidder—indeed they had helped no little in the bidding—and they had received and were still receiving the price. It was she who had played her cards so badly. So they looked at it. But gradually they were forced to realise that so Lesser Thorpe did not look at it: for Lesser Thorpe well knew their present source of income. And ere long the little community showed so very plainly how it felt that, with many regrets, Dr. and Mrs. Marsh decided to seek a cooler climate.

This they eventually found in a small market town on the borders of Wales, where the doctor—he had contrived to save a certain amount of Gerald Arkel's money—purchased a small practice, and commenced to thrive. And as they throve, so, slowly and by degrees, did these good people turn their backs upon their fallen daughter, and more slowly and by smaller degrees upon the man who had brought about her downfall. And henceforth, since they pass out of this story, we may turn our backs on them.

Miriam stitched away at Mother Mandarin's nether garment until a knock came to the door. She started as she heard it, because visitors were few and far between with her now, and so much trouble had come upon her that she was apprehensive of more. She waited to see who it was. Then the door was thrown open, and Jabez was shown in—not the Jabez jaunty and of gay attire whom last she had seen, but the Jabez she had known of old—Jabez come assuredly to ask for alms. Added to his otherwise dejected appearance he seemed to her to be completely broken down in health. Instantly all that great fount of pity in her was touched. She had not seen him since the time when in that same room he had come face to face with Major Dundas, and she had been forced to confess her relationship with him. She waited for him to speak. The words of welcome would not come.

“As usual you prefer my room to my company,” he said, with a scowl, throwing himself down on the sofa.

“I am so surprised—I—I haven't seen you for a year or more, you must remember.”

“And you would rather I'd made it two I've no doubt.”

“I've never given you cause to speak like that,” she answered. “I made inquiries about you—I felt anxious. But they did tell me at Mother Mandarin's that they had seen nothing of you. I concluded you must have left the country again.”

“So I did. That Major of yours nearly spotted me last time I was here. I thought I'd better skip.”

“Yes, he did spot you, as you call it,” replied Miriam quietly. “But I persuaded him to leave you alone. I had some difficulty. But when I told him our relationship he consented.”

“Damn! if I’d known that I wouldn’t have skipped. Why the devil didn’t you let me know?”

“How could I? I couldn’t find you. Where have you been?”

“Oh, back to the Cape—cleared out there two days after you saw me. I didn’t think it was good enough to run any risks.”

“Do you still call yourself Maxwell?”

“No—chucked it for another.”

“I see,” she said sorrowfully, “you are in low water again.”

“I swear I’m the most unfortunate man on God’s earth,” he whined. “I started square enough out there, and made a tidy pile. You saw for yourself last time I was pretty flush. Well, as I told you, I left my pal to look after our claim while I did a scamper round, and what did the devil do but clear out to America with the whole swag. That cleaned me out, and I had to start all afresh. But every blessed thing I touched went wrong, till I got so sick of it that I scraped what I could together, and here I am. You’ll give me a lift-up, Miriam, for the last time?”

“All my life I have been doing that, Jabez, and each time has been the last, hasn’t it? But it is more difficult for me to help you now; you see—”

“Oh, I know all about it—that husband of yours has cleared out with another woman. But I don’t see you’re so much the worse for that. You’ve got your income from the old man! ‘Fact, I reckon you’ve done pretty well for yourself!”

“I am glad you think so,” she said bitterly. “Further than as a kind of banker, an orange to be squeezed, you will never understand what I am. Of what my life has been you can have no idea. You are utterly heartless, brutally callous.”

“Oh, stow all that preaching, Miriam, and come to the point.”

“That means how much have I got, I suppose? Understand then, Jabez, once for all, this is the last money I give you, and I give it you on one condition only—that you never come near me again!”

“Oh, all right, no need to bother about that. How much is it?”

“Thirty pounds is all I have.”

“Lord! what do you do with it all?—you never seem to have much about you. Wonder I do come near you—it’s not worth it I’m sure.”

His tone had roused her.

“You worthless scoundrel,” she said, “to speak to me like that after all I have done for you. There is not one woman in a thousand but would have turned her back on you long since—criminal that you are!”

“Should advise you to drop that! If it comes to who’s the criminal there’s not much to choose between us anyway. How about thieving, eh?—who stole old Barton’s will? Oh, I know all about *you*, my lady. Why, Shorty saw you do the whole trick.”

“I think not,” she answered. She had herself well in hand again now. “I fancy you’ll find it was Mrs. Darrow he saw.”

“Not a bit of it. He saw *you* right enough. That was all kid his yarn to the Major to squeeze a fiver out of him.”

“I have no wish to hear any details of you and your associates’ abominable blackmailing schemes. Anything I have done I am not ashamed of. At all events you are the last man who has a right to taunt me with it.”

“I don’t want to taunt you,” he replied, changing his tone. “There’s nothing of the saint about me I know. What we are, we are: we’re much of a muchness, I suppose.”

“I should be sorry if it were so,” she said. “However, the less said between you and me the better. We are long past words. Wait here and I will bring you the money, and I trust you will go to some other country and remain there. It is not too late even now for you to make at all events an independence for yourself.”

When she had left the room he ran over the position in his mind. She seemed in no way surprised at, and not to care in the least for, what he had told her. He was very much afraid that dodge would not work. She knew the Major, too, and the Major certainly knew him, and altogether he came to the conclusion that this was a case where a little oil was likely to be more efficacious than a large amount of force.

“All right,” he said, as she returned with the notes. “I’ll go, as you’re so mighty anxious to get rid of me. But if I do make another pile you’ll be sorry. And take my advice, Miriam, and don’t get trying your hand at ‘light-finger’ work, or you mayn’t come off so well next time, and then you mustn’t expect any help from me, you know.”

“Leave the house, you brute,” she cried, losing all control of herself for the moment, “or I’ll send this moment for Major Dundas, and hand you over to him.”

“What do I care for you and your bully?” he retorted, laughing somewhat uneasily. But he put on his dilapidated hat, nevertheless, and swaggered out into the hall.

In the street the meaning of her words came back upon him with even greater force, and with all the speed he was capable of he made for Mother Mandarin’s—the only hole in the vast city where he felt secure.

Left alone Miriam shed a few tears. In truth it seemed she was the very sport of Fortune. Was it never to end—this torment of her life? She hungered so for love and peace. All through she had striven to do right, to benefit in every way those around her, and how had she fared? The words of Queen Mary came to her mind:—

*“Mother of God,
Thou knowest woman never meant so well
Or fared so ill in this disastrous world.”*

How well they applied to her. It all seemed so dark. There was no sign of dawn. Yet she did not lose hope. Her faith in God was infinite.

Within a few minutes of her brother’s departure Mrs. Parsley called. There was a thick fog outside, and from time to time the rain managed to pierce it. Against such elements Mrs. Parsley was well protected by

mackintosh, umbrella, and the thickest boots. Thus arrayed she was not a comely vision. But underneath that gutta-percha sheeting there beat a heart of gold—a heart worthy all protection. During the past year her visits to Miriam had been frequent, for she sympathised with her deeply. The younger woman had laid her whole life bare to her, even to her connection with Mother Mandarin and Jabez and old Barton.

Gideon Anab, alias Shorty, was still a sore point with Mrs. Parsley. She had learned through him a very wholesome lesson—that charity was but a business after all, and like most other businesses, if left to go its own way, was apt to go all wrong. Thus convinced she had taken all further charitable operations under her own immediate supervision, with the result that for three days out of the week she was obliged to come to London, and then she was only too glad to make the flat in Kensington her headquarters.

“How glad I am to see you,” said Miriam, taking her unlovely visage between her two hands and kissing her. “But, my dear Mrs. Parsley, how pale you look!”

The old lady had thrown off her impermeable chrysalis, and had emerged therefrom a very sober fritillary.

“Pale?—of course I’m pale. I’ve seen a ghost I tell you—the ghost of a man I thought dead years ago.”

“Where?”

“Outside—just round the corner here. He seemed to be following some miserable, red-headed, out-at-elbows creature. They were both walking fast. But the man I mean—the ghost—is a tall, pale, thin fellow, with eyes like burning coals. I believe I saw him once at Thorpe, but I was not sure at the time if it was he. But I’m sure now. He was wearing a soft hat and a black cloak—”

“The shadow!” exclaimed Miriam, “it must be!”

“Shadow, my dear! Well, shadow or ghost I know him. His name is Farren. He’s the man who ran away with your husband’s mother thirty years ago!”

Chapter IX

More Trouble

“Farren—Farren!” repeated Miriam thoughtfully, “yes, now I remember the name. Mr. Barton told me the whole story, how he bribed him to go to Australia and break off with Gerald’s mother, and how in revenge she made mischief between Mr. Barton and the girl he was engaged to.”

“Bribed him?” Mrs. Parsley rubbed her nose thoughtfully—a sure sign with her that she was puzzled. “I don’t know so much about the bribing, although that was the story Barton told. Flora Barton had five hundred a year of her own, and Farren was deeply in love with her—no, I fancy it took something more than bribery to make him leave the woman and exile himself like that. I’m pretty sure Barton must have known something about the man’s life, and so had him in his power.”

“But this Farren, I suppose, was a man of position and reputation in those days, wasn’t he, Mrs. Parsley?”

“My dear, he hadn’t a rag of reputation—not a rag. He gambled terribly, and led a most dissipated life; all he did was just to keep on the safe side of the law.”

“And you think now he hadn’t even done that always?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Parsley, “that is my idea; as I have told you, I saw the man once at Lesser Thorpe, although, not being able to get a good look at him, I couldn’t be sure it was he. Now if it *was*, Barton was the only man whom he could have come to see in our parish, and you’d think he’d be glad to keep out of his way.”

“That of course I don’t know; but that you are right and Mr. Barton *did* have some hold over this man, I do know, because he told me so himself.” Whereupon Miriam gave Mrs. Parsley a succinct account of the use made by Barton of the man he called the “Shadow.”

“Humph!” remarked the old lady, seeing the possibilities of the situation. “So Barton got Farren to hunt down your brother, did he? and just now Mr. Farren was very busy following a red-haired man who came from the direction of these Mansions. Putting two and two

together, my dear, I should say you had received a visit from your brother.”

Miriam was astonished at her accomplishment in the way of deduction. She tried not to betray herself.

“How do you make that out?” she asked.

“The man Farren was following had very striking auburn hair—very much like your own. Come now, it was Jabez, wasn’t it?”

“Yes; since you know so much, I may as well admit the truth—it was. After his recognition a year ago by Major Dundas Jabez returned to the Cape. There he found that his partner had sold their claim, and had levanted with the proceeds. The result is he returns here with nothing in his pocket, and once again throws himself on me.”

“Of course—exactly,” said Mrs. Parsley grimly. “I know the breed. And how much did you give him?”

“Thirty pounds—it was all I had. But I made him promise never to trouble me again. Yes; and he agreed. He’s going to America.”

“Agreed! My dear, in spite of all your troubles, you are as innocent as a baby. The only way you’ll ever get rid of that man is to tell the truth and have him put in gaol. Promises! Bah! *His* promises! He’ll not go to America, not he! He’ll spend the thirty pounds and come back for more, that’s what *he’ll* do, and you’ll have him like a black dog on your shoulders all your life, unless—” Mrs. Parsley rubbed her nose.

