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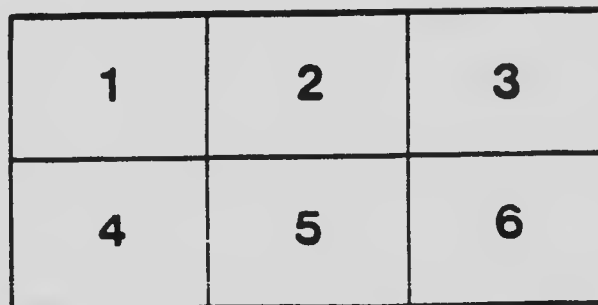
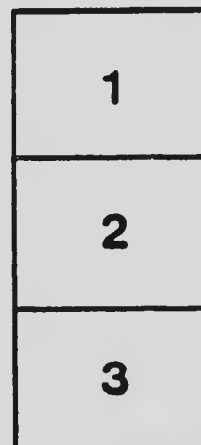
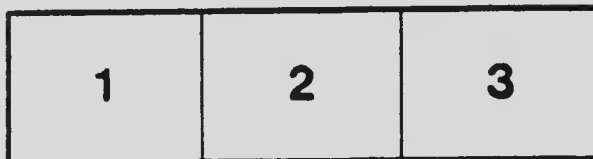
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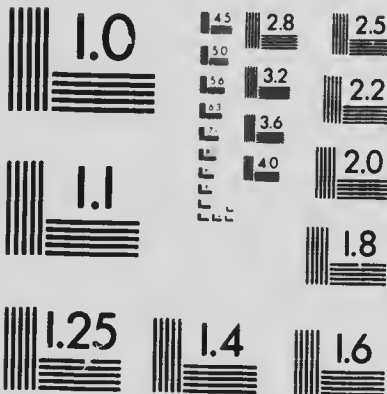
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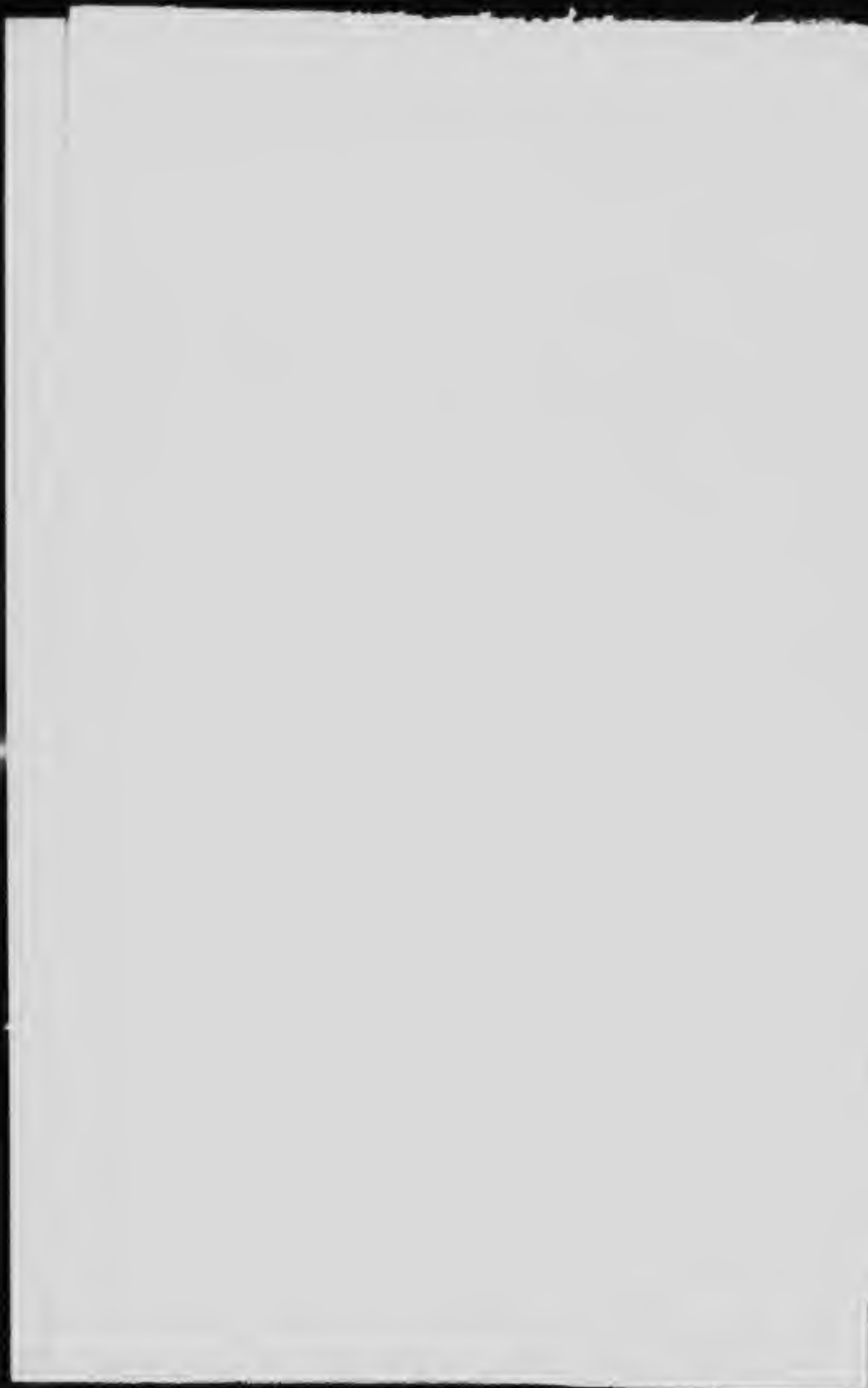
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A FATAL DOSE.





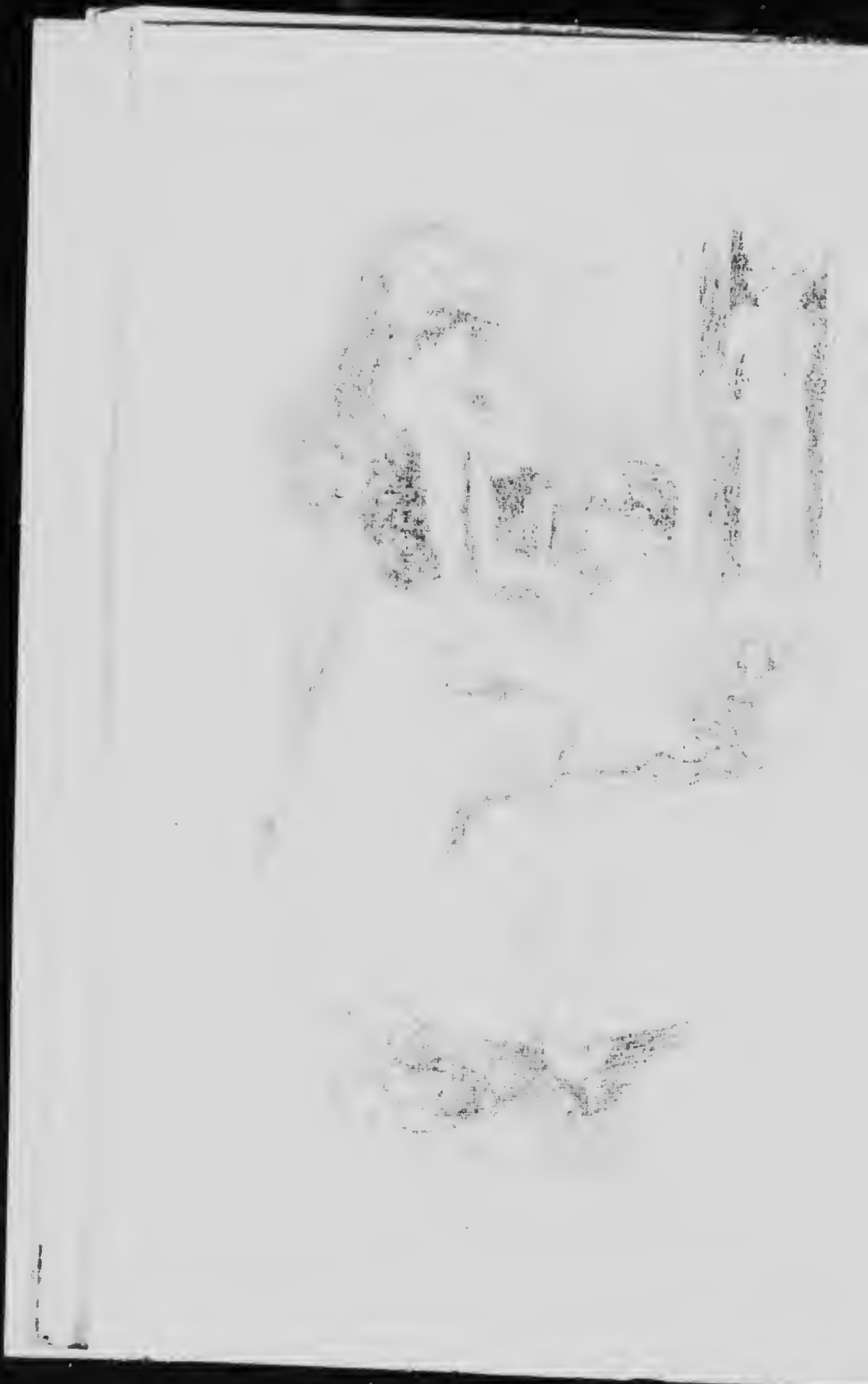


So this is the way you treat me,' a voice in the doorway said." (Chapter XXII)

A Fatal Dose

[Frontispiece]

A FATAL DOSE



A FATAL DOSE

BY

FRED M. WHITE

AUTHOR OF

"THE CRIMSON BLIND," "THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN,"
"THE SLAVE OF SILENCE," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOWARD SOMERVILLE

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A FATAL DOSE.



