

sick. If Tom Reid was a scoundrel, Fred Currie was something worse—a white-faced, cringing hypocrite.

He felt ashamed and angry. That Currie should dare to speak to her! That a blackguard like him should even touch her hand!

Jim's own hands clenched. At least, whatever his origin, his life had been clean and open and straight. And while she sat encouraging this coward who was beside her, she treated him with open contempt.

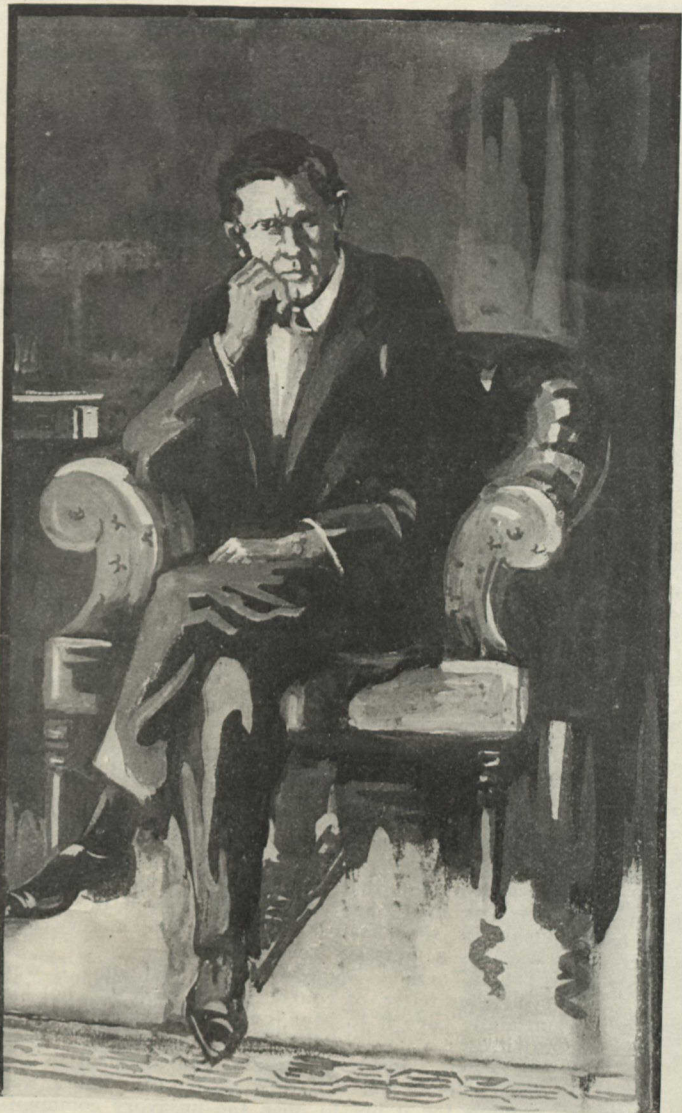
It was the longest evening Jim had ever spent. Mr. Herman was away, and no one else came to break up the little party of four.

There were songs and music. Stella and Currie sang together, and then afterwards for a bitter half-hour before they went he and she sat together on the far side of the room; and Jim watched the flush rising on her cheeks, the light sparkling in her eyes, with bitter misery. If Mr. Herman had been afraid of Reid, then what of this other—a man who knew neither truth nor honor? Better even Tom Reid, he thought, than an unscrupulous coward like Currie.

They were going at last. He rose, too, almost unconsciously following them out into the hall where they stood laughing and talking, finally saying good-night and disappearing in the darkness of the street outside.

He was brought to himself by the slamming of the hall door and the sound of Stella's retreating footsteps. She went past him proudly, not even glancing at him, and with the depression bitter and heavy upon him he turned, walked in a mechanical way towards Mr. Herman's study, where he sat sometimes.

He dropped into a chair before the dying fire, sitting for a long time cold and still, with a sense of almost bodily ill being upon him. When he heard the rattle of a key in the hall door at last he



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started; and it was a strange grey-white face that Mr. Herman saw when he came in.

"Hallo?" he said, "what brings you here?"

Jim did not reply to the question.

"I've found out for you," he said abruptly. "I've found out who it is Stella cares for."

"Eh?"

"It's Currie—young Fred Currie," broke from his lips. "I'm sorry, sir."

For a moment Mr. Herman stared with a puzzled, bewildered look upon his face. Then he laughed outright.

"Go and tell that to the marines," he said.

"But it's true, sir."

Mr. Herman looked again sternly into his face, and stood for a moment with steady eyes fixed upon him. A faint shadow seemed to have crept over him, but Jim expected more than that.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Currie—Currie isn't a good fellow—not good enough for Stella."

"Not good enough, eh?"

"Didn't you know, sir? He's bad, and he comes of a bad stock. No, he's not good enough, but he's the one she cares for." Another odd look swept Mr. Herman's face. He raised his hand and stroked his beard, and if Jim had happened to look at him then he might have seen that he was hiding a smile.

"There's one thing I ought to tell you," he said, "I meant to tell you before. I want to leave you, sir."

"Eh?" Mr. Herman looked startled.

"I want to go. I've felt it for some time, sir. I want to go to America."

"Good gracious, Jim!" broke in Mr. Herman. "You can't mean it? Don't talk nonsense, lad—"

"I do mean it, sir," Jim swung swiftly round. "I can't remain here any longer—I can't stand it—"

"Can't stand what?" Mr. Herman repeated sharply.

"The life, sir. I don't like it. I want to see a lot more of the world than I can see in Medchester."

His voice was steady enough, but Mr. Herman stared hard into his face as if he was seeking the key to a riddle.