“Unless what?”

“Well, my dear, to tell you the truth, I’m not exactly clear in my own mind as to the position. This Farren knows what Jabez has done, since Barton employed him to find it out. Now that Barton is dead, and Farren we may safely say is hard up, I rather fancy your thirty pounds’ll go in blackmail. Or else Jabez, to escape the other man’s clutches, will make for the States after all.”

“Oh, I only hope he does. It would be awful if, after so long, he were to be given up to the police—you don’t think really that will happen, Mrs. Parsley, do you?”

“Depends entirely, I should say, on his willingness to be bled. But anyhow I don’t see why you should mind, my dear.”

“Oh, Mrs. Parsley, whatever Jabez has done—whatever he is, he is my brother.”

“Humph! There is a limit even to fraternal affection to my thinking. Jabez is a bad, bad man, and all your goodness won’t turn him into a good one. While he has you to fall back upon he will never do any good for himself. Leave him to Farren’s clutches, my dear, and let the pair of them kick it out in the mud.”

“But if Jabez gets into trouble his real name will become known. Then think of the disgrace to me.”

“Fiddle-de-dee; nobody can disgrace you but your own self. Besides, if the name of Jabez Crane does appear in the police report, who’s going to connect it with you? There are hundreds of Cranes in the world.”

“Mrs. Darrow, Major Dundas.”

“What, that Julia creature?” Mrs. Parsley snapped her fingers. “My love, her opinion is not worth *that*. She has all the instincts but none of the brains of a really bad woman. As to Major Dundas, what can he know more than he knows already?”

“He doesn’t know everything.”

“Well I do,” snapped Mrs. Parsley, “and there is nothing for *you* to be ashamed of that I can see. If there was, do you think I’d be sitting here? I approve of all you have done—yes, even to taking that will. I wish you had burnt it. And yet I don’t know—” she added. “No; then you wouldn’t have got rid of that idiot. After all, things are best as they are. Leave those two to themselves, my dear, and they’ll finish each other sooner or later—sooner rather than later I fancy; though she’ll manage to come out ‘on top’ as the Americans say—d’you know, I do like the Americans, dear!”

“But I really believe Hilda loves him—in fact, sometimes I think I was very wrong not to leave him to her.”

“Loves him! Rubbish! It’ll be a day with more than twenty-four hours in it when Hilda loves anyone but herself. Bless me, I believe you’ve a hankering after that man still. What you saw in him I never could make out.”

“Sometimes I think he must have fascinated me—that it could not really be love I felt for him but pity. I saw how it was with him, and thought that I could save him.”

“Save him! Strikes me, Miriam, you’ve gone through your life looking upon yourself as a sort of human rocket apparatus. You can’t save people against their wills, my dear; and some of ‘em won’t be saved. Look at Shorty—and that Gerald Arkel is a pig if ever there was one. He prefers his own dunghill—that’s vulgar perhaps, my dear, but it’s expressive, and that’s the great thing! Anyhow, I do hope you’ve got over all that sort of thing now, Miriam, because I have news of the scamp.”

“News of Gerald?—Oh, Mrs. Parsley, he is not ill—not dead?”

The old lady snorted.

“Dead. No, my dear, ‘naught was never in danger.’ He’s alive and sinning. But he’s alone! Hilda has left him!”

“Hilda—left—Gerald?”

“Yes; is it so utterly impossible? Come, my dear, I don’t deny he’s good looking, but there *are* other men in the world you know. They’ve been going it properly, I can tell you. The Manor House is mortgaged—that I could have told you three months ago; in fact, now she’s spent his money for him, he has ceased to be so far as she is concerned, and she hasn’t lost much time in nominating his successor either—she’s gone off with an American millionaire. What d’you think of that? They’re in Florence, I believe.”

“Poor Gerald,” she said slowly. “He has reaped his whirlwind.”

“And why not; he sowed it, goodness knows. You don’t mean to tell me you pity him? There!—I do believe I’m right, you—no!—you wouldn’t go to the fellow now?”

“Only if he were ill—if he were dying would I go to him. When he left me that night in this very room, I told him when I saw him again it would be on his death-bed. When the end comes I shall be there.”

Mrs. Parsley rose and kissed her. She could not but admire deep down in her soul the unswerving steadfastness of this woman. It touched her more than anything in life had touched her for years past; for she had a very tender heart had Mrs. Parsley.

“You are a silly fool, my dear,” she said, “a great big silly donkey. We are both silly donkeys, I believe, when it comes to the point. But after the way that man’s insulted you—well, most women would have liked to dance a polka on his grave.”

“You wouldn’t—if he had been *your* husband.”

“P’r’aps not—but although I said I was a donkey, not in my most asinine moments would I have gone as far as that. Gerald Arkel should never have been *my* husband. And if he had, that hussy would never have got him—that I swear! But you, dear, you’ve just been soft soap in their hands; you’re so good-natured and gentle and sweet, that I could—but there, I love you for it all the more.”

So saying, Mrs. Parsley expressed her affection in a warm embrace, and seeing it was hurtful to her friend, changed the subject.

She was never at a loss for a topic. There were all sorts of parochial and urban schemes to be discussed, among the latter a new home for strayed street boys, which the good lady had established in one of the Lambeth lanes. She was now well known in that neighbourhood, and though she had her people under well nigh despotic rule, was none the less beloved on that account. Even the recalcitrant Mother Mandarin yielded to her. As for the street boys, who were her especial care, she had banged so many of their heads together, that they now no longer swore at her so much as they swore by her. By sheer persistence and strength to enforce her commands, she had brought about a cleansing nothing short of

Augean. Her sway was absolute as that of any Cæsar—her methods every whit as drastic and vastly more beneficial.

“Do you know I had rather a shock last week, Miriam?” said Mrs. Parsley, rubbing her nose.

“Did you; how?”

“Well, that wretched Gideon Anab—no, he shan’t be called Gideon Anab since he has fallen away from grace—that wretched Shorty has gone back to live with his disreputable old grandmother!”

“You don’t say so; and where has he been all this time?”

“Somewhere in Whitechapel, I believe. I know he went off last year with five pounds of my money. I’m disappointed in that boy, Miriam. I thought his instincts were good, and that if he had the chance he’d rise. But he hasn’t; he’s taken a rise out of me instead!”

“The young vagabond he wants a good flogging.”

“No good, my dear. Take my word for it, when they’re past me they’re past everything. However, he has promised a lot now, and we’re going to begin over again, Miriam, my dear, for the last time. But I haven’t told you what really gave me the shock. How old do you think the wretch is?”

“Oh, I don’t know; about sixteen.”

“He’s twenty-three! You may well stare. It’s perfectly true. Not that he hasn’t wickedness for ninety-nine; still, even now I don’t despair of him. I’ll lead him to the stool of repentance yet, if I have to lead him by the ear.”

“I rather think that’s about the only way you’ll ever lead him in that particular direction,” said Miriam drily.

Mrs. Parsley rubbed her nose with more than her usual vigour. Miriam waited, taking it as an infallible sign that there was more to come. The old lady looked troubled and embarrassed.

“Of course,” she began, “the boy’s an awful liar; still—” she hesitated.

“Oh, do go on, please.”

“Yes; I think you ought to know. Well, Shorty, amongst other things, has had a fit—don’t be alarmed, dear, on his account, he’s all right—the devil looks after his own—a fit of repentance, or what stands for such with him. Anyway, he’s been confessing certain facts which are rather serious for your brother Jabez. It appears he saw him hanging round the Manor House on that Christmas night—in fact, he saw him in the library with Barton.”

“I don’t believe it,” cried Miriam vehemently. “Why, I had that letter from him from London—”

“Exactly, my dear; but you saw him afterwards at Southampton remember. The fact is, Shorty hints pretty plainly that Jabez killed Mr. Barton! and although it’s terribly painful to me to say, all things considered, it does look very like it. You know, dear, it can be no surprise to us to learn that he is capable of murder.”

“No; I know. What can I say—it may be so; yes, it may be so. But, dear Mrs. Parsley, I don’t believe it is, I really don’t. I saw him in Southampton it is true, but—oh, I don’t know what to say. What shall I do?”

“Do? There’s nothing for you to do. Only if Jabez is wise he’ll clear out, that’s all. You see, dear, if this is the truth, and he know it, we can’t condone it. He must be got away. That’s his only chance. In an affair of this kind his past life would handicap him greatly, you mustn’t forget that.”

“Would to God that I could.”

“Well, well, you must keep calm, Miriam dear; it was best I should tell you. We’ll do nothing hastily. We’ll see Major Dundas first. Only you see my position. If this boy persists in what he says, he’ll have to be taken to the police—there’s no help for it.”

“No—I see.” She seemed completely stunned by this fresh blow.

Mrs. Parsley rose to go.

“Now, Miriam dear, just turn things quietly over in your own mind—I must go before it gets any later, I’ve lots of things to do, and I want very much to catch the five o’clock. There’s nothing to worry about for the moment. Only we must act rightly and circumspectly, that’s all. You know, dear, I would not be the one to bring more trouble upon you. I want to lighten what exists. Now don’t be silly, there’s a dear girl.” Then she kissed her and hurried away.

From the window Miriam watched her slopping through the rain with her vigorous stride and her skirts half way up to her knees. She thought what a good creature she was—almost the only friend she had in the world; almost, because there was one other, whom she felt she could trust with her life. He would surely help her now, as he had always been ready to help her in the past.

Sick at heart she returned to her chair by the fire, and meditated on this new trouble which threatened her. And the more she thought the more bewildered she seemed to become. A knock at the door roused her. Would that girl ever learn to answer the bell within five minutes of its being rung? At last her mind was put at rest, for the Major, looking very much himself, was shown into the room.

“I’ve come to see if you’ll take pity on me, Mrs. Arkel,” he said, “so far as to give me a morsel of dinner. I’ve taken what the Scotch call a ‘scunner’ at my club.”

“Of course I will, though I fear it will be little more than a morsel,” replied Miriam. “Put your hat and coat in the hall—I’m so glad you’ve come.”

This was sweet music to the Major’s ears. But he noticed she seemed nervous and not quite herself.

“Nothing wrong, I hope,” he said.

“Yes, indeed; very little’s right,” sighed Miriam, “but you mustn’t tempt me to begin pouring my troubles into your ears directly you enter the door.”

“Your troubles are mine, Mir—”

“Oh, I know how good you are; that’s why I hate to worry you.”

“Now, come along, sit down and tell me all about it.”

“No; not till after dinner. It will keep; but just that you may know why I look worried, I may tell you that Jabez has been here again this afternoon.”

“Oh! the same old errand I suppose?”

“Yes; he wanted money. I gave him what I could.”

“Well, that ended the matter, didn’t it? My dear Mrs. Arkel, I do wish you’d let me deal with this scamp of a brother of yours. You see, I know all about him, and he wouldn’t—”

“All? I’m afraid not even you know *all* about him?”

“Yes,” said Dundas emphatically. “All; even to the fact that he is at this moment wanted on a charge of murder!”

Chapter X The Major’s Point Of View

Although for long Miriam had felt convinced that Major Dundas knew considerably more about her brother’s life than he had any intention of acquainting her with, the force with which he drove home those last words completely terrorised her. Coming as they did immediately on the top of what Mrs. Parsley had told her, they, to her mind, conveyed only one meaning—that her brother was known now as the murderer of Mr. Barton, and as such would assuredly have to pay the penalty of his crime. She could not conceal the alarm she felt, and as she leaned back in her chair pale to the lips, her throat seemed almost to close, and her heart to stop with nervous dread. With quick indrawn breath she waited for his next words. They were words of comfort.