CHAPTER I.

A WOMAN OF PROPERTY.

THE theatre was very full, for a popular actor had returned to the stage after a long illness, and some of the best people in town had assembled to give him a welcome. It was no new play which the favourite was producing ; instead, he had chosen to appear before his patrons in three separate parts from different successes. As a consequence the intervals were rather long, and the audience had every opportunity of criticising one another. Two men lounging in the stalls were attracted at the same moment by the occupant of one of the boxes on the left-hand side of the stage.

The woman was not particularly young, nor could she, even by the tongue of malice, be called middle-aged. For the rest, her beauty was of the brilliant order. Her fascinating smile exposed a dazzling set of white teeth, her hair was a triumph of art and nature combined. She sat there quite alone, a snowy arm lying carelessly on the edge of the box, the shapely hand set off by a coruscating diamond bracelet. Although she appeared to

be utterly unconscious of the glances turned in her direction, she was, nevertheless, perfectly aware of the sensation she was creating. She was the most striking of the many striking personalities in the house.

"Who is she, Jack?" the first man in the stalls asked. "I don't recollect ever seeing her before. Still, my two years in South Africa make a difference, of course. That woman is not a creature of yesterday, I am certain."

"To be candid, my dear fellow, I can't tell you much about her," the second man said. "These people seem to arrive in a most extraordinary fashion. One day they are not so much as heard of, the next you have to confess yourself out of it if you don't know Mrs. this or Madam that. All I know is that the lady in the box calls herself Marsh—Mrs. Eleanor Marsh. She is understood to be the widow of a rich Virginian of good family, and she floats on the very crest of the wave. She was introduced into Society by the Duchess of Daventry, which ought to be good enough for a humble individual like myself."

"She certainly looks a thoroughbred," the first man went on. "I never saw a woman carry herself with a more superb air, and yet there is something about her a little suggestive of the hawk—you know what I mean."

"Say, rather, of the falcon," the other man laughed. "No, I can't introduce you to her because I have not the pleasure of the lady's acquaintance. Your old chum, Philip Hardy, is

the most likely man to apply to. They are great chums, and I should not wonder if Hardy married her."

"What has Philip got to live upon, then?"

"Oh, haven't you heard? But I forgot you have been outside the pale of civilization for two years. Phil's uncle Raymond and his two sons came to grief in a yachting accident last September, and naturally our lucky friend dropped in for the Raymond share of the business. He is quite a rich man now, and a very big catch. But I am rather sorry to see him mixed up with the fair Eleanor Marsh. There is something about her I do not like, though I could not explain what it is."

"I think I understand," the other said. "But what has become of Lena Grey? In the old days we always thought that Phil and Lena would make a match of it."

"It is just a toss up," the first speaker said. "Between ourselves, if Philip Hardy gives Lena the cold shoulder now he will be treating her very badly. Last night, however, I heard that everything was going smoothly once more. And, by Jove, there they are in the second row of the stalls. How happy the little girl looks. I should be very sorry if anything happened to give her pain."

Apparently the brilliant creature in the box had also made out the figures of Philip Hardy and Lena Grey in the stalls. For a moment a frown contracted her brows, then her face resumed its serenity. Presently the curtain fell

for the last time, the actor made the inevitable speech, and the gay audience began to file out. In the vestibule, Philip Hardy awaited his carriage. By his side stood Lena Grey, her pretty face smiling and happy under the silk hood. By-and-bye a magnificent creature, with a gorgeous opera cloak, swooped down upon them and held out her hand.

"This is Mrs. Marsh," Hardy exclaimed. "A wonderfully successful evening, don't you think?"

"Very," Mrs. Marsh responded. "Now, don't forget that you have promised to come round to my little supper party to-night. I cannot believe that I am so soon forgotten."

A shade of sadness came over the face of Lena Grey, though the look of happiness was not quite dimmed in her eyes. On the contrary, her companion seemed to be pleased about something.

"What do you take me for?" he laughed. "I should be less than mortal had I overlooked an honour like that; but you will forgive me if I do not stay long. I have promised to see Miss Grey as far as Mrs. Marryat's reception, and then to take her on to Lexington House. It isn't much good going to Lexington House for the next hour or more."

"That will fit in beautifully with my arrangements," Mrs. Marsh said, "seeing that I myself am going to the big function. I have told my guests that the supper party must be over by one o'clock; therefore, I shall expect to see you at Courtville Square before mid-night."

With a bow and a flashing smile, Mrs. Marsh

swept on to her electric brougham, which was standing awaiting her in front of the portico. She was one of those fortunate women who never appear to have to wait for anything. Unconsciously, everybody gave way to her, and no one seemed inclined to quarrel with the fact that her conveyance blocked the way. A distinguished general gave her his arm, rejoiced to be able to do this brilliant creature even so small a service. Her voice floated high and gay as she thanked him; humbler people turned and nudged one another, and whispered that this was the rich and famous Mrs. Marsh whom Society delighted to honour.

Nevertheless, the smile faded from her face, and her features became harsh and almost haggard as she lounged back in the shadow. She wondered what all her superficial friends would say if they knew the truth. She had had her enemies, too, but these she had conquered by sheer force of character. Two years ago she had been unknown to the great world of London, and now she had reached the top of the shimmering flood by sheer fascination and audacity. Yet "All that glitters is not gold," and this brilliant creature was dross to the core.

"Not that they need ever know," she told herself cynically, "what a sham and a fraud it all is. Here am I, posing as a woman of wealth, when I am up to my eyes in debt and difficulty, when even the bare necessities of life are paid for by a fraud. And that little wretch of a Monkwell knows it, too. I could see that by the insolent familiarity of his manner yesterday. Why could

not I have left him alone? Why did I pretend to him that he had found a soft spot in my heart? Well, it is all done now and cannot be helped. At any rate, I must get out of Monkwell's power as soon as possible. If I could only lay my hands upon those diamonds of Philip Hardy's! If I could only have anticipated events by a few hours! I can see clearly what has happened. Hardy has thought fit to do his obvious duty and has already proposed to Lena Grey, or I am altogether mistaken. The symptoms in her face to-night were too eloquent to admit of any doubt. I am very sorry; I don't want to trample upon the poor girl's feelings, but seeing that she has come between me and my interests, she must go. It will involve deceit and fraud, I know, but in this cruel world of ours the weak must always go to the wall. Within a week from now the world must know that I am the affianced wife of Philip Hardy, and then I need have no more fear of creditors. With a husband like that—rich, clever, and ambitious—there is no telling how far one might go. It is no use worrying about it any more now. I have more important matters to occupy my attention."

The brougham drew up before the imposing set of mansions where Eleanor Marsh had her flat. The trimmest of French maids awaited her in the hall. A discreet, inscrutable-looking butler came forward and desired to know if his mistress would care to look at the supper table before she changed her dress.

"My good Robert—of course I can leave

everything to you," she said with a smile. Like most women of her class, she always commanded the full loyalty of her servants. "You have never made a mistake yet, and I am sure you are not going to make one now. I must go and change my dress at once."

A magnificent costume, the latest creation of a confiding French modiste, lay in all its tinsel glory on the bed. Presently, Eleanor Marsh stood admiring herself before the long cheval glass, conscious that she never looked better in her life.

"Madame is superb," the maid said. "She is arrayed for conquest."

"Yes," Eleanor smiled. "The conquest of my life."

CHAPTER II.

PLAYING THE FISH.

"FORTUNE favours the brave" was a maxim that Eleanor Marsh had acted on all her life, generally with distinct success. This audacity, in the course of three or four years, had dragged her from the obscurity of a country gamekeeper's cottage to a small situation in town, and afterwards she acquired further knowledge of life in a West End tobacconist's shop. Always clever and imitative, and a consummate actress, she had had some opportunity here of learning of the ways of Society. A little later a broken-down nobleman offered her his hand and the remnant of his fortune, both of which Eleanor had declined. She had far higher aspirations than the besotted, middle-aged man whose affection for her was, at any rate, pure and disinterested. The man had died a little time afterwards, and, to Eleanor's surprise, she found that he had left her some three thousand pounds. Thenceforward the path of progress had been swift and easy, and behold! the woman was now in the plenitude of her power, a striking figure in Society, and one who, given good luck, might finish anywhere.

Eleanor smiled to herself as she sat in her drawing-room awaiting her guests. Her thoughts were frankly amusing. She wondered what Lena Grey would say if she knew that Eleanor Marsh's father had at one time been gamekeeper to the relative who had brought Lena up? It was, of course, impossible for Lena to recognise in Mrs. Marsh the wild slip of a girl whom she had known years before as Nellie Cripps, but Eleanor Marsh had recognised Lena at the first glance. And now she was going to rob the latter of her lover, and ruin her life without the least compunction.

The guests began to arrive one by one, Philip Hardy being the first to put in an appearance. His hostess had an especially tender smile for him. In her own subtle way she led him to infer that his presence was the one thing she especially needed.

"You managed to tear yourself away from Miss Grey?" she said.

"Well, yes," Philip replied. "It was no very difficult matter. You see, I have known Lena all my lifetime, and we have always been the best of friends. There is no jealousy about her either."

A direct question trembled upon Eleanor Marsh's lips. She hesitated whether to put it or not. And yet she felt she must know definitely whether these two had come to an understanding.

"Lena is a dear little girl," she said heartily, "and I don't know whether I ought to congratulate you or not. At the same time, it seems to me that Miss Grey is hardly the kind of girl to make an ideal wife for an ambitious man like you."

Philip frowned slightly, and Eleanor hastened to change the subject. In effect, the man had told her all she wanted to know. He had already become engaged to Lena and yet he was a little ashamed of the fact. Standing there before his brilliant hostess, he felt he had made a mistake. And she read his thoughts as if they had been an open book.

"We will discuss this later," she said. "Meanwhile, I must not neglect my other guests."

