

pretty little one, and to know that he is dead, my bright, bonny boy, and that she was his child—oh! my mistress, it goes near to break my heart. Don't 'ee be angry wi' me, I am only an old woman, and I held him in my arms many and many a time, and my own flesh and blood could never be dearer than my own Master George.'

'You may go, Susan.'

She speaks with measured quiet, but not coldly nor impatiently.

'And you are not angry wi' me?' Oh! mistress, don't 'ee be angry—don't 'ee, now! Indeed, and in very deed, I—'

'I am not angry. You are a good soul, Tinker. I have a great respect for you. When Mr. Vane comes in send him to me at once.'

'He is here now, ma'am. I hear his steps in the 'all.'

A slow, rather heavy step, is indeed audible, and a man's voice calls through the utter dusk for somebody to show a light.

'Yes,' says madam, listening, 'tell him to come in here, before he goes to his room to dress for dinner.'

'Shall I send in lamps, ma'am?'

'No—not until I ring. The twilight is enough.'

Mrs. Tinker, wiping her eyes, departs, and her mistress turns her brooding gaze once again upon the fire. A very sombre gaze.

All her life of fifty years and more, this woman has been trained to self-repression, and in this supreme hour she is true to her training and traditions.

He would be a keen observer, who at this moment could read what she is enduring in her still face. And yet she has been a mother, a passionately loving mother, and all the martyrdom of maternity is rending her heart in this hour. But of all the men in the world, the man who enters now, is the very last to whom she will show it.

He is Vane Valentine, a young Englishman, a nephew of her late husband, and the last male of the Valentine race, heir-at-law to a baronetcy, and heir presumptive of Katherine Valentine's millions, vice George Hamilton Valentine, cashiered and deceased.

He is a slim, dark young man, not much over twenty, with a sallow, thin face, a thin, aquiline nose, a thin, rather womanish mouth, a thin black moustache, and thin black hair, parted down the middle.

Thinness and blackness, indeed, at the present stage of his existence, are the most salient points about him, if you except a certain expression of obstinacy about the whole face, and an air of hauteur amounting

almost to insolence in everything he says and does.

The pride of these Valentines, for that matter, is quite out of proportion to their purse, if not to their pedigree, madam being the only member of the family out of the absolute reach of poverty—but pride and poverty run in harness together often enough.

He comes in quickly, surprised at Mrs. Tinker's message, for madam, in a general way, is not over fond of him, does not greatly affect his society and never sends for him.

'You are not ill, aunt?' he inquires.

He speaks with something of a drawl, but not an affected one. He never has much to say for himself, so perhaps is wise to make the most of the little he has.

'Ill? No,' she answers, contemptuously.

'I am never ill. You should know that. I have sent for you to discuss a very serious matter. I consider you have a right to know, and perhaps—to decide. You may be my heir; the honour of the Valentine name is in your keeping and she threatens—Vane!' abruptly, 'you know the story of my son?'

'Unfortunately, yes. A very sad and shocking story,' he answers, gravely.

He is standing by the mantel, leaning his elbow on it, facing her. She, too, steadfastly regards him.

'You were told as a matter of course when you first came. Not many people know it—it is a disgrace that has been well hidden. But it is a disgrace that all the world may soon know. The woman is here.'

'Aunt!' he cries. 'You do not mean to say—not the woman he—'

'Married. Yes. Once his wife, now his widow. And her little girl—his child.'

'Good Heavens!' exclaims Vane Valentine.

Then there is silence. They look at one another across the red light of the fire, two proud, dark faces, confronting, with the same fear and pain in both.

'She is a circus performer—bare-back rider—trapezist—so she tells me. She dances on a tight-rope. She is everything that is brazen and bad, and vulgar and horrible. And she is extremely pretty. She is here with the circus in the town. She called at this house not more than two hours ago. And she threatens to proclaim to the whole country—in posters, in papers, in every way, that she is—has been—George Valentine's wife.'

'Good Heavens!' says Mr Vane Valentine.

It seems the only thing left him to say. He stands absolutely stunned by the tremendousness of the catastrophe. He

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