“Mrs. Arkel,” he said, “I fear I have alarmed you. Believe me, you can trust in me. What I have just told you I knew a year ago. If I did not have your brother arrested then you need not fear that I shall do so now. He is safe from me—for your sake.”

She was puzzled. It could not have been then to the murder of Mr. Barton he had referred after all. He could not have known about that a year ago. He must have meant that other—that terrible crime which had so overshadowed her life during all these years, and of the consequences of which to Jabez she had lived in daily dread. She took for granted that it was so.

“I know—I know,” she said, “and I can never thank you for your forbearance. But, indeed, the charge against my unfortunate brother was not one of murder—it was manslaughter.”

Dundas paused before replying.

“I am afraid,” he said, a trifle drily, “that you will find the verdict of the coroner’s jury leaves no room for misunderstanding on that point; still, there is of course the chance that after all this time—it is six years ago you remember—I may be mistaken.”

“Do you know all the facts of the case, Major?”

“Surely. The affair made a great stir in my regiment at the time. You see your brother had shown very soon after enlisting that he was a man of ungovernable temper, and no amount of discipline seemed to have any effect upon him. He was punished again and again for his insubordination. At last after punishment more than usually severe he deserted, and for a long time, in spite of the most careful search, he eluded capture. When in the end they did find him it was in London, and he was arrested by four men and a sergeant. He surrendered so quietly that the sergeant foolishly omitted to handcuff him. The hour was late and the street ill-lighted. He attempted escape. The sergeant snatched a bayonet from the musket of one of the men, and as he did so Crane closed with him and stabbed him to the heart, and then managed to get clean away. The whole affair, I suppose, was the work of a few seconds. They chased him as far as the river, and he was seen to throw himself in. Then they appear to have abandoned him, and he has not since been heard of. I think these are the facts exactly, are they not, Mrs. Arkel?”

“From one point of view, yes; but Jabez has always declared that the sergeant tried to stab *him*, and that he snatched the bayonet from him in self-defence only. In the struggle that ensued the sergeant was stabbed, true, but the act was defensive on Jabez’ part, not aggressive. That I

really believe is the truth, in which case of course it would be manslaughter and not murder.”

“Your brother naturally makes out the best possible case for himself. But the evidence of the men went to prove conclusively that the act was deliberate. At all events he funked trial, and the coroner’s verdict was one of wilful murder.”

“Yes, I know he did. It was marvellous how he escaped, and afterwards he was afraid to give himself up. How he managed, good swimmer as he was, to keep himself afloat in that surging stream, was always inexplicable to him himself—sheer force of despair, I suppose. However, he did manage it, and eventually found shelter at Mother Mandarin’s.”

“Who is this Mother Mandarin?”

“She is an old woman who keeps an opium den in Lambeth. Her name came to her through her having been an orange-seller at one time. Jabez had among other vices contracted that of opium smoking, and he was a good customer of hers. Consequently when he rushed in soaking wet that night, and told her he was in danger, she took him in and concealed him. For months he remained there, not even the immediate neighbours knowing of his presence.”

“No—it was assumed he was drowned. The district was supposed to have been thoroughly searched, and absolutely no trace of him was found. I myself was of the same opinion until that day I saw him here.”

“How did you recognise him?”

“By the colour of his eyes and hair, and more particularly by the scar on his forehead. For a while I could not place him, though I was positive I knew the man. Then suddenly it flashed across me, and the identity of his name with yours struck me. You remember how startled you were? I concluded of course from the name that he must be some connection, but it never dawned upon me he was your brother. I can hardly describe to you what I felt when you told me.”

“Can you imagine what it was to me to have to tell you?”

“I know—don’t think of it now. It has all been very terrible—very horrible. And the worst of it is I fear there is more to come!”

She paled again, and looked up quickly.

“Is there something you are keeping from me? If so it would be kinder to tell me. I can bear anything now I think.”

The Major appeared nervous and ill at ease.

“Well, Mrs. Arkel, I feel in one way I ought to, and yet the subject is so very painful for both of us—”

“For both of us?”

“Surely you know how I feel—”

“Yes, yes; but tell me what you have in your mind.”

“Well, then, I am very much inclined to think that your brother killed my uncle.”

Miriam remained perfectly calm. She had fully expected this; but she felt secure from what he had said, that for her sake he would take no action.

“What reasons have you for thinking that?”

“Perhaps it is safer to call them suspicions. I have really no direct evidence, only I feel that between you and me, even on this terrible topic, absolute frankness is best. I admit that for long past I have not been able to dissociate in my mind the fact of your brother having been in Lesser Thorpe on Christmas Eve, and having been heard to threaten my uncle, from the fact of the old man having been murdered the following night. You may say it was pure coincidence—that it is mere conjecture on my part, based on the most fallible of circumstantial evidence; but I tell you candidly that if it had not been for you, I should have sifted that thing to the bottom long ago. As it was I preferred to leave it in the hands of the police.”

“What you say is perfectly true, and I, too, would rather we spoke quite freely on the subject, horrible as it is. I tell you that from the bottom of my heart I don’t believe that Jabez is guilty of this crime. But there is

another thing I must also tell you. Mrs. Parsley told me before she left to-day that the boy Shorty has recently made certain confessions in connection with Mr. Barton's murder, amongst them that he saw Jabez in the library that night—in fact, he accuses Jabez directly of the murder.”

“And even in the face of that you believe him innocent? My dear Mrs. Arkel, I confess I cannot. It requires only the least bit of evidence to confirm my suspicions. But I am glad you told me this, for it is serious.”

“You won't allow it to alter you? For my sake you won't—”

“For your sake I would do almost anything. I say almost, because there is just one thing I cannot do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, don't you see my position? If this evidence gets to the police it will mean immediate action on the part of some of the smartest detectives in London—in fact, everywhere additional particulars of your brother and this crime will be sent. Within a month he may be caught and within another month have to stand his trial! What happens then? Why, in all probability it will transpire, or out of sheer spite at me—for he bears me no love I can tell you—he will say how we met at your house, and how I, knowing well who he was, failed to give notice to the authorities, as I should have done for your sake. Think then of the position I am in—in fact, of the position we both are in!”

“My God!” she cried, “that must not be. You must run no risks. You must not consider me. Oh, if anything were to happen to you through this!—through me! If necessary you must act at once—you must give him up before this fresh charge comes.”

“First of all I think we had better inquire a little more closely into the value of this boy's evidence. He is an unscrupulous young liar, as I have already proved. Then we will act accordingly. Meanwhile, there is not the least need for you to alarm yourself. You can safely leave the whole affair in my hands. But there is something else I would like you to tell me if you will—that is, how, in the first instance, you came into contact with my uncle. I know partly it was through a governess agency, but somehow—I—I have often thought there was something more—

something that you would tell me of your own accord perhaps some day?”

“Yes,” she answered simply, “you are right, there is. And I had fully intended to tell you. Your friendship deserves—”

“Friendship, Miriam?”

“Let us call it that—it is best so. But before I can tell you exactly how I came to meet with Mr. Barton, I must tell you of my life before that time. It will not be pleasant hearing for you. It is terrible to me, even now, to go back to it, for it was a time of darkness and of deprivation, of absolute want, and of the most acute suffering, physical and mental.”

He looked at her with a whole world of pity in his eyes.

“Don’t, if it pains you so,” he said.

“Yes, it is but right you should know,” she replied simply. “I will begin at the beginning, and you shall judge of me for yourself. My father was, as I think I once told you, a sailor. For many years he was in command of a ship trading between London and China. We lived at Deal then, in our own house, with my mother, who was a most sweet and gentle woman, and devoted to us. But, alas, when I was only fifteen years of age she died, and I was left in charge of everything. Jabez was five years older than I, and for some time had occupied the position of clerk at a local bank. Even then he was violent tempered, and thoroughly idle, and given to affecting the lowest of company. My mother had adored him, as mothers always adore the scamp of the family. Yet she had not been wholly blind to the weakness of his nature. Indeed, she knew well that he would never withstand the temptations of the world, and on her death-bed she made me promise never to forsake him.”

“And I’m sure you’ve kept that promise,” said Dundas.

“God knows at what cost,” said Miriam. “It is no use my making light of the burden I then took up. It was a heavy one, and the bearing of it took all the brightness out of my youth. When my father came back he engaged a housekeeper, and sent me back to school where I remained three years. Jabez still lived at home, but he did not get on well with the housekeeper. She was not a nice woman—in fact, she made up her mind

she would marry my father, and I am sorry to say she succeeded. I returned from school to find myself a stranger in my own home. My father was a kindly man, but weak as water, and perfectly unable to deal with a woman like his wife. Jabez and she quarrelled constantly, and although I tried my best to keep peace I invariably got the worst of it, as peace-makers usually do.”

“True—true,” said Dundas, thinking of sundry family quarrels begun and continued by Mrs. Darrow, “I know that from my own experience.”

“With such a home you can easily guess how Jabez went from bad to worse. He took to staying out at night, to drink, to gamble, and to idle away his time. Then one day he took some of the bank funds and made off with them. My father was at home at the time, and by repaying the money immediately managed to hush it up, but he swore never again to receive Jabez or to regard him as his son. After a while I heard from him from London. He was without money, and unknown to anyone I sent him what I could. The next thing I heard was that he had enlisted. You know his life and doings during that period.

“Just then my father started off on what proved to be his last voyage, for he and all his crew were lost in a cyclone in the Chinese seas. No sooner did we receive the terrible news than my stepmother turned me out of the house.”

“But, my dear Mrs. Arkel, how was such a thing possible?”

“My father left everything to her—house, money, lands, everything. I was not so much as mentioned in his will. My stepmother told me plainly she had always hated me. For very shame she could not turn me out penniless, so she gave me fifty pounds. I took it, indeed, what else could I do? Besides the money was rightfully mine. But that was not the worst. Jabez’ misfortune happened about that time. I saw the whole thing in the papers, and I was in despair. Still what could I do? I was helpless. Next I heard from him that he was penniless, and in hiding, and asking me for money to enable him to leave England. I had fifty pounds; so I sent him half. I had to keep the rest until I got a situation as nursery governess. While I was in this place I heard of my stepmother’s marriage to a young sailor, then I knew that my father’s money was lost for ever.”

“How could your father make such a will?”

“He was weak, and this woman got the better of him. Besides, he believed naturally that she would look after me. It was shortly after hearing about the marriage that I again met Jabez. He had not left England but had spent the money. He found out my address from my stepmother, to whom he had written. She knew what he was, and she was always ready to do me an ill turn. At all events the result was he came to see me one day while I was in the Park with the children. Vice and poverty had set their marks on him, and he looked horrible. The children were frightened and complained when they came home, and I was dismissed.”

“But did you not explain that he was your brother?”

“I did. And the explanation made matters worse. The lady with whom I was said that she could not retain in her services anyone having a brother so disreputable. She took the trouble even to drive to the Institute and tell them about it. Consequently I could not get another situation. In despair, as my money was running low, I went to see Jabez at the address he had given me at Lambeth.”