The delicately-shaded drawing-room was by this time filled with people. Most of them were going on by-and-bye to Lexington House, and for the rest there were none but men present. Only an up-to-date Society favourite like Eleanor Marsh could have given a party of that kind. Presently the folding doors were thrown back and the grave-faced butler announced that supper was ready. Eleanor started gaily forward.

"No, I am not going to permit anybody to take me in," she said. "It shall not be stated that I gave anybody the preference. A hundred years ago, I understand, that sort of thing gave rise to all sorts of unpleasantness in the way of duels and the like. I will take my place at the head of the table and leave you all to find your own seats."

The supper was a very triumph in its way. The table decorations left nothing to be desired. It was like scores of other entertainments, and yet there was a distinctive note about it, an artistic originality which flavoured everything that Eleanor Marsh did. The thing was costly, extravagant, and there was more than a passing chance that it

would never be paid for. Not that this troubled the hostess in the least. She had no scruples on that head. Besides, the mine was already laid, and she had determined that, within a few days, the world should look upon her as the future wife of Philip Hardy.

The champagne circulated freely. The clatter of plates mingled with the hum of tongues, and the feast was at its height when the grave butler opened the door, and, in tones of sturlious indifference, announced a new guest—Mr. Monkwell.

Just for a moment there was dead silence as the new-comer came forward. He was a little man, slightly bald, with innocent blue eyes peeping out of a face as fat as that of a cherub. He appeared to be a little embarrassed, too, by the unexpected brilliance of the company; but if any man or woman ever ventured to take Mr. Monkwell for a fool in the way of business, they were soon undeceived. The rather silly, boyish face masked a mind amazingly clever and unscrupulous. The thick lips could compress themselves on occasion, as the hostess knew to her cost.

She recovered herself swiftly, as she always did, and bade Mr. Monkwell take a seat at the table. He muttered something about the stupidity of servants, and that he had arrived at an inopportune time. He appeared to be quite overcome, though he was in evening dress, so that, in that respect, the other men had no advantage over him.

"This seems to be carrying originality too far," one of the guests murmured. "It is deuced uncomfortable to sit here opposite that fellow,

knowing that I owe him five hundred pounds I can't pay. Quite embarrassing, you know."

Eleanor's quick ear caught the words, and she bent smilingly in the direction of the speaker.

"Oh, don't be foolish," she whispered. "Don't you see that it is all a mistake? Mr. Monkwell has come at the wrong time, but I could not do less than ask him to join us, especially when my servants were stupid enough to admit him into the room. The fact is, he has brought me some stones which I am anxious to secure, as they are a bargain."

"Oh, that's all right," the distinguished but discomfited diplomatist muttered. "It is an unwritten law that Mrs. Eleanor Marsh does exactly as she pleases. Besides, I have met worse bounders in bigger houses before now—I mean some of those semi-Teutonic financiers."

The feast went blithely forward, no one taking the slightest notice of Monkwell, who ate his supper in a modest, unassuming way, much like a shy schoolboy who is permitted to come down to dessert in the dining-room. But very little escaped his innocent blue eyes; many of the guests there would have been startled could they have looked behind that shabby mask, or even into the troubled thoughts which filled the mind of their smiling hostess. As for the rest, Monkwell appeared to be exceedingly interested in the table decorations, more especially in a new specimen of feathery asparagus fern which stood in the middle of the table.

Coffee and liqueurs came at length, together

with the cigarettes. Never had Eleanor Marsh been more brilliant, never had her conversation possessed more sparkle. Yet, all the time, she was longing to be alone with the little blue-eyed man. From time to time her eye glanced at the clock. She gave a little sigh of relief as the hour of one chimed out.

"Now, positively, I am going to get rid of you all," she said. "Of course it is a great compliment to me to feel that you don't want to go, which is a boast few modern hostesses can make. Still, there really is no alternative, and I must contrive to get to Lexington House by half-past one."

"I must be there before then," Hardy said, as he rose to his feet. "Permit me to thank you for one of the most enjoyable hours I have ever spent. But I have no doubt I shall see you again before morning."

Eleanor pressed Hardy's hand tenderly. There was a liquid gleam in her eyes which thrilled him slightly, cold and self-contained as he usually was. He made his way towards the door, followed by one or two of the other guests. Some still lingered, as if loth to go, but Eleanor swept them aside imperiously but good-naturedly.

"It is very good of you all to offer to take me to Lexington House," she said, "but, unfortunately, I have a little business to transact with Mr. Monkwell, which cannot be put off, unless, indeed, Mr. Monkwell would prefer to come the first thing in the morning. Would that do?"

Though there was a smile on Eleanor's lips, at the same time her eyes flashed a challenge to the little

jeweller. The blue eyes responded just for an instant, and then Monkwell became once more the clever subservient tradesman that he really was.

"As you please, madam," he said. "Only in these matters delays are sometimes dangerous. I should not have come round had I not thought that it would be to your advantage——"

"That is quite enough," Eleanor interrupted. "I am going to stay and have it out with Mr. Monkwell. You will all oblige me by departing at once. You may not be aware of it, but I am a most excellent woman of business."



she had her own reasons why she did not want Monkwell
to see her face for the moment."

[*and so*]

[*Chapter III*]



CHAPTER III.

THE ASPARAGUS FERN.

THE last guest had been ushered out by the inscrutable butler, a sense of peace and quietness fell upon the flat, and Eleanor stood before the fire with one slim, white, satin foot upon the fender. She had her own reasons for not wishing Monkwell to see her face for the moment. The door had been closed by the butler; seated by the table, amongst the artistic litter of fruit and wine and flowers, was Monkwell, calmly smoking a cigarette. He had refused champagne, nor had he ventured to smoke till now. Eleanor turned upon him with a world of scorn in her dark eyes.

"Really, Mr. Monkwell, we are getting on," she said. "I know that, for some time past, the barriers of Society have been breaking down, and that men and women nowadays find themselves among a class of people to which they are not accustomed."

"That is precisely so," Monkwell said in his boyish way. "At the present moment I see before me a most charming example of the type of individual you refer to."

Eleanor quivered with a passion she could hardly restrain. There were few persons she was afraid of, few men from whom she would have shrunk, but Monkwell was one of them. She feared this man, she feared his peculiar air of innocence, she felt that he was an enigma. His words had been quiet enough, but she understood them perfectly. She came a step nearer the table herself and proceeded to light a cigarette in her turn.

"I have not much time," she said, "because I have important business elsewhere. Still, I should like you to explain that remark of yours; even less dense people than myself might regard it as a piece of gross impertinence."

"Not at all, not at all," Monkwell said. "I meant every word of it. Ah, you are a clever and audacious woman, and some day you may land in a very high position indeed, but I know what I know and I keep my information to myself, unless you challenge me as you did just now. Then, perhaps, you will compel me to tell you a little story. Truly, it reads like a romance. Here is a girl, brought up in the heart of the country; she lives in the open air; her food is the hard food of the people. But all this is the making of her, because it builds up that magnificent health and strength of nerve which is so fine a weapon in the world's fight to-day. The girl is ambitious; she knows she is beautiful; she eagerly devours all fiction bearing upon the lives of the great. Then she leaves the village. She graduates through a West End cigar shop, and finally finds herself the mistress of a few thousand pounds. Need I

carry the story farther? She makes up her mind to finish at the top of the tree, and at present she is within an ace of doing so. But this is a dangerous game and an expensive one. Just at the moment when success is within her grasp, she has the most pressing need of money. She falls back upon the old expedient of trying to obtain possession of valuables and then disposing of them. The tradesmen are shy; the lady has not quite established herself upon a sufficiently high basis to gull my colleagues in Regent Street and Bond Street. But still, there is another way, just as useful and far less dangerous, because it implies no monetary liability in the future. We will say the lady in question comes to my establishment and looks at a lot of valuable diamonds. She does not ask for credit, she does not purchase anything; but just as she is going away, goods to the value of over a thousand pounds are missing. There are other people in the shop, so that it is impossible to say definitely who has taken the gems. The lady smilingly submits to be searched, and the more thoroughly the operation is carried out the more pleased she seems to be. Of course, we have to make the most profuse apologies, which we do, but we are not satisfied. We shall never be satisfied, though we have our own ideas which are not likely to be altered. I have my loss, and I had made up my mind to write the debt off as a bad one when I came here on business to see you this evening."

"It was a very foolish time to come," Eleanor said coolly. Slowly, as she spoke, and self-contained

as she appeared to be, a brilliant red spot burnt on either cheek. "Surely you could have done better than force yourself upon us this evening."

"That is as it may be," Monkwell went on. "I have been finding out things and putting two and two together. As I sat here to-night, I was pleased to find that my little experiments had not altogether been in vain. Is it not a fact that your florists are Stephanie and Co., of 'Lington Gardens?"

"Why, yes," Eleanor exclaimed in some surprise. "But what on earth can that have to do with the question under discussion?"

"I was just coming to that," Monkwell went on. "You see, I always prided myself upon the palms and ferns which I keep in my establishment. I have a contract with Stephanie and Co. to look after the plants and change them when necessary. They are apt to deteriorate in the atmosphere of a business establishment. Some time ago Stephanie and Co. sent me a fresh consignment of palms, amongst which was quite a new specimen of an asparagus fern. It was so graceful that I sent round to Stephanie for some more. They sent me back word to say that they had supplied me with the only one they possessed, and that the specimen in question was absolutely unique. In fact, it is precisely the same plant that you have in the centre of your supper table at the present moment."

