

took it sharp, you bet. 'I know the lady,' I says, 'I drove her in here from Crouchford last night. She's a-stopping at the George.' I says, 'Leave her to me, it's all right.' The station-master knows me, and I got charge of her and the kid easy enough. I takes 'em back to the George—at least I takes *her* back, leavin' the little one in the trap outside. The chambermaid took her upstairs to her room—she was in a dead faint all the while—and I lays into the horse, and comes along here with the little 'un."

"And where is she?" asked O'Mara.

"Locked in the parlour, downstairs," said Stokes. "What are ye going to do? The mother 'll be back here in no time. She'll guess, if nobody tells her, what's gone with the kid."

"Your penetration does you credit, Mr. Stokes," said O'Mara. "You have managed things very cleverly. Thou art the best o' cut-throats."

"There's another thing, too," continued the publican, "Sir George was with her again last night."

"What, after I got home?"

"Yes. They were together at the bottom of the spinney for a good hour and more."

"Did you hear anything of their conversation?"

"No, I daren't go close enough. But the moonlight was bright and I see him kiss her hand."

"Ah!" said O'Mara, "I think if it should be necessary, that you might remember a little of their talk later on, my good Stokes."

"No," said Stokes, with a resolute shake of the head, "no, no perjury!"

"Perjury!" echoed O'Mara, "My dear Stokes! Go and freshen up your faculties with a little sleep. Or—stay. Wait till I am dressed, and you shall drive Miss Dora and myself down to Crouchford Court. An invaluable fellow, that," he continued, when Stokes had withdrawn, "his scruples are amusing—or would be if they were less costly to his employer. Conscience—not too much of it, but just enough to put up a man's prices—is a splendid thing. He seems to have managed this affair rather cleverly. He has some elementary knowledge of women, too. He's right about Gillian; she'll double back to the Court, when she finds the child is gone, like a hare to her form. I shall have trouble with her, and with that rustic booby of a cavalier servant, too. I wonder if the brute would really have proceeded to violence if I had resisted him last night. By to-day I should be free from that kind of annoyance. My lady will alter her tune when she gets a letter from a London solicitor, stating my claim and my intention to prosecute it to the utmost. She's devilish handsome and well preserved," he went on, as he stropped his razor, "she piques me, with her confounded airs. It would be something of a triumph to win or force her back, and the discomfiture of her admirer, the baronet, would be a rich treat. It will be a hard fight, and she may go to court with a divorce suit, which would be awkward—confoundedly awkward—especially if she won. But could she win? No mortal creature ever saw me lay a hand upon her, save in the way of kindness. She can't *prove* that it was I who took that ten pounds. The desertion looks ugly, but I don't think desertion alone is good enough for a divorce, and even then I have my defence—her assumed name and change of domicile. I have done well to strike first—it's always the safe rule with women. A threatened suit for restitution of conjugal rights may turn out to be a very ace of trumps, and frighten her into submission. It's a stake worth playing for, and my hand is not a bad one, all things considered. Fancy that ass of a baronet going back last night, and talking to her from the public road! I can fancy what a virtuous British jury would make of that and her flight an hour later. That's a trump card, and must not be forgotten."

Communing thus with himself, he finished his toilet, and descended to the room in which Stokes had fastened little Dora. The child was sitting silent, and trembling with terror. It was not his cue to set her against him, and he opened the conversation with an engaging smile.

"Well, my darling, are you ready to go home with papa?"

"You are not my papa!" said Dora.

"Oh, but I am, indeed. Won't you give me a kiss?"

"No," said Dora, "I won't. I don't like you."

"You will like me better, my darling, when you know me better," said O'Mara. "I am a really charming person, I assure you. Come, dry your eyes, and don't cry any more. I am not going to hurt you."

"I want mamma," said Dora.

"We shall find her at home," said O'Mara.

"Come along, the trap is ready."

The child followed him, submissive but obviously distrustful, and Stokes drove them to within a hundred yards of the gate of Crouchford Court. There he stopped.

"Go on, Mr. Stokes, if you please," said O'Mara.

"Oh no," said Stokes, with a dry air and a lengthened shake of the head. "I've had as much of Miss Barbara Leigh as I want. She's a tartar, that's what she is; I don't want *her* to see me along o' you."

O'Mara accordingly descended, and holding Dora by the hand walked to the house and rang. He was admitted by Barbara, who gave an inexpressible snort of anger and contempt at his appearance and handed him Gillian's letter. Dora made a motion to run to her old nurse, but O'Mara checked it.

"Go and sit in that chair," he said, pointing to one in the corner behind him. There was so strong a hint of possible disagreeable consequences in his manner that the child obeyed. He tore open the envelope, and read the missive it contained.

"You've got your will at last," said Barbara, her hatred of the usurper conquering her prudent feeling that it would be best to hide it. "You've driven my mistress away, poor dear. Ah! if she only had *my* sperrit—"

"Yes?" O'Mara smilingly prompted her.