“Ah, there you were wrong—you should have kept clear of him at all costs.”

“What else could I do?” said Miriam plaintively. “I was alone, and Jabez—bad as he was—was my brother, my sole living relative. I went to see him, to beg him to try and get some honest work under an assumed name. He was at Mother Mandarin’s”—she shuddered—“and for the first time I saw that awful den—it was like a glimpse of hell. Jabez would not go out and work, he was afraid of being recognised and arrested he said. So I shared what I had with him—I, oh—” Miriam covered her face with her hands. “How can I tell you the horrible life of those eighteen months!—the sufferings, the penury! I tried to get work—I walked into every registry office in London to hire myself out as a servant—but all in vain—my appearance was against me. They did not think my appearance was suitable. Everywhere I went it was the same thing. I applied at Nursing Institutes, at hospitals, but the authorities refused to take me without certificates of competency and respectability. My clothes got shabby—I could not buy more. Major Dundas, if you only knew what I suffered, what I did to keep the bread in the mouths of myself and Jabez!”

“The hound!” cried Dundas furiously, “and he wouldn’t work!”

“He was afraid of arrest. I sang in the chorus at a music-hall—I sang in the streets—I sold flowers—I—I—I begged on one occasion. Rung by rung I fell lower and lower. But I was still true to myself—I was still honest—I believed that one day God would end my martyrdom. It ended on the night I met Mr. Barton.”

“Where?”

“On Waterloo Bridge at midnight. We had been starving for days, and Jabez was seized with a fit of compunction. He went out with the boy Shorty to get food by fair means or by foul. He was desperate. I knew that he would stop at nothing that night, indeed I heard him say as much to Shorty. So I followed them. Mr. Barton came over the bridge. He had evidently lost his way in the fog. He stopped, asking Shorty to direct him. The boy, taking in his fur coat at a glance, saw at once that he was worth robbing. He called to Jabez, and the two of them set upon him, and half strangled him in the attempt to take his watch. I tried to stop them but it was no use. Jabez persisted. Then I climbed on to the parapet of the bridge, and threatened to throw myself into the river if he did not at once release Mr. Barton. He hesitated, and at that moment I heard the policeman coming. Jabez and Shorty took to their heels, and I helped Mr. Barton to his feet.

“The old man was considerably knocked about, but he was able to walk slowly to his hotel, where he insisted on my accompanying him, and on doing something for me to show his gratitude. Starving as I was I accepted his help only too gladly. It was the Pitt Hotel in Craven Street he took me to.

“After that he caused inquiries to be made about me, I believe, and the end of it was he took me down to Lesser Thorpe as governess to Dicky. The rest you know.”

“Good God!” cried Dundas, much agitated, “how you must have suffered!”

“Indeed I have; but in all my suffering I never lost my faith in God. Tell me, Major, you do not shrink from me now that you know?”

Trembling with emotion he took her hand.

“Miriam,” he said, “what you have told me has only confirmed the belief I had in you. You are a martyr, a saint.”

“Poor saint, I fear,” she said faintly.

“Dearest,” said the Major gravely, “in my eyes you are the noblest and best of women.”

She looked into his eyes. And as she did so she felt that all her suffering had not been in vain.

Chapter XI **In The Depths**

It was characteristic of John Dundas that after hearing Miriam’s story he was more than ever bent upon making her his wife. In so far as the chief traits of their respective dispositions were concerned, there was a good deal of similarity between the Major and Mrs. Parsley. Both were “big” in their way of looking at the more serious issues of life; both were inclined to ignore the smaller ones; both were generous, steadfast, and strong. Consequently, the free confession of what her past had been, which Miriam had made to each of them in turn, was attended with much the same result in either case—a strengthening rather than otherwise of their belief in and of their love for her.

And it must be confessed that there are many men who, while believing themselves to be ever so deeply in love with the woman of their choice, would still hesitate at marrying her in the face of the almost certain arrest and conviction of her brother for double murder. But not so this worthy soldier. His only qualm was lest she should on that account refuse to marry him when she was free to do so. And that time seemed very near at hand. News had come from Gerald in Paris.

“I am very ill,” he wrote, “in fact, they tell me I cannot last long.”

It was a pitiful letter. He begged his wife to forgive him; he had sinned, and sinned deeply against her he knew. Hilda had left him, and he craved that his wife should be with him when he died. As soon as there was the slightest chance of his being able to bear the journey, he was

coming to London. Would she receive him? Would she forgive? Would she stay beside him and soothe his last hours?

With such a woman as Miriam there was but one answer to this plea. The tears fell fast as she read.

There was only one thing of more importance to her now. Since it had been made clear to her that the safety of Jabez meant not the safety of Jabez alone, but the safety of John Dundas—meant indeed the upholding of his good name, she had made up her mind to act. If Jabez could be got right away before any official intimation could be given of this new charge against him, she felt convinced of his ability to evade capture. She determined that this must be her work. And it must be done too at once, before he should have opportunity of getting rid of much of the money she had given him.

She knew where to find him. The den of Mother Mandarin was no new ground to her, though she loathed the idea of going there. Strange that the night she chose for her errand should be just such a night as that on which she had met Mr. Barton. The fog was dense, almost as dense as it had been that night, and a thick drizzle was beginning to squeeze its way through it as she left the respectable portico of Rosary Mansions for the abode of vice and profligacy which sheltered her brother. In half an hour she was at Westminster Bridge. As she crossed over, the clock tower rang out nine.

Leaving the main thoroughfare she plunged into the network of lanes and alleys which thread the mass of miserable dwellings lying within a stone's-throw of the river. How familiar were those ways to her even now! How vividly she recalled the days of penury and misery when footsore and in despair she had trodden the stony pavements there! Every corner loomed up a landmark in her mind!

The unclean figures brushing past her in the darkness in no way scared her now. With a light and rapid step she turned down a lane which sloped to the river, and out on to a ruined wharf green with slime, red with dust. A sharp turn at the bottom of the lane brought her into a small court, now a mere vessel for the fog. Here the houses were all askew. Within them the ragged dwellers snarled and wrangled with each other for all the world like jackals over a carcass. Two or three struggling

gas lights managed to pierce the murky air. They served to save her from stumbling. Cautiously she groped her way toward an emaciated-looking building of three stories, its roof so pointed and so narrow as to admit of but one window on each floor. And even these were innocent of glass. They were stuffed with rags.

As she climbed the stairs a hubbub of laughter and of shouting met her ears. Foul as had been the atmosphere without it was more foul within. She had to grasp the filthy iron railing, for she felt an oppression at her chest. As she ascended the sounds died away. At last, panting, she reached the top storey. The door faced her. It was heavy and rudely bound with iron. Three times she knocked lightly. It swung open immediately. Mother Mandarin was in her den—or rather in her eyrie.

The place was still the same. She remembered it well—the square room, with its whitewashed walls, discoloured and scrawled over with vile words and viler caricatures; the great open brick fireplace in which, always smouldered a handful of fire; the filthy mattresses laid out at the far end, on which the customers were wont to sprawl and sleep; and pervading all, the mephitic atmosphere illumined dimly by the swinging petrol-lamp set in a bracket over the fireplace. A Lascar and a Chinaman were lying there like corpses, narcotised by the drug, and dreaming God knows what dreams of paradise. Close to them lay a European, sallow-faced and ragged, and restless for his pipe, which was in course of preparation by the lady of the house. She crouched on the floor near a lamp, twisting and stirring the brown confection with a knitting needle, over a clear flame. As it frizzled and spat, she held a long-stemmed pipe for its reception. Though thus engrossed, she raised her grizzled head as Miriam entered.

The boy who had opened the door, sank back into the corner behind it, and rolled himself into a ball like a doormouse. Mother Mandarin rasped out her welcome.

“Eh, lovey, dovey, deary, and is it you, swelley? Oh, I know’d so well you’d come. Didn’t I dream of ‘awks kerryin’ stones last night, an’ if that ain’t you with money for your poor ole aunty, she ain’t the poor thing as wants it. Come, pretty ducky, chuck us the blunt!”

A small worm of a woman this, with a wrinkled face like a baboon, and eyes piercing as gimlets, and a mass of white hair like spun silk. She wore a dress of old green stuff, threadbare now, patched and discoloured. A dingy red shawl was drawn tightly over her red spare shoulders and across her chest—a woman full of evil, saturated with vice, and exhaling it so powerfully as to repel.

Miriam could not repress a shiver, but she addressed herself at once to the business she had in hand, being only too anxious to have done with it and get away.

“I have come for Jabez,” she said. “Where is he?”

“Lor’ bless you, lovey dearie, he’s jes’ stepped out for a dram. He’ll be back in no time. Wot’s it you wants, sweet sweetie?”

“Are they awake?” asked Miriam, indicating the apparently insensate forms on the mattresses.

“One of ‘em is, lovey, he ‘asn’t had ‘is yet. But he’s noo to the pipes, yer see, ducky, and it won’t take long to get him orf. Here, dearie, this is as strong as strong.”

The man, who had thrown an indifferent glance at Miriam, clutched the pipe and lay back on the bed to indulge in it.

“He’ll be off directly, pretty dovey,” droned Mother Mandarin, loosening his collar; “he’s noo to it.”

One of the Lascars emitted a horrible sound and rolled over.

“E’s a dreamin’, yuss! I knows they’re ‘untin’ you, pore ‘eathen. Don’t you let ‘em catch you, dearie!”

“What are you talking about?” inquired Miriam, looking at the motionless figures.

Mother Mandarin stoked the fire.

“Bout them, dovey; I don’t know what you calls ‘em. When you takes the stuff they comes a ‘untin’ you. I’ve met ‘em myself in the galleries—no faces, or ‘ands, or nothin’; but they ketches you!”

It was all quite unintelligible to Miriam. She noticed the young lad curled up in the corner.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“That, why don’t you know ‘im? that’s Shorty, dearie, m’ grandson. The good lady’s bin a tryin’ to ‘elp ‘im, but ‘e won’t be ‘elped. Wot’s the good o’ sarm-singin’ when you’re ‘ungry? ‘Ark!” She raised her head and sniffed the wind like a disturbed stag. “It’s Jabez’ foot, that is!”

Jabez it was. He rolled into the room a good deal the worse for liquor. Recognising his sister he hailed her boisterously.

“You here, old girl? Why, what’s in the wind now?”

“There ain’t no blunt, any’ow,” whined Mother Mandarin; “it’s a right down shame as a pore thing like me ‘asn’t ‘eaps of it, ‘eaps of it!—poun’s an’ pence. One as ‘ard to git as t’other.” A snarl came from one of the sleepers. “Oh, they’ve ketched you, ‘ave they? Why don’t yer run now?—there’s the road by the ‘eath, and the gall’ry in the palace—take which way yer like, but run, or they’ll ketch yer!” So did she drone on like some witch evoking a spell.

“Jabez!” Miriam drew him to the other end of the room, and made him sit down. “I have come to warn you. You are in great danger. You must get away at once.”

The words sobered the man as nothing else would have done. His face blanched, and his red moustache and beard stood out in horrible relief.

“Danger!” He glanced at the sleepers, at Shorty snoring heavily in his corner, and at Mother Mandarin rocking, rocking, and muttering endlessly before the fire. “We are safe here,” said Jabez, “but speak low. What is the danger—that infernal Dundas?”