"The same?" Eleanor faltered. "I—I don't understand——"

"Oh, I am coming to the point quickly enough

now. I know it is the same plant ; in fact, I recognised it by that broken little branch at the top. As soon as I sat down here this evening I saw through the whole thing like a flash. The lady I speak of came to my establishment ; she took up the missing diamonds and thrust them amongst the earth in the palm. They would be perfectly safe there, with not the slightest chance of their presence being discovered. A day or two later, the lady goes to Stephanie and Co., and asks them to supply her with an asparagus fern like one that she has seen in Monkwell's shop. They do not like to say they haven't got them, but profess that they will send her one in a day or two. The thing is quite easily managed ; under pretence of changing my stock this unique specimen finds its way into Courtville Square, and the diamonds are safely removed from their hiding-place. Now, Mrs. Marsh, do you understand what I mean, or must I speak still more plainly ? Of course, you can defy me if you like, or you can take the wiser course and give me an opportunity of getting my money. I don't want to be too hard upon you, and I will give you just three days to find the cash. If I don't receive it by that time, I will issue a warrant for your arrest, as sure as you are a living woman. Those are the conditions—a thousand pounds within three days, or you become acquainted with the inside of a gaol."

Eleanor Marsh attempted no defence ; she was far too clever a woman for that. As far as Monkwell could see, she did not turn so much as a hair. There was a hard smile on her face.

"Very well," she said; "I think I can see my way to manage it by that time. Almost at once I am going into the country to stay with the Duchess of Daventry. I had better give you her address, so that you can communicate with me if necessary. Have you a visiting card in your pocket, or a piece of paper?"

Monkwell searched his pockets and produced a telegram. He tore off a corner and pencilled the address down upon it, then he retired, leaving the pink flimsy behind him. In a mechanical kind of way Eleanor took up the telegram and read it. A quick cry came from her lips; she rang the bell for the butler.

"A marvellous trick of fortune," she cried. "Robert, Jasper Cleave will be in England tomorrow. You must find him without fail. To think that this should fall into my hands!"

CHAPTER IV

FOR HIS SAKE.

IN a very thoughtful frame of mind, Philip drove along with the idea of finding Lena and taking her to Lexington House. He was disposed to be annoyed with himself, because he felt that in a way he had played the coward in not telling Eleanor Marsh that his engagement to Lena was an accomplished fact. He might have gone further and said that they also were going down to stay with the Duchess of Daventry, and that the engagement would be formally announced there. Indeed, Philip was actually taking his mother's family jewels with him, so that Lena might see them and make up her mind as to whether or not she approved of the setting. It was, perhaps, a small matter, but on the whole it would have been more loyal and straightforward to have told Eleanor Marsh this. And yet, all the time, Philip was haunted with the idea that Eleanor was the wife for him.

At any rate, he put her out of his mind now, resolved to think no more about her. Lena welcomed him shyly. She was glad to have her

lover back again; she had striven not to feel in the least jealous of Eleanor Marsh.

"So you have come for me," she said timidly. "Really, I began to feel quite anxious about you. I am so sorry we have had no opportunity as yet to discuss one or two little things that trouble me. Do you know, I sometimes feel afraid of the future. I doubt if, after all, you have made a wise selection, Philip. I am so shy of Society and its many strange ways."

Philip laughed. He could understand quite clearly what was passing in the girl's mind.

"You will get used to that in time," he said. Not once during this time had he shown the slightest disposition towards endearment; indeed, Lena could have counted the times her lover had kissed her since their engagement.

"You want someone more stately," she said—"someone more commanding. I used to think at one time that Eleanor Marsh would have suited you better."

Hardy shrugged his shoulders indifferently. He felt a little mean, too.

"Yes?" he said. "An exceedingly brilliant woman—clever and all that sort of thing—but at the same time, I can never get it out of my mind that there is something of the adventuress about her. For instance, she never speaks of her people, except some vague references to relations in Virginia, and I am quite certain that the money she makes by her journalism is not sufficient to maintain that luxurious flat in Courtville

Square. By the way, I saw that she was in the House to-night, with Lady Lorimer."

They stood there for some time longer, discussing the future—always his future, by the way—until Hardy noticed a little impatience pass over the face of his companion.

"I am sure, I beg your pardon," he said contritely. "You are ready. Had we not better get on as far as Lexington House?"

They drove away together and came at length to their destination—one of the largest houses in Grosvenor Place. The establishment was lighted from top to bottom. Crimson cloth lay across the pavement, a constant stream of carriages ebbed and flowed before the door, and at the head of the stairs one of the most fashionable and exclusive hostesses in London greeted Hardy warmly.

He was already beginning to feel the subtle intoxication of success. In her shy, quiet way Lena slipped in; she was terribly afraid of great ladies like her hostess. She had only come here to-night to please Hardy, but there were many people here to whom she was known, and almost at once she was surrounded by a bevy of friends. Looking up presently, she saw with a smile that Philip Hardy was in animated discussion with the very woman whom they had so recently been discussing. They made a handsome pair as they stood there together, and Lena sighed just a little enviously as she recognised the fact.

The dark, glittering eyes of Eleanor Marsh rested on Hardy's face with a subtle flattery. He was always moved to his best in the presence of this

woman, though there was something about her at the same time that repelled him. She was smiling her sweetest and best now; her words of welcome were smooth and well chosen.

"Lucky in war, lucky in love," she said gaily. "Is it a fact that I am to congratulate you on your engagement to Lena Grey? But why did you not tell me before supper to-night?"

Philip nodded gravely. Just for a moment the woman's face grew hard; she hid her eyes behind her fan. It was only a fleeting spasm, and a second later she was smiling as gloriously as ever. With a bow and a smile she turned to another man who had just come up to claim her society. Philip moved on, thinking nothing of this interview, and little dreaming how fateful it was going to be for him. He was somewhat bored and tired of this idle frivolity; he wanted to be alone, to think over the events of the evening. Perhaps Lena divined what was uppermost in his mind, for she stole across the room and laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't you want to go?" she asked. "Philip, you have been working too hard lately, your eyes look tired and misty. Whatever you do, don't neglect your health."

Hardy laughed indifferently. He was feeling to-night that he could defy the fates in all directions. He was so well, so strong, and so successful that illness of any kind seemed far removed from him. He had listened lightly to a famous specialist's statement that he would have to be careful of his heart. True, he saw things in a dim and hazy

way sometimes, but a day or two's rest speedily gave relief. Nevertheless, he professed himself ready to do anything that Lena needed. She drew him towards the door.

"Then let us go," she said. "Take me home to aunt's flat. She will not be back just yet, so that we can have a delicious hour together. We have been in London now for over a month, and I have only seen you twice in the last fortnight."

"I feel horribly guilty," Hardy laughed. "We won't have a cab; we will walk as far as the flat."

Lena asked nothing better; she felt perfectly happy now, as she sauntered along with her hand in her lover's arm, listening to his glowing plans for the future. It was about himself that he talked, and Lena was too wrapped in him to notice the selfish egotism of it all. She was only too happy in the knowledge that she had won this man's affection; she was frightened by the reflection that she might not be worthy of him. With his head in the air, Hardy strode along, quickening his pace unconsciously. As they turned a corner, a shabbily-dressed man, loafing furtively, came in more or less violent contact with Hardy. The man's shiny hat fell to the ground; he muttered something angrily about the stupidity of people who would not take the trouble to look where they were going. Hardy apologised in his superior manner; the man appeared to be about to retort angrily, then suddenly turned on his heel and crossed the road.

He stood for a moment watching the retreating figures, his face working convulsively; then he

threw up his head and laughed bitterly. The others were out of sight now.

“Philip Hardy—and, as I live, Lena Grey,” he muttered. “I wonder if they recognised me; but that is impossible. If they had, Lena would have stopped; she was always forgiving and sweet-tempered. I wonder if it is possible——”

The man stopped abruptly and drifted down the street.

CHAPTER V.

A ROLLING STONE.

THE outcast wandered on, stopping from time to time as if waiting or hoping for something. He was conscious of the doubtful glances of the passers-by; he noticed also that more than one policeman took a mental note of him. It was not to be wondered at, seeing that, despite the way he carried himself, his general appearance was suspicious to the last degree. His shabby frock suit at one time had been fashionable enough—indeed, frayed and creased and soiled as it was, the flavour of Bond Street still clung to it. The coat was buttoned up tightly, to disguise the absence of a shirt; the greasy top hat was stuck on the head at a defiant angle. Altogether he looked a man to be shunned, as a glance at his shifty eye and unshaven face testified.

And yet there was a time when Jasper Cleave had walked the West End on terms of equality with the best of them. He had been accounted a good fellow and a true friend. He had ample means at his disposal, and more than one designing mother had been ready to welcome him as a probable son-in-law

But there had been a weak spot somewhere—something wanting in the man's mental fibre. There had been a scandal, sudden and unexpected, and Jasper Cleave's place knew him no more. He had drifted abroad as men of his class do; the waters of oblivion had closed over his head; his name had ceased to be mentioned.

Those had been terribly trying years for the ruined gambler. He had starved with others of his clan and had seen many strange and unspeakable experiences, and now some back-water of the sea of life had cast him back upon the streets of London without hope, without friends, without money.

His wandering footsteps brought him presently to the fine block of buildings known as Courtville Square. Here he paused and looked about him curiously. The grounds were all fresh to him; the huge series of flats had not existed when he went away. He could see the blinds pulled up somewhere on the second floor, revealing a glimpse of a luxuriously-furnished room within, brilliantly lighted with soft shaded electrics. Jasper Cleave had seen nothing like this at close quarters for the last three years, and the sight fascinated him. It was just possible that some old-time friend lived there, some man whose hospitality he had shared before his fall. He was still gazing at the fairy scene when he turned to see a neatly-dressed man-servant standing by his side. With a bitter smile he noticed that the man actually lifted a subservient hat to him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the servitor said, "but am I not speaking to Mr. Jasper Cleave?"

Cleave laughed aloud. The irony of the situation appealed to his cynical humour; he had almost forgotten what it was like to be addressed in this fashion; he felt himself in every way inferior to the man who addressed him. He was disposed for the moment to deny his own identity. There might be some subtle scheme behind all this. On the other hand, it was just possible that the man had recognised him. Also, whatever scheme was afoot, Jasper Cleave could not possibly be worse off than he was at that moment.

