

"I suppose you want—" He felt out mechanically for the sleeves. The doctor gave it the little lift. "Oh, all right, doctor; I—don't care."

The doctor quietly unlocked the door. "You'll remember," he said, "all locks are not so easy to turn." He flung the door wide open and signed to his prisoner to pass out.

The latter involuntarily drew back, but the doctor looked at him gravely—and he went out.

"One moment," said the doctor quickly. "You speak well; have an educated voice. You have also a sense of shame. The white house by the river must have had—respectable tenants. I'm glad they cannot see their son to-night. Well, I'm not a judge, so I won't deliver sentence. I can only prescribe for my patients."

And he went in and shut the door.

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Less than three hours later a cab drew up at the address of Talma Norris. The landlady came to the door, but she lost her voice in the presence of a gentleman in evening dress.

"Will you take me to his rooms?" he asked. "I'm blind, and I've forgotten to bring my servant."

To take this gentleman to the room in question shocked the woman into speech.

"It ain't my fault," she burst out. "E said when 'e come 'e'd take my attic back! It ain't my fault 'e pays so little—it don't make it worth scrubbin'! An' it ain't my fault 'e's behind with 'is rent, and 'e'll pay or leave on Saturday!"

"You think I shall find him packing?"

The woman laughed. "Packin'!" she said. "Why, 'e ain't got nothin' to pack! 'E's packed what 'e 'ad—at the pawnbroker's—tryin' to pay 'is rent. Will you come this way? It's a long way up to the top."

The visitor dismissed the landlady before she had time to knock at the door on the fourth floor and gently groped his way into the room. He claimed as the privilege of his blindness to enter without knocking.

"Talma! You here?" he said.

Talma was standing at the window, staring into the dark, fighting the Giant Despair—and getting badly beaten. There are times in the rounds with this giant when nothing seems to surprise.

"I suppose you're wearing the coat?" asked his visitor gently.

It was lying flung into a corner of the room. "It—it didn't fit," said Talma.

"I'm glad—it didn't fit. You're telling me the truth?"

"I can't expect you'll believe me—I'm telling you the truth."

"On your honour, are you?"

"On—the honour that is left me!"

"Talma," said the blind man, "do you think you could redeem yourself if you were given the chance? Ah, you need not answer. Well, I'd like to give you that chance. Years ago I loved your mother, but she married your father. I have lived a lonely life—a blind life. A large house—great, lonely rooms; in fields—great, lonely fields. For company, my valet. No wife, no child, no heir! A blind life. Have you ever heard of Sir John Halsted?"

"Yes. When my father was dying, he suggested if I were in need I should go to him for help."

"Did he? You never went?"

"How did you know that?"

"Because I'm Sir John Halsted."

"I might have known," said Talma. "My father wrote you a letter, and I—afterwards I burnt it. I thought I could stand by myself. I'm sorry now I burnt it."

"Yes; you didn't stand—quite so straight—"

"I didn't stand—I fell!" He hesitated. "They advertised a walking part at Drury Lane," he said. "They're putting a street scene on. I thought if I could get it—We have to supply the dress."

"I suppose you are really hard up?"

He had spent his last sixpence. Those who have not spent their last sixpence do not know the tragedy of it. And to-day he had been mad—hunger had! Those who have not suffered it do not know how one may be willing to risk one's soul on the chance of getting money to buy a loaf of bread. He had suffered it, smothering hunger-dulled shame with the thought that there was nobody living who knew him. Really hard up? He could put in such a plea of poverty as might soften the dense blackness of the picture painted of him in the doctor's house. But the presence of Sir John, who had known his people, appealed to his old self, his unfallen self, the self that burnt the letter and tried to stand alone.

"Yes, desperately," he answered.

His room would have shown how desperately, if Sir John had not been blind.

"We were very hard up before," he added, as if to excuse his own failure—"before I was left alone."

"And now you will take my help?"

"Yes, if you would!" Life since two years ago last August had sufficiently humbled him. "I could never repay you. But if you could find me work—" He broke off suddenly, his face reddening. "If it were possible," he said, "to give me that chance you spoke of—to prove I am not so bad."

"If it is possible," said Sir John. "I'll remember what you have said." He paused a long while before speaking again. "I think it right to tell you," he said deliberately, "I am in London—partly to have my will drawn up; and you are mentioned in it."

"I!" said Talma. "I?"

"My heir!" said Sir John Halsted.

"I? You can't mean me!" He was feeling weak, and ill, and hopeless; he had had no food all day—and he had been named heir to the richest man in the finest house in the county. It seemed an unreal farce. "You can't mean me!"

"Your mother's son," explained Sir John.

"But me!"

The blind man nodded; he appreciated the difficulty.

"Ah! that was before you met me at the doctor's. As it is—as it is—Talma, I'm going to take you back with me to the Hall. You shall live with me six months—and then—I'm going to decide how much I must alter the will. Talma, have you had supper?"

"I don't have supper now!"

"Why not? Are you never hungry at night?"

"I'm so hungry, I—" He checked himself hurriedly. "I mean—I haven't had supper."

"Then come and have it with me. They shall put you up to-night at my hotel, and to-morrow you shall sleep at Halsted."

Talma gently took the blind man's arm. He was glad of this little act of service to Sir John, for words of thanks had failed him. Then he paused.

"Well, what is it?" asked Sir John.

"I should like to return the coat."

"Then find someone to take it."

"I think I'll take it myself."

"You needn't trouble," said Sir John. "I've paid the doctor for it. He and I are old pals. I made him take its value. He knows about the will."

