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BRUISES—SPRAINS—SORE THROAT



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CHAPTER XXXVII.

Jackson set down the glass unsteadily which he had been raising to his lips. His manner was so indicative of surprise, amazement, that Gaunt stared at him.

"Do you mean to say that you have not seen a paper—a London paper?" he asked.

Jackson moistened his lips with his tongue.

"No," he said. "I—I haven't seen a paper. I—I know nothing about it. There was no paper on board the ship that took us off from Mogador."

Gaunt sighed.

"It's soon told," he said. "A woman was murdered at one of the flats at Prince's Mansions—What is the matter?" he broke off, as Jackson half rose from his seat.

"Nothing—nothing," said Jackson, with the hollow cough which Gaunt had noticed several times during the meal.

"She was murdered—stabbed with a Persian dagger. The rooms in which she was found were my rooms. The dagger was mine. The coat thrown over her—a fur coat easy to identify—was my coat, and—"

"—he paused—"the woman was my wife."

"Yours!" ejaculated Jackson.

He gripped the table with both hands, and stared at Gaunt with his hollow, bloodshot eyes with a gaze half of amazement, half of terror.

"Yes, mine," said Gaunt, leaning back in his chair and gazing moodily at the table-cloth. "She was my wife. I married her, thinking her all that was good, and pure, and innocent. I loved her—but that's a different part of the story. The salient facts are that she was found—murdered—in my rooms. That I had been there—"

"You—you had been there?" ejaculated Jackson.

"Yes," said Gaunt. He had almost forgotten his auditor, and was communing with himself. "I had been there. She came in while I was there, and there was a scene. I dare say I threatened her—God knows she tried me hardly enough—and I was very likely overheard by the servants. In short, Mr. Jackson, the evidence is very black against me. I tell you all this because you may object to continue an acquaintance with a man who lies under so heavy a charge, and whom you will probably think guilty."

Jackson leaned back in his chair, and, with his head sunk between his shoulders, coughed appallingly, and stared at Gaunt.

"If you'd like to say 'good-bye,' and go to another hotel," said Gaunt, "pray do so. I shall not be offended or deem your desire to cut my acquaintance an unreasonable one."

"She was your wife?" said Jackson in a hollow voice, and apparently ignoring Gaunt's suggestion. "Your wife?"

"Yes," said Gaunt, with a sigh. "And when I think of her lying dead, I can only remember that I once loved her, and I can forgive her all the misery she caused me."

Again he spoke more to himself than to Jackson, who sunk deeply in his chair, looked a ghastly object, and scarcely capable of understanding the case; but presently, without taking his bloodshot eyes from Gaunt's face, he said:

"If the evidence against you is so strong, why in the devil's name did you come back? You might have got

off in that yacht—and there would have been no more bother."

Gaunt raised his eyebrows slightly. "If I had been guilty, I suppose that is what I should have done," he said; "but I am innocent. Of course I do not insist upon your believing me—"

Jackson made a movement with his hand.

"—And being innocent, of course I have come back to face the thing. What else could I do?" he added, simply.

Jackson's eyes wandered round the room, then returned with their fixed stare to Gaunt's face.

"You take it coolly!" he said, hoarsely, and with an oath. "Suppose—suppose they find you guilty?"

"Then I shall not be the first man who has suffered innocently," said Gaunt, gravely.

Jackson got up from his chair with difficulty and went and leaned against the mantel-shelf. The short journey brought on his cough again, and he bent double and put his handkerchief to his lips. As he took it away, Gaunt saw that there was blood upon it.

"I'm afraid you're very ill, Mr. Jackson," he said. "Don't you think you'd better go to bed and let me send for the doctor?"

Jackson waived the suggestion away impatiently.

"I'm all right," he said, sullenly. "Who—who did this murder?" he asked, hoarsely.

Gaunt shook his head.

"I have not the least idea. I know nothing of my wife's life since I left her, or her recent movements; and I suppose the police were so assured of my guilt that they didn't deem it necessary to look in any other direction."

A curious gleam shot for a moment into Jackson's eyes as he bent over the fire.

"The police are fools!" he said. "I suppose any one could have got into the flat, the room. What's the name of the Manstons?" he asked, with a cunning glance at Gaunt.

"Prince's Mansions," said Gaunt. "I do not think so. The servants would have seen any one enter."

Jackson smiled; his back was to Gaunt.

"If I'd been the detective in charge of the case I should have raked up her past life; I should have found out what friends she had; who she'd quarrelled with lately. They're fools!"

He turned round, and looked at Gaunt; his face was flushed with a kind of childish satisfaction, and he began to laugh in a meaningless fashion; but the laugh was cut short by the awful, hacking cough, and again the handkerchief was stained with blood.

"Look here, Jackson," said Gaunt. "I must insist upon your going to bed and having a doctor. You see, I somehow feel responsible for you, having brought you here."