"She'd have stayed and faced ye, ye smooth-tongued, smiling serpent."

"You are really an extremely disagreeable person," said O'Mara.

"Aye, so you'll find me."

"We had better come to an understanding at once," said O'Mara. "I am master here, you are doubtless a hard-working and deserving person, but your appearance—to say nothing of your manners, which are deplorably vulgar—dissatisfies me. I like to have well favoured people about me."

"Ye don't get me out o' this house," said Barbara, folding her arms, "without force, and I wouldn't be in your shoes if you tried *that* dodge. I don't go till I'm told to by my lady, if harm comes to her or to that sweet lamb there, you'll find me harder to reckon with than many a strong man."

"Oblige me by leaving the house," said O'Mara, advancing towards her.

"If I go," said Barbara, "I take Miss Dora with me. Don't ee be afeared, my darling, no harm'll happen to ee while Barby's here to look after ye. Come to Barby!"

"Stay where you are," said O'Mara to the child. "Do you dare," he continued, "to interfere between me and my child?"

"Aye, do I!" said the honest virago, "and what's more, I don't believe she's any daughter o' yours—she's o'er good and o'er pretty!"

"Take care, woman," cried O'Mara, stung through his armour of cynicism by the servant's outspoken contempt.

"Woman, or no woman, I'm a match for you, master; Dontee lay a finger on me. Raise your hand if ye dare, and I'll write my ten commandments on your ugly face! Thank God, there's my lady."

Gillian tottered into the room, overcome with fatigue and fear. Her eyes fell upon Dora, who ran forward with a glad cry and fell into her arms.

"I'm glad you're here, my lady," said Barbara.

"Yes," said Gillian, who had grown quite calm again upon a sudden. "I am here, I have come to take back what this man tried to steal from me, like the coward he is."

"I am glad to see you," said O'Mara, "I expected you."

"You had reason to. You know that I would have risen from my dying bed to save my child from you."

"Pardon me," said O'Mara, quietly, "also *my* child. Let me trust, Gillian, that you have come to your senses, and that your return to this house implies a new and growing feeling of wifely duty."

Gillian, with her eyes fixed upon his face, touched Dora lightly on the head.

"Go with Barby, my darling. You are safe with her."

"Aye, that she is," said Barbara, "but don't stay with him alone. Let me be by."

"There is nothing to fear," said Gillian. "Go, leave us, but remain at hand. In a little while this gentleman will be gone, and I shall be again mistress in my own house."

"My dear Gillian," said O'Mara, with a laugh, when they were alone together, "you amuse me. You are positively splendid."

"What I have to say to you," said Gillian, "can be said in a few words. Weigh them well, they are the last you will ever hear from me."

"I am all attention. Let me remind you, however, that you talk nonsense. You said just now that I was about to leave this house. Quite a mistake. I shall remain,"—he took a chair and crossed his legs with an easy gesture—"and if you are a sensible woman you will remain with me."

"Listen," said Gillian. "Last night you terrified me, your very presence, the thought of what you might say and do, filled my soul with dread."

"Naturally. You see, I commanded the situation."

"In my terror I attempted to escape from you. I was weak and ill, and even as I tried to fly I was struck down. While I lay, feeble and helpless, you had my child stolen from me."

"Quite so. I had warned you of my determination."

"The news was brought to me instantly. Thank God it did not kill me. No. It cured me of all my cowardice, and gave me a mother's strength."

"You still look a little pale," said O'Mara, sympathetically. "Let me get you a glass of wine."

"I feared the world! I feared the scandal and the cry, I shrank from the public shame! I thought 'So long as that man lives, there is no shelter for me, and no escape.'"

"Quite right, my dear—except in sweet submission."

"I said to myself, 'There is nothing he will not do. There is no infamy to which he will not subject me, rather than let me keep my child and live in peace.'"

"An exaggeration, I only—"

"Hear me out. Then, while hastening back home I thought it all out, and before I had reached that door I had made my determination."

"To be reasonable? Come."

"To defy the world, to defy all scandal and shame, and to take my stand upon the law itself as a free and fearless woman."

"A vigorous programme," said O'Mara. "And how do you propose to carry it out?"

"Your desertion absolved me from all responsibility. Your absence for all those years is my justification. I was divorced by your own act, and in proof of that I will invoke the law."

"It won't help you, my love."

"We shall see. Next—you left your child to starve. Day by day, year by year, I have guarded and reared her, without one sign from you. By the duty so done I had made my child mine only—and in that too the law shall justify me."

"You really think so? Anything more?"

"Yes. From first to last I have never had one penny, one crust of bread from your hands. You abandoned me in my poverty. What came to me afterwards escaped you. It is mine—this house, with all in it, and all else that I possess is mine, and that also the law shall prove."

"Try. I am here."

"You will not remain another hour. You will go as you came."

"One moment!" said O'Mara, calmly still. "I will not attempt to combat your very primitive