The wealth that he had forfeited—by theft! For, of course, Sir John, after such an introduction to him, would erase his name from the will. For his mother's sake, Sir John was taking compassion upon his poverty, giving him a helping hand, would surely put him in the way of earning his own living; but he would find another heir.

But the next six months were secure, freeing him from a burden he had not been able to bear. He guided Sir John down the passage, which was to him no longer perilous.

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At Halsted, eight months later, "Dr. Maynell" was announced. Sir John rose from the deep arm-chair and held out both his hands. "You've come at last," he said, like one relieved from waiting.

The doctor always tried to spend a week near Christmas at the Hall; he called it his winter holiday. He was two months later this year.

"Well," he said, "I want to know what's troubling you? Three letters and a telegram, because I was slow in coming! And all the time you knew I couldn't please myself. I've only time to keep professional appointments. You've no fresh symptoms, have you? Then what's wrong? I told you you weren't to worry."

For the friend was also his patient. Eight months ago, when he had felt it right to warn Sir John, he had felt very sorry for that.

"John," he had said, "you might have consulted a man who wasn't your friend."

"A man who might have lied! From you I want the truth. After all, it isn't your decree. Is it an urgent warning?"

Why is it often we find wicked hearts that are strong and good ones that are weak?

"Not with care," he had said. "I can give you years with care."

"Can I live a quieter life?"

And the doctor had been forced to admit its impossibility.

Sir John's quiet life had accumulated his money. He had never married. He was an only child. His relations were all connections. They only came to him when they wanted to borrow money. He was blind, and behind the times—he still lived in the days when he lost his sight—and he bored them. Besides, they were so sure of him. He had no one else to whom to leave his money, had he? No wife, no child, no heir! Why should he trouble to make a will at all? He would just die quietly out—and they would come quickly in.

The doctor knew them thoroughly; he knew the reputation of the man who would legally be quickest in—and it was not a pretty reputation.

Sir John also knew it.

"You advise me to choose my heir?" he said.

"I think it's good advice." Only it did not seem a question of choice. Was there anything left for Sir John but division among the connections? As to which should have Halsted itself, the doctor thought of suggesting he should write their names on playing-cards—and cut.

"I've chosen my heir," said Sir John.

"Indeed?" said the doctor. Had Sir John cut?

"He's not among the folk who call themselves my own folk," Sir John went on. "My heir's all right."

He spoke over-confidently. He knew his heir by name, and not by reputation; but he thought it safe to say the son of the woman he loved was all right.

And then had followed the drawing up of the will and—the theft of the doctor's coat.

Of all these things was the doctor thinking to-night.

"Well, how's your protegee?" he asked.

"He's upstairs dressing for dinner. I told him you were coming."

"How does he like his new position?" The doctor's thoughts were of the white-faced man who leant against the wall and tried to hide his face.

"He's been like a son to me."

The doctor smiled. It is easy to be like a son to one who has money to leave. Any lazy scamp is fully qualified. "So you haven't altered your will?"

"No. But I—I have decided."

"Did you find him out in other things? Of course, you made inquiries?"

"Made inquiries! There was nothing—but I heard about his poverty. He'd had nothing to eat that day."

"Of course," said the doctor, "as your heir he would not again be tempted under the same conditions."

After all, he preferred the reputation of Talma Norris to that of all the connections.

"No; but there might be others. You see, I can't be sure of him now—and mine's a big estate. I ought to be quite sure; it's a duty I owe the tenants. Besides, I'll not give up the Hall to one who can't be trusted. If I could see his face, I think I could decide; but I'm in the dark. I love to hear his voice—after Ascott's." Ascott was the man who waited upon Sir John. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do." He put it very briefly, for Talma at that moment was coming down the stairs. He was very eager about it, and the doctor, demurring slightly, finally agreed.

"I think you're right," he said, rising. "Afterwards, he must remember he brought it upon himself."

Talma came in to meet the doctor. He looked very well in evening dress. He had not met the doctor since the night that would not die in his and Sir John's memories. Sir John was sitting alone.

"Hasn't Dr. Maynell come?" he asked.

"Yes, he is here." Sir John smiled a little. "I'm glad you have come down; I've something I must say. Talma, have I done you any good?"

Talma glanced down at his hand. He was wearing Sir John's signet ring. At first it would not fit, and now it was rather tight. At Halsted he had played the part of son, companion, secretary; he had lent his eyes to the blind—and all was little in return for the good Sir John had done him. His head was bent, and his voice was lowered.

"I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was a stranger, and you took me in; I was half naked, and you clothed me. You saved me—body and soul. And you ask me, Have you done me any good?"

"You came on a six months' trial," said Sir John; "and then I was to decide—about my will. I have given you eight months."

Talma was sitting facing the window, staring unseeing at the heavy curtains drawn across, sudden, desperate fear upon his face. Sir John might turn him out, weaponless, to fight again for mere existence!

"I have decided," said Sir John.

"For—or against?" He spoke; and regretted speaking—the fear stood out in his voice.

It caught Sir John's notice.

"Against!" he said.

Talma pushed back his chair. The colour rose to high tide in his face and ebbed again slowly, leaving it strangely pale. Sir John's next words brought a quick return of the tide.

"I can't forget that night," he said—he had never been so merciless before. "Gentlemen—never do that sort of thing. Talma, you haven't left me, have you?"

Nothing answered him; nothing stirred—except before the fire the heavy breathing of a sleeping terrier.

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