"Nonsense, Jim. Think it over. Sleep on it. But now—are you sure of what you say about Stella and Currie?"

"Sure!"

"Well, I must put a stop to that. But tell me how, Jim? Two heads are better than one, aren't they? Well, put yours against mine and tell me how we are to turn her fancy. What do you think of getting some other fellow to make love to her?"

Jim made no reply.

"What do you think would be the result if you did?"

"I?" Jim blazed round, hot and breathless.

"Yes, you. Don't you think you could cut out young Currie?"

"But—for fun, sir? Make love to her—for fun!" There was a depth of hoarseness in his voice that stirred Mr. Herman sharply. He bent forward, his face changing and growing serious, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Why should it be for fun, Jim?" he asked.

Jim started sharply. His face went quickly white, the blood drained from his very lips.

"I—I don't understand, sir," he said in a whisper. "Don't torment me—I'm in a torment already. It is more than I can bear. Don't tease me, sir."

"I'm not, Jim. I mean it; I can see a lot farther than my nose as a rule, and when I suggested to you to find out who she was in love with, I knew what I was doing. I've seen how you felt for a long time. I know, my lad, why it is you began to spend your nights in a bad club, and I determined to stop it—and I set you on a job which I thought would keep you at home. Yes, I've seen it in your face—your looks. God bless her, lad! how could you help falling in love with her? The bonniest lass in Medchester. And you—do you think she couldn't care for you?"

"She hates me, sir," whispered Jim. "Snubs me—"

"Go and snub her in return, my lad," said Mr. Herman.

"I?" cried Jim, startled. "If you are good enough to forget who I am and how I came to you, she doesn't, sir. And you can't mean it seriously—not really."

"I do, Jim, lad. I know you for what you are, and I'd rather have you for a son-in-law than any chap in Medchester; and if you'll go in and try, I'll back you up. You'd better set to work at once and make love to her before my very eyes. And how would it be for me to be indignant, eh? To forbid her to flirt with you? That's the way wise parents set about things, I believe. What do you think, Jim?"

"I don't know, sir," said Jim in a whisper. "I only know that she hates me more than you think. She detests me."

Mr. Herman shook his head.

"Faint heart never won fair lady," he remarked; "but all I can say to you is—save her from Currie. Seriously, my lad—his voice and face changed—"seriously, she must be saved from him, and you can do it—I know you can do it."

"Know." What did he mean? Jim was puzzled, but the chance he had given him, the hope of success worked a magic change in him.

Stella's snubs lost half the effect. He even snubbed her back, to her dismay and astonishment, and somehow the look of indignation and rage which she flashed at him scarcely hurt him.

"Tell her what you told me," Mr. Herman suggested to him.

"Have it out to-night—I'll keep it up."

He did; and his words fell like a bombshell upon Stella's ears.

"Has Jim told you," her father asked, "he's going to America?"

Stella drew her breath with a little gasp.

"Jim?" she began, and stopped.

"Yes, and he wants to go at once, as far as I can make out."

"For—how long?" Stella faltered.

Mr. Herman rose from his seat with the gesture of a man in a rage.

"That's just it. He wants to go for good—wants to go and leave us forever. His mind is set on it, I'm afraid. He's been restless for some time, and now—he'll be off unless you can persuade him, Stella. He won't stop for me—even though I'm as good as a father to him. I've called him ungrateful, but he don't care for that. But anyhow, I can't stand in his way, can I, Stella, if it's for his good?"

Stella was deathly white. All the gaiety of her seemed to have vanished like a smiling country under a mist, and as she went up to her drawing-room she stooped heavily, looking suddenly like a little old woman instead of a girl who had just left school.

She went up to the mantelpiece, and putting down her head upon it, gave a sudden sob.

Jim came in just as Mr. Herman crossed the hall, and was sent to her at once.

"Jim, go and see if I've left my tobacco pouch in the drawing-room and bring it to me."

Jim did not suspect, and at the door he stopped abruptly.

"Stella," he cried, "what is the matter?"

She stood still, scarcely breathing, her head down upon the marble.

He went forward.

"Stella," he repeated, "you are crying."

"I'm not," she lifted her head, and was instantly betrayed.

"You are," Jim took her by the shoulder and swung her round. He would not have dared do that a few days ago. "Stella, what are you crying for?"

"Father says you are going away."

"That's true."

"Why are you going?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Tired of Medchester, I suppose," he answered.

She took a step suddenly towards him.

"Oh, Jim, how you've altered lately," she said. "You're not a bit the same—not like you used to be. Jim, we used to be such chums—"

"That was before you went to France and became a fine lady," he said. "I'm not good enough for you now."

"Not good enough?"

"Well, it seems so—and, after all, it's natural, Stella. My mother a weaver and my father only a working man. I ought not to have felt it so when you snubbed me. I ought to have known my place better."

"Jim, Jim, forgive me," the tears were streaming down her face again. "Jim, I've been a coward—I—I—Oh! do forgive me."

She held out her hands, and the touch of her was too much for him. He trembled sharply. His face went from grey to white.

"Stella," he said hoarsely, "I—I can't help loving you—it's been torture to me day and night—I love you—that's why I'm going. I can't stand it—I can't bear seeing you and Currie together, and I've told your father so. He knows. Oh, Stella! I wish I had dared—to try to make you—forget him. I might have saved you—I might—"

A sudden flush ran up into her face.

"Oh, Jim, do you think it is too late now?"

For a moment he stared at her. Then suddenly his arms were round her, and he was saying over and over again: "I love you, Stella, I love you."

"Oh, Jim, it was because you wouldn't say it that I snubbed you so, and tried to flirt with Currie," she whispered at last.