“Major Dundas knows everything—not only your first crime—”

“First crime! Why, what the devil d’you mean? I only committed one!”

“Oh, Jabez, do be honest with me. Tell me the truth. Surely by this time you can trust me. Is it true that you murdered Mr. Barton?”

“It’s a lie—upon my soul, Miriam, I did not lay a finger on the old man—I wasn’t even near the house. On Christmas Day I was in London.”

“But I saw you at Southampton afterwards. Don’t deceive me, Jabez; everything depends upon your telling me the truth. How came you in Southampton?”

“I told you before. But at the time of the murder I was in London. I can prove it!”

“I believe you, Jabez; but you must not prove it; you dare not!”

“By Jove, that’s true; I see what you mean. I’ll be nabbed for the other affair if I do. But whose game is this, Miriam?—who says I killed old Barton?”

She cast a glance at the bundle in the corner, and brought her lips to Jabez’ ear.

“Shorty says he saw you! Hush! don’t waken him. You must get away as quick as ever you can. It’s your only chance.”

He clenched his fists.

“I’m inclined to slip a knife into the young devil as he lies there,” he said. “Saw me, did he? Let me stir him up a bit—”

“Jabez, for God’s sake don’t. You must run no risks. A word now from anyone casting suspicion upon you and the other affair will all come out.”

“He knows nothing of the other affair,” retorted Jabez, inclined to argument.

“How can you be so mad. What does that matter when the police know? So does Farren; he’s been watching you, do you know that?”

“Farren, Farren?—who the deuce is Farren? Some detective bloke, eh?”

“Farren is a spy,” replied Miriam bitterly. “He was the man employed by Mr. Barton. He discovered your name, and that I was your sister. He

knows everything about you, *everything*, Jabez. That was how Mr. Barton had such power over me. I was forced to obey him for your sake.”

“Well, that wasn’t very hard work I reckon,” replied the man with an impatient scowl. “So this Farren chap’s been watching me, has he? How did you know that?”

“Mrs. Parsley saw him following you after you left me at the flat the other day.”

“What!” exclaimed Jabez—“a tall dark chap, wearing a cloak and a soft hat—nasty-looking devil?”

“Yes; that’s the man. You know him?”

“Know him? Of course I know him. Why, he’s always coming round here for a pipe and a yarn. He’s particularly chummy with me too. He told me his name was Garson.”

“Did he speak to you that afternoon?”

“Yes; said it was a rum chance we met. The beggar must have followed me. But why? He knows where to find me when he wants me.”

“Has he ever threatened you, or tried to get money from you?”

“Tried to get money from me? The chap’s not born, my dear, who’d try such a fool’s game as that. Whatever put that into your head.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Jabez; he’s hard up and disreputable, and knowing as he does how you killed—”

“Hush! Confound you.” He looked round apprehensively. “Don’t speak so loud. Look here, Miriam, strikes me you’re right. What with Dundas, and the old lady, and this young devil here, I’m in a tight place. I’d better skip while I can. But I tell you straight, if this Farren, or anyone else for that matter, tries coming it nasty with me, I’ll do for ‘em and then for myself. So you know. I’m not going to be taken alive. Now go on, tell me more about this beggar. Are you sure he knows as much as you fancy he does?”

“Quite sure, Jabez. He knows, at all events, that there’s a price upon your head for murder.” Then rapidly she told him how Farren had come to be in such a position towards Barton, and how he had always done the Squire’s dirty work.

Jabez listened attentively, and chuckled to himself.

“Oh, that was the reason, was it? Now I see it all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Listen to me, Miriam. I know how to deal with Farren and Shorty. Let them interfere with me, and they’ll be precious sorry they did, I can tell you. Now then, if I’m to get away, I must have some more cash. I’ve spent some of that you gave me.”

“I expected that,” said Miriam, slipping her hand in her pocket. “Jabez, can’t you stop drinking even when your life is in danger?”

“Oh, hold your tongue, and don’t begin preaching now. How much have you got here?” he said, weighing her purse.

“Twenty pounds—a ten-pound note and gold. It is every farthing I have.”

Mother Mandarin’s ears caught the clink of the gold, and she crawled towards them.

“Lovey, dovey, give aunty the blunt; she wants ‘eaps of it—’eaps of it!”

Jabez took the money from the purse and put it in his pocket. As the woman clamoured on he swore at her. She yelled at him and threatened. With an oath he picked her up and pitched her like a bale of goods on to an unoccupied mattress.

“Get outside, Miriam,” he said, “sharp; I’ll follow.”

Only too anxious to escape from the repulsive scene Miriam hurried down the stairs. Jabez quickly followed, banging the door with such force as to shake the crazy house.

Then bolt upright sat Shorty with a twinkle in his eye.

“So that’s it, is it?” he mumbled. “Murder, eh? S’elp me, I’ll get some dibs out o’ this, or my bloomin’ name ain’t Shorty!”

Chapter XII

Jabez Seeks An Old Friend

With the best part of fifty pounds in his pocket, Jabez Crane took counsel with himself as to which portion of the civilised or uncivilised world he should next honour with his presence. That there was all-round prejudice against his remaining in London seemed, from what his sister had said, tolerably certain. And, in truth, he confessed to himself that even Lambeth had its limitations as a place of residence.

And so, on the following morning, he set out for the office of the Beaver line of steamers, which, as is well known, ply between the ports of Liverpool and Montreal, with the intention of booking a steerage passage in the next boat leaving for that port, and with a vague notion of gradually making his way thence into the heart of the gold-bearing country, about which the more fabulous tales had percolated recently, even to the remote habitation of Mother Mandarin.

His berth secured, Jabez turned his steps towards the Strand, He had not walked far when the thought struck him that he was in a position to afford a penny ‘bus. Putting his thought into action he mounted one. At the bottom of Fleet Street he saw something that caused him considerable surprise. There, sitting inside the same omnibus, reflected in a more than usually shiny plate-glass window, was the familiar form of Shorty. Shorty too, then, had been able to afford a penny ride! Strange! It was the second time he had come upon him unexpectedly that morning. At Temple Bar, where he alighted, there was no longer doubt in Jabez’ mind. Shorty was following him—had been following him ever since he left Lambeth. Turning suddenly on his heel he made straight for the youth, and seized him by the collar.

“Ere,” whined the quondam Gideon Anab, struggling to get free, “lemme go, carn’t yer; I’ll kick yer shins to bits if yer don’t.

“You young gaol-bird,” said Jabez, holding him all the tighter, “what d’ye mean by coming after me like this?”

“I want to tell yer something if ye’ll only stop!”

“And must you follow me half over London to tell me something—you—out with it, what is it?”

“It’s about Garson; ‘e’s arter yer!”

“After me? What d’you mean?”

“Step round ‘ere into this ‘ere back street and I’ll tell yer. But yer’ll ‘ave to give us a quid!”

They moved down into Essex Street. Jabez felt half inclined to yield. But he thought better of it.

“Look here, young man, I should have thought you’d ha’ known better than to try your beastly hanky panky business on with me. You’ll just tell me anything you know, and I’ll reward you afterwards according to what I think it’s worth; d’you see?”

“Well, you’ll say it’s worth a tidy bit I reckon. I’ll tell yer this much now; that Garson cove’s only ‘untin’ yer to git ‘em off ‘is own track!”

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean as I seed quite enough down at that there Thorpe place to string ‘im up if I liked to blab. But look ‘ere, pal, you’ve got to treat me square on this job. You be at the shop to-night—there’s too many coppers round about ‘ere for my likin’. There’s one of ‘em got ‘is eye on me already.”

“Right you are—at Mother Mandarin’s to-night. What time?”

“Oh, somewhere about eight, pal,” and with a whistle, indicative of approaching danger, Mr. Shorty made his way towards the Embankment.

Jabez was both astounded and relieved. At last he began to see Mr. Farren’s game. It was running the war into the enemy’s camp with a vengeance. But he’d be one too many for him this time. Still, even so, he felt far from secure. He had not seen Farren all the morning, and there was always the possibility he might already have betrayed him. He had

more than half a mind to leave Euston by the late night mail. He could do so and still be at Mother Mandarin's at eight.

Meanwhile Shorty made his way along the Embankment at a rate for him prodigious, and in less than half an hour from the time of his parting with Jabez had reached his destination—Great Scotland Yard.

Jabez, having completed sundry minor purchases for his voyage, rewarded himself by dropping into a public-house and drinking (to himself again) *bon voyage*. That done, he called for his pipe and another bowl, accompanied on this occasion by pens, ink, and paper. He was feeling very nervous about Farren, and had made up his mind that any betrayal by that mysterious gentleman should not go unpunished, even though he, the betrayed, were not there to punish him. With such retribution in view, he ran off a letter to Miriam, the contents of which would be all sufficient to secure unto Mr. Farren the chastisement he would so richly deserve. For the whiling away of the remainder of the afternoon he had to fall back on such attraction as his host was able to offer in the shape of Scotch Whisky.

That such was sufficiently powerful seems proven by the fact that the clock was striking seven, and Jabez was with difficulty restrained from striking the clock, when he picked up his parcels and made for "home." His progress was of necessity somewhat leisurely, and by the time he arrived there most of his "indecision" had passed off. Mother Mandarin was out; and the room was empty save for one man in a long cloak, who sat before the fire warming his hands.

"You?" cried Jabez, as he recognised his friend Garson, alias Farren, and as he very much feared, alias Judas. "You here?"

"And why should I not be?" replied the man coolly. "Is it not my custom to smoke a pipe on occasions?"

"I mean, are you alone?"

"I am always alone," replied Farren in the most melancholy voice.

Jabez closed the door, and taking up a stool sat down near to the man. The glimmering lamp overhead cast its flickering light over both of them. Outside the wind was howling, and shook the crazy window

frames. As he looked at his companion, Jabez felt a sense of satisfaction in that he had despatched that note to Miriam—the man was so sinister looking. For a time there was silence between them. At last Farren spoke.

“What has become of our good hostess?” he asked. “I hunger for my pipe. Glorious comfort! What should we poor devils be without it? At least, we have always that—our Paradise if fleeting can be reached for the asking.”

Jabez was taking no notice of what he said. He seemed indeed not to hear. His thoughts were concentrated upon himself and his probable fate at the hands of the man opposite to him, had it not been for the timely warning of his sister. At last he had to give voice to them.

“Look here, Mr.—Mr. Farren—”

He looked up quickly at the mention of his name.

“Who told you that?” he asked slowly.

“My sister, Miriam—”

“Miriam Crane, or I should say Mrs. Gerald Arkel? So she told you, did she? And how did she come to know?”

“Her friend, Mrs. Parsley, wife of the Vicar of Lesser Thorpe, saw you with me in West Kensington the other day.”

“Mrs. Parsley!—how well I remember her. And so she remembered me? To her I owe my resurrection?—an energetic old lady, Mrs. Parsley, if I recollect rightly. Dear me, how long ago it all seems!”

“You admit you *are* Farren?”

“Assuredly so—to *you*. I would admit anything—to *you*. You are to me a cypher, Mr. Jabez Crane; a plaything, if I so wish—for I hold you here—here, in the hollow of my hand. Do you begin to comprehend?”

“Oh yes, I comprehend; you are Barton’s spy. You know my secret. But why should you want to betray me? We have been friends. I have done you no harm. You’ve nothing to gain by it. Why round on me?”