"Well," he said guardedly, "we will suppose that my name *is* Cleave. What have you to say to that? What business can it be of yours?"

The man-servant lost not a whit of his subservient manner; he might have been speaking to his own master.

"I have been tracking you all day, sir," he said. "My employer would like to see you. There is only one stipulation—that you ask no questions and do exactly as you are told. Believe me, sir, it will be to your advantage to fall in with my suggestion."

Cleave grinned evilly as he noted his own sorry rags. Any change from the present situation must be to his advantage.

"Where does your employer live?" he asked.

The servant pointed to the brilliantly lit-up room opposite.

"That is the dining-room, sir," he said. "If you are not disposed to fall in with the suggestion——"

"Lead on," Cleave said hoarsely. "Lead on,

my good fellow; I am not in a position to decline anything that looks like giving me a respectable meal, to be followed, if the gods are good, by a cigar and a cup of coffee."

The man-servant led the way across the flagged hall and up the steps into the most perfectly-appointed suite of rooms that the adventurer had seen for many a long day. He felt a little uplifted by the sight of so much good taste and luxury. It reminded him of the time that had gone for ever. All the same, he did not fail to detect a certain note of femininity in the arrangements of the flat. It could not be possible that some lady had suddenly fallen in love with him, Cleave thought grimly, though certainly the whole thing had a distinct suggestion of the "Arabian Nights" about it. The silent man-servant might have passed for a slave of the ring, quite up-to-date. Cleave could see the man regarding his tattered wardrobe more or less critically in the strong light.

"Perhaps," he said, "you would like to make some little change in your dress before supper. If you will come into the bedroom with me I shall act as valet to you——"

"Certainly," Cleave said grimly. "I shall find my kit bag and dressing-case ready laid out for me. As I have just come off a long voyage, my somewhat dilapidated appearance may be pardoned. Now what am I to call you? Robert? Well, Robert, if you will be so good as to shave me, and put the diamond studs in my dress shirt, I think I shall be able to manage the rest."

Robert neither bowed nor smiled; he seemed to take the whole thing for granted.

"Very good, sir," he said. "You will find everything ready if you come this way. Perhaps you would like a bath."

Too utterly dazed now to make any further comment, Cleave followed the soft-footed servant into a bedroom at the end of a corridor. It was obviously a man's room somewhat plainly furnished, but lacking nothing that any man of fashion could desire. Here were silver-mounted toilet requisites on the dressing-table, brushes, combs, a case of razors, everything necessary. As Robert turned up the lights, Cleave could see a bathroom leading out of the apartment beyond. As he turned his cynical eyes around the room, he could see a black mass on the bed, which resolved itself presently into a dress suit. Here were also ties, socks, silk underclothing, nothing lacking in the way of wardrobe. To Cleave's amazement he saw that everything here was marked with his own initials.

"I shall wake up presently," he muttered, "and find myself on a seat in Hyde Park. This is nothing else but delirium, and yet circumstances over which I have no control have deprived me of intoxicants for the last few weeks. Robert, you are a veritable magician. I deliver myself absolutely into your hands."

The whole thing was done at length, and Cleave stood before the long looking-glass trying to identify his own features. The scraggy beard was gone; the change from rags to purple and

fine linen had made a wonderful difference to the man. He held his head higher and felt on more equal terms with the world. The touch of the soft silken underclothing gave him a certain sense of power. Robert stood at his elbow holding out a gold-mounted cigarette case; he struck a match subserviently.

"Oh, yes," Cleave said, "I will not disguise to you, my good Robert, that I have not smoked a cigarette of this quality for the past three years. This is excellent. It brings back recollections of my gilded past. Now let us proceed with the adventure. What is the next stage of the programme?"

"Supper, sir," Robert said practically. "Will you be good enough to follow me to the dining-room? My employer will be here presently and then my task is finished. If there is anything you require, perhaps you will be good enough to ring the bell, sir. I shall not be far off."

Feeling as if all the world were at his feet, Cleave strolled into the dining-room. A day or two before he had been glad enough to eat the most indifferent food. Now his critical eye noted with approval the daintily-arranged supper table. Everything was cold, as if the owner of the flat had intended that the meal should be partaken of without the presence of servants. There were gold-foiled bottles on the sideboard, and a tempting array of ruby-filled decanters on the flower-decked table. Without hesitation, Cleave poured himself out a large glass of claret and drank it with gusto. The generous wine glowed in his veins

"*Chiteau Lafitte*," he said. "Oh, how the taste brings back memories of the dear dead past! I wonder what it all means. I wonder who the philanthropist is who has arranged this delightful little comedy for my delectation? But possess your soul in patience, Jasper, you will know before very long."

The words were hardly uttered before the door opened and a tall, dark woman swept into the room. There was a pleased smile of welcome on her face, and she extended both hands in the heartiest possible fashion to her visitor.

"This is an unexpected meeting, Jasper," she said.

"Eleanor Marsh," Cleave cried. "Eleanor Marsh, as I am alive. Sit down at once and tell me what all this means."

CHAPTER VI.

THE COMPACT.

THE woman crossed the room and pulled down the blinds. Then she returned to the supper table, having first satisfied herself that the door was closed. Cleave watched her in a hazy kind of way, as if he still doubted the evidence of his senses. He had been practically without food all day and was utterly worn out and exhausted. Moreover, the fumes of the generous wine were still clouding his brain. He had to pinch himself to be sure that the whole thing was not a figment of imagination. He would not have been surprised if the glorious dark vision in the amber dress had taken wings and flown. But there she sat on the other side of the little round table, her dark liquid eyes smiling into his.

"You must not talk yet," she said. "Let me do the talking. When you have sufficiently recovered your mental balance we shall be able to discuss the plan of campaign."

"But what does it all mean?" Cleave asked. "Whence all this splendour? When I last saw

you you were in a tobacconist's shop. Mind you, Nell, I always said you would get on, always prophesied that you would do something for yourself in the world, and you have progressed a little farther than I expected. A good marriage, I suppose——”

The woman laughed in a light-hearted fashion. She was looking after Cleave's creature comforts; he was trying to eat now as if he were accustomed to this kind of thing. He fought against his wolfish appetite.

“There is no husband,” Eleanor Marsh said. “In fact, there never has been. I still retain my own name; sudden changes of that kind would have been awkward sometimes. Behold in me, my dear Jasper, Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, the widow of a deceased Virginian gentleman of good family and fairly good means. That is the *rôle* that I have played more or less successfully for the past two years. It is astonishing what a little impudence, allied to a fair amount of ability, can do in this so-called Society of yours. Behold me now, fresh from the reception of a duchess; but I have even been under the same roof as Royalty. But all this is by the way, Jasper. Everything that glitters is not gold, and you must take all you see about you at its face value. I make a certain amount of money by my pen, but not nearly enough to keep myself in circumstances like these. I have been unlucky lately, too, and my available war-chest at present contains less than a thousand pounds. Still, I have a great scheme on hand, and in that scheme I shall require your assistance.

If the scheme is a success there are five hundred pounds for you. I do not flatter you by supposing that you are over-scrupulous, being quite certain——”

“Oh, don't let's worry about my scruples,” Cleave said impatiently. “I am a desperate man, ready for anything. When your servant found me to-night I was starving. I am entirely in your hands and will do anything you please. What would I not do for five hundred pounds? But, tell me, how did your man find me to-night?”

“Well, that is simplicity itself. Quite by accident I learnt that you were coming home; I also found out what boat you were travelling by. My discreet and faithful Robert would have met you at the Docks only he was unfortunate enough to get his cab stopped in a block and thus lose sight of you. But Robert is a veritable sleuth-hound, and has his own way of doing things—but what does it matter? You are here and you are ready to fall in with my wishes.”

“You are a wonderful woman,” Cleave said with deep admiration. “I always said that you were born for great things, but how did you manage about this wardrobe of mine? Positively, I might be sitting here in my own garments.”

“So you are,” the woman laughed. “I suppose you have been away too long to have noticed that your dress-suit is not quite abreast of present fashion. Don't you remember when you left England suddenly, everything behind you was abandoned? You were very extravagant in clothes in those days, my dear Jasper, and you

left behind enough for a score of men. To make a long story short, when I heard you were coming home, I went down to your old rooms and found that your landlord had stowed your boxes and cases away in the faint hope that you might some day return and recover them. Twenty pounds did the rest, and there you are. Now is there any other information that I can give you?"

Cleave repeated his remark that his companion was a wonderful woman. He had satisfied his hunger now; he was soothing his nerves with those exquisite cigarettes; a full glass of wine stood by his elbow. On the whole, the world was not so bad a place as he had thought. It was a wonderful change, too, for a man who an hour before had been a starving outcast and wanderer.

Cleave's wits were sharpened now; he noticed a brilliant red spot burning on the cheeks of his companion. He leant towards her confidently and touched her arm. She looked up with a significant smile upon her lips.

"I know what you are thinking," she said. "You are wondering why it is I do not come to the point. I want you to cast back your mind some four or five years. In those days, you will remember, I was little more than a child living in the village where you were born. In fact, where we were both born. I little thought in those days that I should come to be on such terms of intimate friendship with the most important man in the parish."

"Never mind that" Cleave said uneasily.

"The old home has passed into the possession of strangers and I am never likely to see it again. I shall be obliged if you will touch that topic as lightly as possible."

"My dear Jasper, it is absolutely necessary to mention the past. I want you to recall the time when you fondly imagined yourself cut out for the *rôle* of a county gentleman. You were going to marry and settle down, when your father died. I daresay you would have done so, only unfortunately you fell into bad company and your weak disposition answered for the rest. You forgot the little girl to whom you had given your heart, and, no doubt, in time she forgot you. But she was only a child at the time, and youth speedily recovers from that kind of thing. Need I remind you of the fact that I am speaking of your old sweetheart, Lena Grey?"

Cleave smiled lightly, as one who recollects tolerantly the days of early folly.