"Yes, I know," said Jackson. "You saved my life; you gave up your place in the boat—"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Gaunt, quickly.

"—No; but I was," broke in Jackson in a hollow voice. "I'm bad, I know; but you don't suppose you're the only man who isn't afraid of death, do you? P'raps I've got so much pluck as you have," he added, with a kind of defiance.

"My good fellow, I don't doubt your courage," said Gaunt. "And, as to being afraid of death, life isn't such a desirable thing for most of us that we should cling to it very desperately. But you're a young man, Jackson, and have got all the world before you; and you ought to take better care of yourself."

Jackson stared at him gloomily.

"You're young yourself," he said, "and rich, I suppose." Gaunt shrugged his shoulders. "And a nobleman. What's the matter with life that you should be so d—d anxious to lose it?"

Gaunt smiled grimly.

"Life is just what we make of it, Jackson," he said. "I've made a mess of mine, and, candidly, I am sorry that the 'Sea Wolf' happened to lose her way in the fog that night. But I won't bore you any longer with the story of my griefs and sorrows," he added, with a smile. He rose as he spoke, poured out a glass of the Morlet port—it was excellent wine—and carried it to Jackson. "Drink that," he said; "I don't think it will hurt you; then go to bed. I'll send for my doctor to-morrow; he's a clever fellow, and will put you right, I hope."

Jackson took the glass and drank the wine, looking steadily at Gaunt as he did so.

"Don't trouble to send for your doctor," he said. "He couldn't do any good. I'm past tinkering; I know that. I've led the devil's own life for some time past, and that night in the fog off Mogador put the finishing touch."

He set the empty glass down on the mantel-shelf and moved to the door.

He was a young man, as Gaunt had said, but he looked a very old one, and very bad and feeble at that, as he shuffled along, with his red head bowed on his breast and his hands hanging limply at his side.

At the door he paused and looked round the room and then at Gaunt.

"Good-night," he said. "I haven't forgotten what you've done for me. You're a brave man, Lord Gaunt, and I—d—n it, I admire you."

"Thanks," said Gaunt, with a smile. "Good-night, or, rather good-bye. I expect I shall be gone before you come down to-morrow. Don't hurry up, but take a long rest. Oh, by the way, do you happen to want any money? If so—"

He took out his purse. He still felt, as if, having saved the man's life, he was in a sense responsible for his welfare.

Jackson's face grew red, then livid, and he looked at Gaunt with a curious expression in his bloodshot eyes.

"I've got plenty of money," he said, brusquely. "Good-night!" and he left the room.

Gaunt was not sorry to lose him, for though he had saved the man's life and was anxious to befriend him, he did not like him; but, perhaps for that very reason, he felt that he must look after him and do the best for him. It was like Gaunt to think of another man, even in the midst of his own terrible trouble.

He drew his chair to the fire and lighted a pipe—and is it necessary to say?—began to think of Decima.

His wife was dead, and he was free. But Decima was as far from him as ever. It was more than possible that a jury of twelve highly respectable and intelligent Englishmen would find him guilty of the murder of his wife.

But even if they should not, Decima could not be his. She could never forget that he had received her and tempted her to fly with him.

He spent a couple of hours in the delightful occupation of thinking how exquisite a thing life would have been if he had met his girl-love years ago; if he had not married; if—Life is made up of "ifs." He sighed, rose, and stretched himself, and went out into the hall.

Wilkins was standing there as if waiting for him.

"Well, Wilkins," he said, cheerfully. "I suppose you know whom you've been harboring?"

Wilkins colored, then went pale.

"I'll never believe you did it, my lord," he said, with agitation.

"Thank you," said Gaunt, with that tone and smile which affect men like Wilkins so greatly. "As a matter of fact—I didn't. Have me called early to-morrow, Wilkins, will you? I should like to have my breakfast before the police come."

"Certainly, my lord," said Wilkins, with a gasp. "I 'ope your lordship, don't blame me. I had to give evidence."

Gaunt smiled rather wearily.

"I don't blame any one but myself," he said. "Good-night."

He was very tired, and he slept soundly. He dreamed of Decima that night, as he had dreamed—how often! He thought he saw her standing at a distance from him, and smiling at him. But she was a long way off, and though he stretched out his hands toward her, he could not reach her.

He came down to breakfast the next morning as calm and self-possessed as usual. Wilkins was waiting, as if no thing were the matter.

"Where is Mr. Jackson?" asked Gaunt.

Wilkins coughed.

"He left the hotel early this morning, my lord," he said.

Gaunt shook his head.

"I'm afraid he was not fit to go out," he said.

"No, my lord," said Wilkins. "I heard the gentleman coughing all night. It was something dreadful."

"Take care of him if he comes back," said Gaunt. "He ought to be in bed and under a doctor's care."

(To be continued.)

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