“I have no wish to, friend.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it. You have been watching me—tracking me here, there, and everywhere, like the dirty spy you are!”

“So you take me for a Judas? Have I asked you for money?”

“No!”

“Then take my warning, friend, and turn me not into an enemy—take further warning from me too, and go. You have the money now. And there is danger, I can tell you—danger for you here!”

“Danger—yes, there is danger, thanks to you. But understand, Mr. Farren, that neither you nor living man ever takes Jabez Crane alive. Oh, I know you for what you are, you fawning Judas. Look out for yourself. If you do your devil’s work, and I have to shuffle off, it will not be alone. I have made it all secure. I’ve not forgotten to execute my last will and testament, and all I have to leave I’ve left to you. Do you know what kind of legacy it is, Mr. Farren? I’ll tell you—the legacy of death! When the end comes to me it will mean your arrest.”

“Arrest, friend? For what should they arrest me?”

“For the murder of George Barton. You were followed on that Christmas night, Mr. Farren. You were admitted by that old man into his library; and when you strangled him there at his desk, you were not quite alone, although you thought you were. When I killed it was in self defence. You are a cold-blooded murderer!”

“Fool—fool—fool; three thousand times a fool! to turn on me your friend. I know whence came all this. It is ordained that I should be persecuted throughout my life. But heed now what I say, for I know all. It was the youth Shorty told you this. My hands are innocent of blood, friend. The youth Shorty is your enemy. He is the Judas—not me! He is devoured by lust for gold; this very day he has denounced you to the police. What I say is truth, friend—the time is short for you. Last night in yonder corner he heard all. He knew a deal before, for Shorty has been expert long in crime. You thought he slept. He never sleeps so heavily but that he can hear the chink of gold, be it ever so far away. Last night

he heard it. And this day is he gone to grasp it. Your time is short, friend.”

With a gasp Jabez raised his hand to his forehead. For the moment he was completely dazed. He could hardly believe his ears; and yet there came upon him the conviction that this man was speaking the truth. Yes; it must be true. He was hemmed in all round. That boy—

“Where is he?” he cried. “Where is he? Let me put hands on him, and—”

“Stop, friend—that way lies the end of all things for you. Go while there is time. I came here after you had left last night. The boy and his grandmother were then in greedy contemplation of the price upon your head. To-day it would be theirs—to-day it *may* be theirs! Go, I say, while there is time.”

A fearful gust of wind shook the house. Jabez shied like a frightened horse. There were voices below. His ears were so sharpened he could hear them through the wind. There was he, a rat in a trap. The whole position revealed itself to him in an instant. In silence he clasped warmly the outstretched hand of Farren. It was life or death for him now he knew. Hardly touching the steps he slid down by the railing to the courtyard below. Voices were all around him. He could see two men groping their way. The night was thick and dark. There was a shout, and a figure he well knew threw itself upon him. It was Mother Mandarin. He struggled to get free.

“No, dearie, no; you must stay now with your old aunty who loves you. Shorty and the nice gentleman in blue have something pretty to say to you.”

“Let go, you hag, or I’ll—” With a wrench and a kick he freed himself, and made a dash for the river. It had been his friend before—it would be his friend again.

Two constables were close upon him. The people, attracted by the noise, were gathering in a crowd. The end of the lane was blocked. There remained only the wharf end free. He could hear Shorty’s voice above the rest.

“E’s orf; ‘e’s orf! ‘E carn’t git out that way. ‘Urry up there, copper!”

Then a policeman's whistle was blown three times. The rain was falling in torrents, and the wind was almost tropical in force. Down towards the wharf tore Jabez, Shorty close behind him. The police were never in the running. As he reached the stream, and saw its surging surface sweeping seaward, for a moment his nerve failed him. Could he hope to live in that seething caldron?

There was no choice—he must risk it.

“Ere ‘e is—’ere ‘e is!” yelled Shorty. “No you don’t—not that way!”

With a shout he threw himself on Jabez and clung to him like a limpet. There was a wild struggle.

“Elp, ‘elp!” roared the boy.

Cautiously the police crept along the crazy old wharf, which was straining every timber in the gale. The two men struggled on—the one for gold, the other for dear life and liberty. There was a cry of terror and a hoarse roar of rage. Then a thud, and after that a splash, and the inarticulate sounds of two human creatures locked in each other's arms—gone to their death together.

And the voice of baulked humanity was hissed down by the roar of the storm.

Chapter XIII

The End Of Gerald Arkel

Wholly unaware of the fate which had overtaken her brother, Miriam was sorely puzzled how to act on the letter she had received from him the previous evening. If anything happened to him, he had said, it would be through Farren, and she was, therefore, in such event, to give notice to the police immediately that Farren himself was guilty of Mr. Barton's murder, and call upon Shorty to prove it. She would know where to find them both.

The letter had made her horribly uneasy; she had had but little sleep all night, thinking about it. She could only comfort herself with the thought that as no further news had come by the morning post the probability was that Jabez had got clear away.

While she was thus thinking the Major made his appearance. He had never been to see her at that hour of the morning before, and she could not repress an exclamation of surprise on greeting him. Directly she saw his face she knew that something was wrong.

“Miriam, I came at once—I thought you would rather, I hated the idea of your being alone—”

“My God, what is it? What has happened? I know nothing. Tell me.”

“You know nothing? Have you not seen the paper?”

“No; what?” she snatched it up from the side-table where it was lying still unfolded.

“Jabez!—he is dead.”

“Jabez! Dead? Poor Jabez! he said he would not be taken alive.”

“Well, he was true to his word, and something more. He took Shorty with him.”

“Took Shorty with him? Major, how horrible! Don’t tell me he killed him!”

The Major took the paper from her and read the whole account aloud. She sat there deathly pale and listened.

“Poor, poor Jabez,” she repeated when he had finished, “may God forgive him!”

Then she started, as there came back to her mind the letter she had received from him the night before. It was in her pocket now.

“But, Major,” she said, producing it, “I got this from the poor boy last night; it is inexplicable now!”

The Major read.

“I don’t know that it is inexplicable,” he said, “but of course it is impossible to act upon it.”

“Why?”

“For two reasons. First because the boy Shorty is drowned, and consequently his evidence could not be forthcoming, even if it were worth anything, which it probably wasn’t; and secondly, Miriam, because, terrible as this is, for you to attempt to clear your brother would only be to make it worse for ourselves. Let it die; let him and the whole affair remain in oblivion. As it is it will soon be forgotten.”

“You see, Major, I was right; poor Jabez did not kill Mr. Barton.”

He did not reply. He could not bear to hurt her; but even in the face of what had happened he found it difficult to remove the suspicions which had for long past occupied his mind.

“Miriam, take my word for it, we shall never know the truth. Personally speaking, my one desire is to keep the whole matter in abeyance. Now that Jabez is dead I am the more able to do that. The fact of his absolute guilt or innocence of my uncle’s death need not weigh with me. As for this man Farren, there is no need for *me* to charge him. If, in the ordinary course of things, his prosecution comes about, I suppose of necessity we shall both be brought into it. But failing that, I feel very unwilling to stir the thing. The atmosphere of it has become repellent to me. Guilty, or not guilty, he may go scot free so far as I am concerned. I think you had better destroy that letter.”

“Yes; you are right. It is best so.”

At that moment the “cook-general” entered with a telegram. Resignedly Miriam opened it.

“I AM HERE ILL. WILL YOU COME TO ME?
GERALD. GRIFFIN HOTEL,”

she read. The place of despatch was Dover. She handed it to the Major.

“Will you come with me?” she asked.

“You really mean to go?”

“What would you have me do? He is my husband. He is very ill—dying, if my instinct tells me truth.”

He walked over towards her writing bureau and picked up a railway guide.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said. “There is a train at twelve-fifteen. We have time to catch it if you get ready at once.”

Without a word she left the room. She guessed how it was. Gerald had taken the journey when he was not in a fit state to travel, and on arrival at Dover had been obliged to take to bed.

This was exactly what had happened. Even in the comparatively short space of time which had elapsed since he had left her, the life he had lead had been more than enough to set up the disease to which he had always been predisposed. In the face of all his doctor’s orders he had insisted upon coming to England as soon as ever he had regained sufficient strength to enable him to get about. And the result was as they had predicted. He had caught a severe chill which, on arrival at Dover, had forced him to succumb. Within forty-eight hours he was in the throes of an attack of double pneumonia.

When she saw him first she hardly recognised him. All the youth seemed to have gone from him. Around the mouth, where had always lurked the sunniest of smiles, were now nothing but the heaviest of lines. His cheeks were sunken and his hands like claws. The hectic flush of fever was on his face.

He reached out to greet her as she entered the room, and a faint expression of pleasure parted his parched lips.

“Miriam—forgive!”

She laid her cool hand on his brow.

“I am here, dear, to show that I forgive.”

“Till the end?” His eyes sought hers imploringly.

“Till you are quite well,” she said.

“Till the end,” he repeated sadly. His eyes closed and he dozed off again, his hand clasped in hers that he might keep her by him. For ten minutes she sat thus. Then, seeing that he slept soundly, she quietly rose to go to

her room. As she left she called the nurse aside. She wished to see the doctor when he came. He was expected early in the afternoon.

When she saw him—he was a young man and fully sensible to the charms of a pretty woman—she had no difficulty in getting her own way; it was that she might undertake at least a portion of the nursing. And so for days and weeks she came to that melancholy bedside, and tended him with all the endless patience and unswerving devotion which were so much a part of her nature. And his attitude toward her was that of a child to mother rather than that of husband to wife. So long as she was beside him he was at rest. And from her all sense of wrong, of anger, and contempt had passed away, and had given place to a great pity in her heart.

“I am afraid we must be prepared for the end in a very few hours now, Mrs. Arkel,” the doctor said to her. Gerald had had a more than usually restless night.

“Is there nothing to be done?—no one we could get from London?”

“Nothing. He is beyond science—beyond drugs. An attack of this kind is invariably fatal to men of his constitution and habit. He has lasted longer than I thought. It is only right you should be prepared for the end.”

Still Miriam kept a smiling face always to him. Wherever she went he followed her with his eyes; when he could he clasped her hand in his as if to save him from the deep abyss on the brink of which he knew so well he was. He seemed always to wish to speak to her, and in between his short snatches of sleep he would murmur all the time:

“You said I would die, Miriam, when the money came to me—if only I had held by you—but I neglected you—I left you—oh, Miriam, how could I leave you—Hilda never loved me—I’m afraid the estate is dipped, dear—Dundas’ll soon put that right—why didn’t he come to see me?—might have come to a poor dying chap—”

“He did come, dear; he is here now. Would you like to see him?”

“No—I want you—only you. Don’t let anyone else in, Miriam. Just our two selves. You forgive my leaving you, dear? Ah, yes, you were always

good—read to me, Miriam—I never was a good chap—but there’s some of the Bible you can read to me.”

Then softly she read to him from the New Testament all the loving promises of Christ, and the pitiful tenderness of the gospel.

“Just turned thirty, and to die!—I’m not sorry though—God won’t be hard on me will He, Miriam?—it was in my blood—!”

“God will take you to Himself, Gerald dear; He is all merciful.”