"I have not thought of her for years," he said. "She was but a child then, certainly not more than seventeen, though I believe she had the bad taste to be very fond of me. She also had an exceedingly narrow escape. But that is all by the way. It is a most extraordinary thing, Nellie, that you should have mentioned Lena's name. I passed her to-night; nearly ran into her, in fact. I did collide with her companion, whom I recognised as Philip Hardy. What a conceited prig he used to be! I never used to see him without wanting to kick him. I hated that fellow."

A peculiar smile passed over the listener's face

and her cheeks flushed slightly, but Cleave noticed nothing of this.

“Philip Hardy is by way of being a great man now,” she said. “He is one of the spoilt children of fortune. It is certain that he has lately inherited a huge fortune. To be perfectly candid with you, my dear Jasper, I am exceedingly fond of Philip Hardy. Up to a short time ago, I felt pretty well certain that I was going to be asked to share his distinguished career. Not that I care much for the career as long as I share the fortune. By a piece of ill-luck Lena Grey stepped in, and I understand their engagement will be announced to-morrow. This brings me to the point. You know my disposition, Jasper; you know how I can smile and smile when my heart is full of fury. I could kill that little pink-and-white doll; I could take her throat in my hands and squeeze the life out of her without remorse. It matters nothing that she has come between me and my ambition unwittingly; she is there, and she will have to be removed by fair means or foul. It maddens me when I think of it. Here I had the ball at my feet, and was on the verge of a marriage with a rich man, who can have a title whenever he wants it. In two years I should have been one of the recognised queens of Society. Nothing could have stopped me. Nothing could have barred my progress. If that little white cat had only kept out of the way for another two days my ambition would have been crowned. She must go, Jasper; she must be wiped out of existence. And you are the very man to help me to do it. Do you understand?”

The speaker had risen to her feet now and was pacing up and down the room, a picture of beautiful subdued fury. Cleave could see her eyes flashing like points of flame; he saw how the slim hands were clenched together; there was a deep intentness, too, in the tone of the woman's voice which told of her iron determination. She paused in her restless stride presently and laid a shaking hand on Cleave's shoulder. The strength and tenacity of the clutch fairly astonished him.

"I don't want murder," she hissed; "that kind of thing is so cheap—and dangerous. I have a far better scheme than that. If you will only listen to me, the part you have to play is no difficult one; you only want audacity and ability to lie with a perfectly solemn countenance. Now, tell me, in those days when you were going to play the part of the model squire with the little doll by your side, did no letters pass between you?"

"I have no doubt they did," Cleave confessed. "Though I have not the remotest idea where they are. Probably I destroyed them."

"Indeed, you didn't," the woman laughed. "I found them in one of your boxes, and they gave me a hint as to what I could do. Now sit down, and listen to my scheme, and don't forget that there are five hundred pounds for you if you are successful."

"Go on," Cleave said hoarsely. "For a sum like that I would not stop at murder."

CHAPTER VII.

PANGS OF CONSCIENCE.

IF outward appearances counted for anything, Eleanor Marsh had every reason to be satisfied with her present surroundings. From the long, luxurious chair in which she was reclining, she could have looked, had it been daylight, over one of the fairest expanses of country in the south of England. The view from Court Royal extended away south from Reigate almost to the Channel. Indeed, out of all the many estates owned by the Duke of Daventry, Court Royal was easily the favourite with his beautiful Duchess.

A distinguished house-party had gathered in the historical mansion, ostensibly to enjoy a series of week-end festivities, which embraced a night fête in the gardens, but really the exclusive function was devised on behalf of Philip Hardy. Like most modern Society leaders, the Duchess took the keenest interest in rich young men. Philip Hardy was a great favourite of hers, and she had determined to push him by every means in her power.

To this aristocratic gathering Eleanor Marsh had contrived to be invited. She had done more than that, for she had also managed to obtain a card for Jasper Cleave, whom she had skilfully planted on some friends of hers living in the immediate neighbourhood.

The woman's plans were all completely laid, and she had a willing and obliging tool in the man by her side. Yet, at the same time, there was a frown on Cleave's face and a shrinking look in his eyes, as if he dreaded the task which lay before him.

The brilliant dinner party had been over for some little time, and there was a lull before the arrival of the numerous guests who were bidden to the subsequent reception. As the saffron light of evening faded to a dim, mystic purple, points of flame peeped out here and there in the grounds, till presently the gardens and lawns were one blaze of electric light. From a distant spot came the sound of a band softly playing.

"Well, I suppose you are satisfied now?" Eleanor Marsh said, as she turned to her companion. "Rather a different lot yours now compared with a month ago."

Cleave shrugged his shoulders with assumed indifference. Certainly he looked very different to the tattered outcast who had been hanging about Courtville Square only the other day. Even an astute observer would have failed to detect any difference between Cleave and the ordinary well-groomed Society man. His tone was anything but grateful as he replied.

"Oh, that's right enough," he said. "But what does it lead to? It's true that I have to thank you for a good deal, but I am very little the better off; of course, I have a wardrobe and a roof over my head; but frankly, my dear Nell, living on borrowed fivers of yours is not altogether to my taste. Besides my position here is a little bit invidious. It was all very well till Hardy and Lena Grey arrived this afternoon, but ever since then I have been dodging about keeping out of their way."

"And why should you keep out of their way?" Eleanor asked scornfully. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"You don't know Hardy as well as you profess to," replied Cleave. "And you quite forget the fact that I knew him years ago. He is acquainted with my past, except possibly the little episode between myself and Lena Grey. Your would-be lover is a pretty hard man, like most strictly virtuous people, and if he recognised me here this evening, I should have to beat an ignominious retreat. If I refused to do so, he would most assuredly acquaint the Duchess with some of my purple patches, and then you would have to work this little thing on your own account. Besides, you have not yet told me what you want me to do."

Eleanor Marsh paused for a moment before she replied; from her seat on the wide verandah she could command a view of a noble corridor, terminating in flights of marble steps and filled with palms and flowers on either side. It was

very much like looking from the darkness of a theatre on to a brilliantly lighted stage, and there on the stage was a little tableau that caused Eleanor to clench her teeth and clutch the arm of her companion.

"Look there!" she whispered. "Look on that half-landing! Now tell me, my friend, what do you see?"

There was no reason for Cleave to explain, for the picture lay plain enough before both of them. Two figures stood there in earnest conversation. Hardy, tall and vigorous, looking a successful hero to the life, with Lena Grey by his side, her face upturned lovingly to his.

"What do you think of that for a picture of domestic bliss?" Eleanor sneered. "He has forgotten everything but her for the moment. I tell you it maddens me to see a man like that throwing himself away upon a doll. Oh, I dare say he cares for her, I have no doubt she worships him; but she is no wife for a man like Philip Hardy. And to think that if she had only kept out of the way a little longer I should have taken her place! I would have made him, I would have pushed him to the very top. There is no position in the country that Philip Hardy could not have assumed with me by his side."

"There are other men quite as rich," Cleave said cynically.

"Yes, but you see I want this particular man and I am going to have him. I will not disguise from you that if he were poor I should not have given him a second thought. Oh, I am quite aware

of what I am opening up for myself, but we need not discuss that. You are my ally, you have promised me to do anything I desire. At the first opportunity to-night, you are going to make yourself known to Lena Grey. What happens after that will depend upon circumstances, but the general programme I have already outlined to you."

It was some little time before Cleave replied. He seemed moody and restless, his eyes still dwelling on the little group on the stairs with a look of something like regret.

"It's a strange thing," he muttered. "Until a day or two ago I felt ready for anything, and now that I have come into the world again the conscience that I so often sneered at seems to have taken possession of me. Upon my word, Nell, I can't do it. She is a dear little girl; she always was, and now to step in like this and wreck the happiness of her life——"

"All this is madness," Eleanor whispered passionately. "You can go if you like. Go and leave the whole thing to me. I daresay I shall be able to manage by myself, but you will leave me without a penny, leave me with nothing but the clothes you stand up in. On the other hand, you can live on the fat of the land for the present. In a few days you will have five hundred pounds to call your own. If you are going to choose, all I ask you to do is to choose quickly. There is no time to waste."

Cleave averted his eyes from the group on the stairs. He stifled the voice of conscience. He

professed himself to be entirely at the disposal of his companion.

"No use kicking against the pricks," he said moodily. "Now tell me what you want me to do in the matter of that woman, Fiona Dear. You have not been too candid with me, and it is impossible for me to go on unless I know something more of your project. Who is Fiona Dear? What is she doing here?"

"Oh, I had quite forgotten for the moment that you had been out of the world so long. Fiona Dear is the last craze in the way of a thought-reader. I don't know whether she is any worse or better than the majority of her tribe, but she is riding on the crest of the wave for the moment and everybody has gone mad about her. She is coming here to-night, and one of the small summer-houses in the garden has been placed at her disposal. No one has ever seen this woman; it is one of her fads to be masked; therefore she will arrive quietly, the train stopping for a moment at the Duke's private station on the other side of the lake. You must meet this woman and engage her in conversation for a moment. It matters but little what you say so long as you detain her for just five minutes. If nothing happens in those five minutes you can come back to the house and mingle with the other guests quite naturally. Now, you will at once take the first opportunity of making your identity known to Miss Grey."

"Very well," Cleave said sullenly. "It shall be just as you say. And now, as the carriages

begin to arrive, we had better break up this conference. If there is anything else I can do for you——”

But Eleanor Marsh waved the speaker aside impatiently. She rose slowly to her feet and made her way into the house, a stately figure in black and yellow, with diamonds in her dusky hair. It seemed almost impossible to believe that this magnificent creature was only an adventuress, who had begun life in a gamekeeper's cottage and had graduated at a tobacconist's shop! Cleave watched her with grudging admiration as she mixed with the rest of the guests, nodding to one and smiling on another, perfectly at home in this exclusive house.