“Ah, well, I am the work of His hands—clay in the hands of the Almighty potter. I have cracked in the furnace of prosperity. Hilda never loved me! Never—never! I gave up all for her. How good you are, Miriam? You will marry Dundas, won’t you? and live in the old place—good chap Dundas. He’ll soon get things to rights—and poor Gerald will be forgotten—!”

“Never by me, dear.”

“Hilda will—Hilda never loved me—never—never—”

That was ever the burden of his cry. Hilda had left him to die alone—had taken all and had given nothing in return. For twelve hours Miriam never left his side, and when the end came she was there to close his dying eyes.

Towards dawn he died. Worn with watching she still held his hand in hers, and soothed him until she saw the change in him which no one could mistake. She rang the bell and sent for the doctor.

The dying man opened his eyes and looked at her and smiled.

“Miriam—Hilda!—ah, poor Hilda—I was bad—good-bye, Miriam—Hilda!—Hilda!”

Hers was the name last on his lips. But Miriam did not think of that. She knelt by his death-bed and prayed.

Chapter XIV

A Queer Story Queerly Told

“Gentleman below named Farren to see you, sir!”

Never in his life, it is safe to say, was Major Dundas more surprised than when his orderly thus announced the presence in Brampton barracks of the person last credited with the despatch from this world of the late Mr. Barton.

“Farren?” he repeated. “Sure? What’s he like?”

“He wears a long cloak and a soft felt ‘at, sir.”

“Show him up, then—and look here, keep your eye on him!”

“Yes, sir.”

“If it’s the same man he’s got the cheek of Old Nick himself,” muttered the Major; “what the deuce can he want with me? Seems my fate to be lugged into this business.”

The Major was in mufti. On his left arm a broad band of black cloth was the outward and visible sign of mourning for his recently deceased cousin. He had undertaken for Miriam all the details of the funeral—the conveyance of the body to Lesser Thorpe and the interring of it in the family vault. And this he had done with all due respect and solemnity. But in his heart he was obliged to confess that the events of the past few weeks had caused him in every way the greatest possible sensation of relief. In the first place Miriam’s brother was no longer in this world to pester her or anyone else, and he had been the sort of man from whom there could be no feeling of riddance on this side of the grave. For Gerald he was sorry—he pitied him just so much as one pities any man who is the victim of his own mad folly. But his death could be counted a loss to no one. On the contrary, it was bound to bring with it a distinct feeling of relief, because the Major was no hypocrite, and he never attempted to disguise from himself that the one object of his life now was to make Miriam his wife—and had indeed been so for long past. Her absurd scruples on the subject of divorce he had felt no sympathy with—the most he had been able to do was to respect them. She having returned to the flat, he had seen very little—all too little of her recently. But she had not been alone, for the good heart of Mrs. Parsley had gone out to her in her trouble, with the result that the vicar’s wife had taken up her abode at Rosary Mansions during those first weeks of her widowhood. And so

were matters progressing as comfortably as the Major could desire when the announcement of this man Farren's presence came as a cold blast upon him.

He put aside the paper he was working at and waited. His welcome was not a cordial one. But at this his visitor was wholly unmoved. He sat down uninvited and looked calmly at his host. Indeed, he forced Dundas to open the ball.

"Well, Mr. Farren, what do you want with me?"

"Can you not surmise that, friend, without my telling?"

"Damn it, sir, don't call *me* your friend, or you'll find I'm a precious unpleasant one."

"It is a mere figure of speech, friend. The world is cold—there is no friendship—no love. I come not for love but for money!"

"What—confound you, man, what do you mean?"

"The meaning is simple, Major Dundas. I am no extorter. I come to plead your sympathy—to plead it not, I trust, in vain, when you have heard my story, for there are many things about which I alone know the truth. I alone know who killed your uncle!"

"Well, that you certainly should from all accounts. But upon my soul I marvel at your brazen impudence in coming here to tell me so—and I suppose to excuse yourself. Doesn't it strike you that I have been unusually forbearing in taking no part against you!"

"I am no slayer of men, friend. I did not slay your uncle! I come to tell you who did."

"You'll have to do more than tell me, I fancy, before I believe you."

"First let me state for what it is I sue. It is small, friend, what I ask—sufficient only to restore me to the land whence I come; a mere matter of a hundred pounds."

"I—I am to give *you* a hundred pounds!"

“Twill rid you of me for ever, friend—’twill rid you of all mention of the past. It is not a large amount.”

The Major scrutinised him closely for a moment. He began to think the man was queer. But there was something about him which compelled attention. In the first place he bore the stamp of breeding—in the second he piqued curiosity. The Major came to the conclusion that whatever he was, he was no ruffian.

“Go on,” he said, “let me hear your story. But look sharp about it.”

He fixed his dreamy eyes upon the Major for quite a minute before he began.

“Years ago, friend, you had an aunt, Flora Barton. You will have heard of her. I loved her. She was to me the sweetest soul on earth. No dolphin in Galatea’s train more blithe and gay than I, who thought to call her mine. But, alas! the goods of this world I had not, though she was blest with them, and more. Your uncle George, whose death we now deplore, swore she should not be mine. He exhorted me to withdraw. But I loved truly and deeply, and by my love I was being consumed beyond all heed of lucre; so that his exhortations were in vain—in vain, friend, in vain. And as he saw that this was so, he changed, and was to me as a true friend. And I rejoiced within me then, and was filled with joy. Ah, friend, what days were those! What happiness was mine. But all too soon the glory of my day was clouded and I fell. Yes, fell to crime. Like Orestes, I had appealed to Pythias, and Pythias had spurned me. I knew not where to go for money, for I had gambled, and I owed a goodly sum. And so I did that which has cursed my life—I wrote another’s name—in the language of these days, good sir, I forged. I forged! I forged! I forged the name of George Barton! No sooner had I done the fatal deed than I saw what it meant, and regretted it a thousand times. But I could not give *her* up. Together we took wing and fled. He followed, and my freedom was vouchsafed to me on one condition—that I gave up my love. Alas, what could I do? And so we parted, my love and I—she to the home whence she had come, there to join her life in time with one Arkel, the father of the lad who but a few short weeks ago died—I to the far-away land chosen for my exile. But she, the flower of flowers, still remembered our love. She avenged our parting; for she wrecked the life of him who had parted us. She came between him and his love. She ruined him—

devastated his life so that he was stricken with disease of the brain, and suffered some of the tortures which I too have suffered.”

“But much of this is ancient history to me,” interrupted the Major. “Get on to the gist of the thing.”

“May I not tell the story of my life in my own way? To Australia then I went, and there for a score of years I stayed. And as with time the wound in my heart healed I married, and children were born to me. Then death came, and my wife was taken from me, and I put the past behind me and returned to this land. But in that whence I had come I had found a way to Paradise—a way to drown the past and revel in the present. I had learned to love the poppy. It became the emblem of my later life—the anodyne of every sorrow. I sought it here, for life without opium was no longer possible. I found it at the hands of one Mother Mandarin—”

“What, you too, then, know that old hag!”

“Beneath her roof I have dreamed the sweetest dreams, beside her—a very Jezebel—I dwelt for long in Paradise. But now I am in Hell. They chase me constantly, relentlessly. But so far They have not caught me. Horror! when they do! Your uncle, too, loved his opium. We met there, and I came to understand him more. Twin sister to his love for opium was his love for crime. He had a passion for its mysteries, and lacked only the courage of a past master. He probed in the depths—together we probed in the depths—he paying me. I was a seeker of criminals for him. It was my work to hunt them out and bring them to him as to one who was an appreciator. For the fulfilling of my task he paid me three hundred pounds a year. He used to say he longed to kill—to be a spiller of human blood.”

“Man—you’re mad!”

“Small wonder if I were—but I am not. These things that I tell you are true, friend. Your uncle was the criminal’s comrade. He sheltered him and paid large sums of money to his kind. I was his tool in this as all through life. At Lesser Thorpe I used to visit him. I was there that Christmas night when Nemesis o’ertook him, and he met with death at the hand of one of those whom he so sought. No soul knew I was there. But I knew all—of Miriam Crane—of Jabez Crane—of Gerald Arkel, aye, and of yourself. For I had been set my task and had fulfilled it, and the

secret of Miriam Crane's past life was in my keeping and in my master's. I knew her brother for a murderer—he had killed a sergeant in your regiment.”

“I know—I know all about that—go on.”

“Softly, friend. As he had held me for so many years so did Barton hold Miriam Crane—in his power—in the hollow of his hand. So did he hold Jabez Crane, who too loved the drug. We met at Mother Mandarin's. And now I approach what you would know. The grandson of the woman Mandarin was a thief—an expert criminal. He heard speak of Lesser Thorpe, and Barton, and Jabez, and his sister. And he took himself down there to find what he could find. He made excuse of going at Jabez' bidding to warn his sister he would come. His name was Shorty. He was the genius of evil. He was the accomplice of Jabez in many crimes.”

“I know they tried to rob my uncle one night on Waterloo Bridge,” put in the Major, who, in spite of himself, was becoming excited. The man's narrative, strange as it was, was beginning to convince him.

“I watched this sinful youth, for I knew his lust for gold. On Christmas night I took me to the Manor House to warn George Barton of that which I knew threatened him. But, as I learned, all too late, Shorty followed me. He concealed himself behind a buttress near the library window and heard our converse there. And when I left he entered and hid himself away, for I left and entered always by the window on the terrace, so that no soul should know.”

“But how, man?—how could he get into the library while you and my uncle were there without your seeing him?”

“In this way. Your uncle, deep in converse with me, came to the end of the terrace. He was wont to walk out there. It was then the lad got in. When your uncle, unsuspecting of evil, returned, he returned alone and to his desk. I took my way down the steps into the village whence I had come. Before I had left him I had warned him that with Shorty in the village he knew not the hour he might be robbed. And he meant to act next day upon my warning. Then the boy came from his hiding-place and demanded money. Had I returned with your uncle the lad would have remained there till I left. Your uncle did not heed his demands, but cried for help. That cry it was that killed him. The lad threw himself

upon him to silence him. He clutched at that old throat and clutched too hard. When he clutched no more your uncle was dead! Here, friend, is the verification of what I have told you.”

He produced a dirty sheet of paper from his pocket. On it were written but three lines. But they were all sufficient to condemn the man who put his name to them.

“But the creature surely could not write,” objected the Major.

“Mine is the writing, friend; his the signature. ‘Twas Miriam Crane taught him to write that. Show it to her.”

“But how did you get this confession out of him?—it’s difficult to believe—”

“It was difficult to obtain, friend. No one but myself could have procured it. Myself alone did that boy fear. I had broken his nerve. In drink one night, not many weeks ago, he came to me, forgetting himself so far as to threaten me and demand of me money, accusing me of having killed your uncle. At once I knew then it was he who had killed him. I had suspected him for long. He told me he was there and had seen me in the library. But I was not to be thus threatened by this youth. We were alone. It was night. I locked the door and taxed him with the crime. He would not confess. But I knew the lad; I alone knew Shorty and the only way with him. In the grate there burned a fire, and by the hearth a poker stood—’twas easy made red-hot, and—”

“Good God, man, don’t describe to me your loathsome horrors. Have done with your story and go.”

“Well, that was how, friend, I came by this confession. I told him while he lived I would not use it for his undoing. In truth I could not, since my own past is not clean. But now that he is dead he cannot suffer in this world for his crimes. I alone am left. Your uncle ruined me, friend. I hated him. All my life I hated him. He sapped my soul; he was a vampire. I ask you now to help me to end my days in such peace as is left to me. I am without money. I wish to leave this country and return to the land of my exile. The Mark of the Beast is on me, and I am getting old. My end will come soon now, and I shall join your uncle, and Jabez Crane, and Shorty, and all our other kindred souls in Hell; down there,

deep down in Hell. Already I have tasted of its fires—but they have not caught me yet; They chase me all the time, but They—”

The Major stopped him.

“If I give you money,” he said, “I give it you in this way: fifty pounds and your passage to Australia. Never again set foot in this country. I may be wrong; but I believe your story, and I would wipe out once for all the memory of it. I am sorry for you, Farren. Give me some address, and what I have promised you shall follow. But remember if I catch you in this country that’s the end of you.”

“Thanks be to you,” he said. Then he scribbled a few words on a piece of paper, and took up his hat and cloak and vanished.

Epilogue

John Dundas was as good as his word, and within a fortnight of his visit to Brampton the unhappy Farren was on board an Oriental liner bound for Melbourne.

As the Major read his name in the passenger list, he breathed a sigh of relief. For with him disappeared all record of the past. He felt convinced the creature—queer in the head as he undoubtedly was—had told him nothing but the truth. His life story was indeed a pitiful one, and the Major would not but admit that there was something of retributory justice about the fate which had overtaken his old uncle. For that he had met his death by Shorty’s hand there was not a doubt. Miriam had been shown the signature appended to those three lines of confession—confession absolute and unqualified—and she had recognised it instantly.

There remained no doubt in the Major’s mind. As he had told Miriam, the whole affair was horribly repellent to him. The remotest connection with such men as Jabez, Shorty, and Farren ran counter to every instinct he possessed. He alone among his contaminated stock recoiled from the merest contact with the morbid. Gerald, in his bouts of alcoholism, had always shown that he was attracted in that direction. Even when most himself that side of him had been plainly apparent to any keen observer.

And so the Major thanked his stars that things were as they were. His hundred pounds had been well spent, indeed if it had purchased in the future complete immunity from all reference to the terrible past. So far as Farren was concerned he felt perfectly safe. It was not difficult to foretell his end. It would be speedy. And the Major knew enough of Melbourne even to localise it with some degree of accuracy. That fair city of the south possesses in its heart the foulest opium dens outside of China. It would be in one of them—in that foetid artery named Little Bourke Street—that Farren would die; and with him would disappear the last of what the Major was wont to refer to in his own mind always as the Lambeth gang.

From time to time he caught a glimpse of Miriam; anything from an hour to two hours constituting merely a glimpse in the eyes of the Major. Each time he told himself she was more beautiful than before; and for the first time in his life a year seemed to contain at least twenty-four calendar months; and all the rifle practice or tactical manœuvres in the world were of no avail to shorten it. Slowly, wearily, it dragged itself along, with now and then a spurt on such days as could furnish him with reasonable excuse for a run up to town—town being bounded on the east by Addison Road and on the west by Hammersmith.

In Mrs. Parsley, had he only known it, he possessed the strongest of allies. If he had needed anyone to plead his cause, he could not have chosen a better.

“My dear, I am just waiting for the day that shall see you Mistress of the Manor House. Won’t that be a knock-me-down-staggerer for *her*?” Such was Mrs. Parsley’s leit-motive now, the “her” having, it is scarcely necessary to say, reference to Mrs. Darrow.

“But, my dear Mrs. Parsley,” Miriam would remonstrate, “he hasn’t—”

“Oh, don’t tell me he *hasn’t* if he hasn’t, you’ve only to hold up your little finger for him to *have*. Why any fool can see he just worships the ground you tread on—not that I ever believe altogether in that sort of thing myself; but my experience of them is they’re all the same. It’s either that or nothing. Take my word for it, my dear, unless a man’s abject, he’s not in love, and unless he’s in love, he’ll never make a good husband. Now the Major is in love—he is abject, horribly abject. And of all the men I’ve

known he's the most promising as a husband. I do believe he is a thoroughly good fellow."

"I know, I know, my dear Mrs. Parsley; there is no better fellow in the world. But you seem to take it quite as—well, what shall I say?—quite as necessary to my existence that I should have a husband. Does it not occur to you that I might like a little freedom—that my first experience of matrimony has not been altogether encouraging?"

"Freedom! Encouraging?—rubbish! What does a woman want with freedom, except to get into captivity again? As for encouragement, no one ought to require much encouragement to grab a good thing when they see it. John Dundas, matrimonially speaking, is a good thing, and if it weren't for the Reverend Augustine, I tell you candidly I'd soon show you I mean what I say!"

"Oh, my dear friend, this love, this love!" sighed Miriam, "this keep the world a-whirling!—well, I suppose you're right. You know it is not that I underrate Major Dundas' good qualities. I do not. I know he is a good man, and I like him and respect him more than I can say; but—but—"

"But—but—there you go! you're thinking about that wretched past of yours again. Well, tell him, tell him everything; he'll think none the less of you for that!"

"Indeed I have; he knows everything of my wretched past. It is not that—"

"Well, what is it then?"

"Oh, I don't know—let us leave it. It will settle itself I expect if it's meant to be settled. Meanwhile, we're quite happy, you and I, aren't we?"

"Oh yes, we're very happy, Miriam, with our work. That reminds me that old Chinese Mandarin creature's dead at last."

"Really? Poor old thing! When did she die?"

"Yesterday morning. The place is becoming quite respectable now—a veritable land of promise. And that reminds me again I have to go down there in the morning to finish up one or two things, and in the

afternoon, dear, you know I am going back to Thorpe. Augustine's got a cold, and you know what Augustine is with a cold!"

"Poor Mr. Parsley—he is very good. I sometimes think I should like to change places with you, and go down and look after him while you're looking after Lambeth," said Miriam, just to see how she would take it.

"Indeed, my dear, you'll do nothing of the kind. You'd spoil him altogether, that's what you'd do. I understand Augustine and he understands me. He'd break out in all sorts of fresh places with any other treatment than what I give him. Besides, he likes to be alone—he always says I'm the only woman he could stand. Not that he means it, you know—he doesn't. He thinks all women a nuisance, except when he's ill—then he's glad enough to have 'em, I can tell you. Now, dear, I must really go. I shall have tea at the Stores. Who's that at the door I wonder?—let me get out of sight. Good-bye, Miriam dear."

She kissed her and hurried off. They were in the dining-room. Miriam remained where she was, awaiting the announcement of her visitor whoever it might prove to be.

The name brought in to her was that of "Mrs. Latham."

"Mrs. Latham?" she repeated to herself. "I don't know any Mrs. Latham."

She went into the little drawing-room. Her visitor was closely veiled and in the deepest black. She looked at her.

"You don't know me, Miriam?"

"Hilda! Is it you? Mrs. Latham!—but—"

"Yes, Miriam, I am Mrs. Latham. But my husband is dead. He died only a month ago!"

"It is only a year since Gerald died."

"Poor Gerald—did he forgive me for leaving him?"

"He never forgot—I cannot say whether he forgave. Your name was last on his lips—not mine!"

“My name? And you were so good to him? Miriam, will *you* forgive?”

“I—yes, I forgive. It was him you wronged more than me, for I could guide my life—he couldn’t. He was weak, helpless—little more than a child. And you led him further astray, Hilda. And yet he loved you as he never loved me, even at the end.”

“Oh, Miriam, you don’t know what I’ve suffered. I am not so wholly to blame as you think. You don’t know what my life was—from the merest child I was neglected. I was never taught to care save for myself. I was pampered, spoiled, allowed to run utterly wild. My only teaching was to put a value on myself—to see to it that I secured the biggest prize in marriage. You cannot afterwards undo the evil done by an up-bringing such as mine. And my instincts were never for good, Miriam. I secured through John Dundas all that I craved, riches, position, ease, gaiety. And when I lost them, remember, I lost what was to me all. Gerald loved me I know; yes, and I loved him as much as it was in me to love any man. I could not resist the temptation that assailed me. But I was prepared to do my duty by him, Miriam. I would have gone on loving him. I would have been with him at the end—”

“Why, then, did you leave him?”

“Because he forced me to. He drank so horribly. He was like a madman most of the time. He gambled recklessly—more than once he struck me. I stayed by him as long as I could, and then one night he treated me so cruelly I had to leave him. I was afraid for my life. I had already met Mr. Latham. He fell in love with me, and he urged me all the time to leave Gerald. But I would not have left him, I swear to you, if he had not treated me so violently. Mr. Latham was rich I know, and Gerald then had little money left. But it was not that that took me. I was in daily, hourly terror of him. Oh, Miriam, you cannot imagine how he was. That night I tell you of, I left him. I went with Mr. Latham to Italy, and there we were married. He was more than good to me, far better I know than I deserved. I was prepared to make amends for my past life, and at least to be a good wife to him. But fate determined, I suppose, that I should suffer, for he died—died when we had been married only a few months. And now I am alone, and oh, so wretched, Miriam, so terribly unhappy.”

She burst into tears.

“Hilda, don’t—I, too, am alone. Believe me, I forgive you if it is my forgiveness you would have. You have been wrong; but I was wrong, I think, in the beginning, too—towards Gerald. I ought to have left things to take their chance. But what I did, I did to save him. For that I was punished. God knows what I have suffered. But, come now, even though you are alone, you have your father and mother—”

“My father and mother! Don’t name them to me. I hate them. To them I owe the whole failure of my life. They had no right to bring children into the world, and allow them to grow up weeds. I wish never to see either of them again. No, I am going back to Italy. I shall find some niche to fill there I suppose. But I could not stay here. All I wanted was to know that you forgave me. You have been so good, Miriam, and if you forgive me, I can bear the rest. And, Miriam—”

“Yes, Hilda.”

“You will marry John Dundas? Don’t be angry with me, but if you are happy, I should feel my life was easier. John is good, Miriam, he is one of the best of men—I never deserved him. You do. Let me feel that you won’t—that the past won’t stand in your way. He deserves to be happy.”

“He has been very good to me, Hilda, very kind. I know what you must feel. Let us both try and forget.”

“Say again that you forgive me, Miriam.”

“Freely, Hilda. I forgive.”

“Good bye. You will write and tell me—any news?”

“I will write, Hilda; good-bye.”

As she left the room Miriam could bear up no longer. She threw herself on the sofa, and cried as if her heart would break.

Six months later, in the lovely summer weather, Dundas and Miriam were wandering through the gardens of the Manor House together—man and wife. In the little church over yonder, fraught to Miriam with so many memories, they had been married by the Reverend Augustine, now four months ago. And even Mrs. Darrow, open enemy though she

declared herself, had not contrived to spoil their peace. Dicky, it is true, had been permitted to attend the wedding of his Miss Crane, but Mrs. Darrow herself had remained adamant, and stayed at home to nurse her rage and show her great displeasure.

And with the glorious peace and rest which had now come into her life, Miriam felt at last her night was over—the heavy shades had lifted, and the dawn was brightening to a golden noon. Her faith in God was justified to her even in this world.

Her husband turned, and asked her what he never tired of asking:

“Are you happy, Miriam?”

“Happy, dear? So happy!—happier than I have ever been or ever thought to be!”

THE END

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