As he stood there remarking these things, Cleave noticed that the little group on the stairs had vanished, and presently he saw Lena Grey standing by herself. By this time the great corridor was filled with a brilliant array of guests. Slowly, but with grim determination, Cleave crossed the marble floor and stood by the girl's side. She did not see him at all, her pleased eyes taking in the scene of beauty and extravagance still around her. Cleave hesitated. Then he ventured to lay his hand slightly on Lena's arm. She turned quickly.

“I am afraid you have forgotten me,” he said. “I am afraid I have no right to be remembered, but if you will look at me I think you will admit that we have met before.”

“Jasper Cleave,” Lena whispered faintly. “Jasper——”

CHAPTER VIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

It was impossible that Cleave should fail to notice the fleeting suggestion of terror in the eyes of his companion. She stood there pale and trembling, like a child detected in some fault. She was waiting apparently for him to speak, to say something to break the tension of the moment. And yet there was nothing in the aspect of the man to suggest the blackmailer. It was easy enough for Cleave to guess what was passing in the girl's mind. She had gone back to the time when as a mere child, a romantic girl, there had been love passages between them—pure and innocent enough on her side, and possibly on his.

But Lena had seen much of the world since then; her ears had not been altogether deaf to the disgraceful stories which had been told of Cleave's downfall. She recollected the horror with which these recitals had inspired her, and the thankfulness she felt at her narrow escape from a life of absolute misery. What would Philip Hardy say if he knew of those episodes, for Lena had never told him? Indeed, she had long since forgotten

all about them. It came back to her now, vividly enough, that certain letters of hers might still be in Cleave's possession. There was nothing wrong in those letters; they were merely the outpourings of a simple loving nature, though doubtless romantic enough in flavour, such as a young girl, in the days of her calf-love, might have written.

And Philip Hardy was so immaculate, so far above human weaknesses of this kind. He would have expected his wife to come to him, pure and unsullied, and with the flavour of no other man's kisses on her lips, wholly honourable though they might be.

But it was useless to stand there, panting and frightened like a timid deer. It behoved Lena to recover her self-possession, to show this man that she was not afraid of him, and that she was able to guard her own interests. But perhaps she was exaggerating; perhaps Jasper Cleave had turned his back on the old evil life and had by degrees re-established himself in the eyes of the world.

"I did not expect to see you here like this," she said, forcing a smile to her lips. "I understood that you had left England altogether; that, in fact, you——"

She paused in some confusion. Cleave laughed a little bitterly. He was feeling quite at home now, quite ready to carry out his programme to the letter.

"I can quite understand what you mean," he said. "You thought that I had left my country for my country's good; and yet, knowing me as

you did in the old days, you will be disposed to admit that I was more sinned against than sinning. I fell into bad hands, amongst men who took advantage of my generosity and stripped me of all I had. Then when I discovered the extent of my folly, I became the pigeon which has turned a hawk. But any man has a right to a chance of recovery if he proves himself worthy of it. The fact that I am here to-night shows you that I have taken my chance."

Lena made no reply for a moment; she was casting around for a means to get rid of this man; she wanted to be alone and think. A little way off stood her lover in conversation with one of the leaders of his party, but Lena could see that he was paying but scant attention to the great man's utterances. There was a puzzled frown on his face, as if he were struggling to remember the name of Lena's acquaintance. Then there was a sudden lurid flash in his eyes and a sudden hardening of his lips. Lena did not need anyone to tell her that Philip knew. He made one stride forward, then recovered his self-possession. His back was turned to the others. Lena flashed an uneasy glance at Cleave's face. She could see at once that the little comedy had not passed over his head.

"I have heard about that," he said. "I have been in England long enough to know that Philip Hardy has so far honoured you as to offer his hand and what he calls his heart to you. He is going to be a great man, I understand, but he must not be too impulsive. And, after all, what business

is it of his to question my presence in this house?"

"I did not know such was his intention," Lena said coldly. "You will excuse me, I am sure; please do not let me detain you any longer. There is much I have to do."

A sudden anger flamed up in Cleave's heart; he had no intention of being dismissed in this cold contemptuous way.

"Softly, softly," he said between his teeth. "What a wonderful change in a woman in the course of three short years! When I left England there was no more timid or more affectionate creature than yourself. Now you are so hard and cold to me. Why?"

"Why should you question my feelings at all?" Lena retorted. "They cannot concern you."

"Oh, yes, they can," Cleave sneered. "Do not tell me you have forgotten those pleasant old days when we were together in the heart of the country. Do you recollect the night——"

Lena's face flushed crimson. She felt as if some cold hands had been laid about her heart. A subtle instinct told her that this man was here for no good; she flashed round upon him with a challenge in her eyes.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Why do you come here like this and force yourself upon me? Let me grant at once that all you say is true, that we were at one time more than friends. I was young and innocent of the world—I loved you. But I was merely a child and knew no better. The love that I felt for you

in those days I know now was no more than a passing fancy. I know now that I had given my heart to a scoundrel, who would surely have broken it had not Providence been kind. If you are the man you say you are, if you have done your best to redeem your disgraceful past, you would have shrunk from me, you would have avoided my presence. But you are here to-night for some purpose inimical to my happiness. If you think you can damage me in any way you are mistaken. There is nothing you can do."

"You are flattering," Cleave said bitterly. "Upon my word, you tempt me to take up your challenge. You are marrying a man who is as different to myself as light from darkness, but Philip Hardy is not the man to forgive or forget. Suppose I go to him and tell him all I know?"

"He will not believe you," Lena said proudly.

"No, he may not believe my spoken word," Cleave said significantly. "Being a born politician and a statesman, he would ask for evidence. He would want to see the written document. Now just cast your mind back for a few years, and don't reply in a hurry. If he asked for the documents, don't you think I should be in a position to give them to him?"

Lena started. Her face lost a little of its natural colour.

"The letters," she whispered. "I had forgotten all about them. Surely you would not be so cruel, you would not so far forget——"

"The past," Cleave sneered. "Sounds like a scene from some melodrama. Had not you better

smile at me as if we were discussing some pleasant problem? There is a fat old woman opposite who is regarding us in a highly suspicious manner. Ah, that is better. And now let me ask you another question. Why should you take it for granted that I am going to use those letters to do you any harm? Why do you regard me as if I were some offensive animal trying to push myself upon you? If you only knew everything——”

Cleave paused abruptly for a moment, then the strange thin smile that Lena had disliked so much came to his face again.

“Let us make a compact,” he said. “I can help you and you can help me. If I choose to go to Hardy and lay those letters before him, your happiness is gone for ever.”

Lena was silent. She could not deny the truth of this. She was passionately attached to Philip, and she knew that he cared equally for her, but his was not the love that forgave, not the pure and disinterested affection that overlook anything and everything. Very timidly Lena waited for her companion to speak.

“I have those letters” he said. “They are not in my pocket at the present moment, but they can be within an hour. It is for you to say whether I shall get them or not and return them to you.”

Lena’s heart gave a great leap; it seemed to rise up in her throat and suffocate her. It was difficult for her to collect her scattered thoughts amidst all the chatter and laughter that was going on around her. The strains of a distant

band seemed to muddle and confuse her senses. Philip Hardy was close by, still in deep conversation with the great political personage. He had his back resolutely turned to Lena, and something in his attitude seemed to suggest that he was both annoyed and suspicious. And yet the whole thing could be smoothed away in a few moments. Still Lena hesitated; it was her bounden duty to defy Cleave, to turn from him scornfully and bid him do his worst. It was plainly her duty also to tell her whole story to Philip Hardy and ask him to protect her against the insidious advances of this adventurer.

"Very well," she said at length. "I know I am doing wrong. Still, if you will be so good as to give me those letters I shall be obliged to you."

"Good for evil," Cleave laughed. "You shall have your letters, but not here. There are too many people about. It is ten now, and supper will be at twelve. Meet me at half-past eleven in the little alcove leading to the rose garden and I will place those papers in your hands."

Once more Lena hesitated. She was trembling from head to foot with an emotion that she was powerless to resist; she seemed to detect some scheme here, and yet what could this man gain?

"Very well," she said breathlessly. "It shall be as you say. I will meet you at half-past eleven."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SYREN SPEAKS.

NOT without a certain feeling of shame and self-reproach, Cleave turned away from his companion and mingled with the other guests. He had crossed the Rubicon now; for better or worse the decision was made. And he was smarting, too, under the cold contempt of Lena's manner. He would have liked to argue it out with himself that a little more kindness and feeling on her part would have produced a different result, but inwardly he knew that he was bound to act as he had done. As he passed in the direction of the refreshment room, he saw that Eleanor Marsh had contrived to get hold of Hardy, with whom she was in earnest conversation. No woman could be more attractive when she chose, and Hardy was evidently enjoying her society. Cleave did not disdain to stand behind a palm and listen.

"But of course you will," the woman was saying. "Everybody does. I used to laugh at that kind of thing myself till I had my first interview with

Fiona Dear. Really, she is most marvellous. I heard it on excellent authority the other day that the Pan-Anglican Alliance was the direct outcome of an interview between a prominent statesman and the wonderful woman who has this gift of looking into the future. Positively, Mr. Hardy, you ought not to miss a chance like this. I know that you would not dream of calling at her place in Regent Street. Seeing that she is down here, you might look in on her to-night without the slightest loss of dignity."

"Upon my word, I think I will," Hardy laughed. "Of course it is the most utter nonsense, and if I had my way I'd have all these people prosecuted. Still, it is good to be frivolous at times, so I will consult this Oracle of yours."

Cleave stopped to hear no more, though he smiled to himself as he saw how completely this clever man was playing into the hands of the beautiful adventuress. He passed on to the refreshment room, telling himself that his nerves needed something in the way of a stimulant to fortify him for the difficult and dangerous task that lay before him. When he emerged a little later, it was to find that the house was literally crowded with guests, who had come from far and near to take part in the great function. Cleave pushed his way unconcernedly through the glittering throng, many of whom he had known intimately enough in the days of his prosperity. It mattered little or nothing to him whether he was recognised or not; his duty lay

plainly before him, and he meant to carry it out to the last.

It was somewhat difficult to find Eleanor Marsh, but he came upon her presently in the grounds, where most of the guests had drifted. It was a perfect August night—soft and subdued and full of stars. Here and there picturesque groups were picked out by the points of electric flame, with which most of the forest trees were outlined. In the centre of a laughing throng stood Eleanor Marsh. She gave Cleave a quick signal as he passed, and he fell back in the shadow of a group of azaleas. A moment later the woman joined him; all her gaiety and *abandon* had disappeared; she was quick, sharp, and eager.

“Well?” she said breathlessly; “You have been successful? I saw you talking to Miss Grey just now. By the way in which she carried herself, I judged that the meeting did not rouse her enthusiasm.”

“Of course, she is very much altered,” Cleave said sourly. “Contact with the world has changed her from an innocent child to a self-possessed woman. By some fine instinct, she divined the fact that my feelings were not exactly friendly—indeed, I had to speak to the point.”

“Which means you alluded to the letters, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes—the letters were a great card. They brought her ladyship to her knees at once. You are a wonderful judge of your own sex. As far as I am concerned, I should have expected the girl

to burst into tears and summon Hardy to her side and tell him everything, after which he would be expected to kick me promptly off the premises. Mind you, that was her impulse right enough. But in reality she did nothing of the kind. She hesitated, and was lost. The upshot of the whole thing was, that she agreed to my terms, and is going to meet me at the appointed time to receive those precious documents. I hope you are satisfied."

"Splendid," Eleanor cried. "Could not have been better. And as I told you, the girl has acted exactly as I said she would. You were very particular as to the time, I suppose?"

"Oh, very. And I don't think you need worry about that. Women are not noted for punctuality as a rule, but this is a case where the lady will turn up to the moment."

Eleanor nodded. Cleave could see that her eyes were shining like stars.

"You are positively excited," he said. "I have never seen you so moved before. Anyone would suppose that the danger was near."

"The danger is very close," the woman whispered. "You have no notion how close it is. I have the whole world in my grasp. I may wake up to-morrow and find myself in the position to gratify my dearest ambitions. And, on the other hand, I may wake up to-morrow and find myself within prison walls. It is all on the knees of the gods. If you will come this way I will show you what I mean. Only walk softly and leave that cigarette

behind you, for the point of flame may attract attention."

With a thrill of curiosity Cleave followed on the long path which terminated presently in a public roadway across the park. There, in the middle of the road, stood two men, obviously of the lower class, who seemed to be waiting and watching for something. It was only for a moment that Eleanor stood there; then she drew her companion back into the seclusion of the grounds again.

"What does the mystery mean?" Cleave asked.

"Those men are after me," the woman said, in the same passionate voice. "It is a debt I have incurred and cannot pay—a debt that has an element of fraud about it. I—I swear I had forgotten them. Altogether, it comes to nearly a thousand pounds, which practically equals every farthing I have in the world. Dangerous as the situation is, I dare not part with that money. My one security is that I am dealing with business people, and if I can give them a positive assurance of payment by a certain date, they will take no steps in the matter. If I can assure them that I am going to marry one of the richest men in England, they will abandon their threatening attitude and grovel at my feet."

"How can you give this assurance?" Cleave asked.

"That is easy enough," Eleanor said coolly. "If I can keep out of the way of those men for four-and-twenty hours, I am safe. Critical as the danger appears to be now, by the end of that

time Lena Grey's engagement to Philip Hardy will be at an end, and a few hours later he will be pledged to me. There are diamonds in the Hardy family, family diamonds, almost beyond price. If necessary, I would not scruple to obtain possession of some of those, and thus free myself from some of the most pressing of my liabilities. Everything depends upon the next hour and the way in which you play your part in the conspiracy. Remember, if I fail, you fail also. If I lose, you are ruined as hopelessly as myself. You will have to pawn your fine wardrobe again and face the world once more with nothing in your pocket. And one thing more——"

The speaker broke off abruptly as the big clock over the stables gave the half-hour after ten.

"You must go at once," she cried. "I had no idea it was so late. If you go down the shrubbery path that I showed you this morning, you will find yourself presently at the bottom of the cypress walk which leads directly to the way to the private station. In a few minutes from now Fiona Dear will be here, and you must meet her as arranged. I almost think I can hear the noise of the train approaching. Oh, don't wait for any more, but get away at once."

Without another word Cleave turned on his heel and took the path indicated by his companion. He had half decided it to be necessary to assume something in the way of an overcoat, but, after all, in the palpable guise of a guest, his accosting of the stranger would arouse less suspicion.

He had barely reached the foot of the cypress walk when he heard the train pull up at the station. The engine only stopped for a moment, and then a tall, slim figure in a motor veil and long cloak stepped into the roadway, carrying a bag in her hand. With subservient air and manner, Cleave approached the solitary figure, but not until she was well within the walk and in the thick shadow of the trees.

"I am sure, I beg your pardon," he said, "and I hope you will pardon this liberty. It does not matter in the least who I am, but it is sufficient to say that I am one of the Duke's guests. If I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Fiona Dear——"

"That is my name," the stranger replied. "But it is not usual for me to be accosted in this way——"

"I am perfectly well aware of that," Cleave said eagerly, "but I happen to know something about you which impels me to ask a favour at your hands. I have no doubt that from time to time many curious requests are made of you, requests which——"

Despite his coolness, Cleave stopped and stammered as he saw another figure come swiftly through an opening in the hedge. A second later and a pair of strong, lithe arms were thrown from behind round the neck of the thought-reader, and a white handkerchief, strong with some pungent odour, was thrust into her mouth. The victim struggled feebly for a second or two, then collapsed without a sound unconscious on the road.

"So far, so good," Eleanor Marsh said breathlessly. "I flatter myself that it was accomplished quite neatly. Now don't stand there staring at me like that. Lift her up and I will help you to place her where there is no chance of her being discovered. Bring the bag along—I shall want that. There is no time to lose."

CHAPTER X.

JEALOUSY.

CLEAVE waited to hear further what Eleanor had to say. With an imperious gesture she directed him to take the unconscious body by the shoulders, while she, herself, raised the feet. Though it was an exciting moment Cleave could not refrain from noting and admiring the strength of his companion.

"Which way?" he whispered. "We must not go too far, or we shall have somebody spying on our movements."

"We are going a very little distance," the woman panted. "I have thought this all out carefully, and there is no danger."

They came at length to a dark hollow leading through the thick cypress hedge, and that way turned at the end of the path into a side walk, terminating in what looked like an old summer-house.

"Lay her down here," Eleanor said. "She will take no harm, and it is very long odds against her being discovered, at any rate, before morning. But we need not worry about that."

"Aren't you going to gag her or bind her?" Cleave asked.

"There is no necessity to do anything of the kind. The drug I have administered will throw her into a deep sleep for some hours, so that there is no chance of failure in that direction. Now take this bag, and go and place it in the particular alcove where Fiona Dear is going to carry out her experiments. I daresay it has dawned upon your intelligence by this time that I am going to play the part of Fiona Dear. It is much more easily managed than you imagine, seeing that she always sits in darkness, and I have merely to assume the mask and cloak in that bag. Now go along, and keep within hail in case I want you."

A few minutes later and Eleanor Marsh was mingling with the crowd again as if nothing had happened. She vept along, apparently with no object in view, though she was keeping a keen watch for Philip Hardy. She found him presently, and in her own clever way contrived to detach him from the group of people with whom he was talking.

"I have had a bit of an adventure," she said. "As I was coming up the rose garden just now I am quite certain that I came in contact with Fiona Dear. Rather strange, considering we were talking about it just now, isn't it? I hope you are not going to forget your promise, Mr. Hardy."

Hardy looked vaguely at the speaker; apparently his mind was far away. Eleanor

smiled to herself, though she could have put his thoughts into words for him if she liked.

"What promise?" he asked. "You may call me stupid if you like, but I have no recollection of any promise in connection with the adventuress whom you mention."

"You were going to consult her as to your future, don't you recollect? You did not mind so long as it was a pastime and part of the evening's entertainment."

"That's right enough," Hardy admitted. "I remember all about it now. On the whole, I think I had better go and get it done with, only don't tell anybody else of my folly."

Eleanor Marsh slipped away into the grounds, and made directly for the alcove where the *séance* was to take place. It was the work of a moment to slip into the cloak and mask, which she extracted from the bag recently carried by the unlucky woman whom she was impersonating. It was, perhaps, a wild scheme which Eleanor had thought out, but there was a chance that it might be successful. The woman had carefully studied her victim; she had a knowledge of his temperament which would have astonished him. The man was brilliant and clever, cautious and painstaking, qualities, as a rule, which make for success in the world of politics; but at the same time, Hardy had sprung from a race of men and women who had given more than one dreamer to the world, and he himself, unknown to his friends, had from time to time indulged in poetry. This was

the side of his nature which he had carefully concealed from the public, but he had not succeeded in blinding the sharp eyes of Eleanor Marsh.

She sat in the darkness there planning out the main lines of the coming interview. She was a little annoyed to find her privacy intruded upon by two frivolous young creatures who had probably been the first to hear of the arrival of the thought-reader. To persuade them to retire took time, and at the present moment delays were dangerous. With a sigh of relief, Eleanor could just make out the figure of her intended victim in the doorway. He came in coolly and cynically enough; he explained his errand, taking care to make it clear from his point of view that the whole affair was little better than clever fooling.

"You think so," Eleanor said, in a deep voice. She felt capable of acting her part to perfection. "There have been others like yourself who came to scoff, and went away in a chastened mood. I will say nothing to you about the stars, because you have come here to be practical, Mr. Hardy."

"So you know my name," Hardy smiled. "Still, I suppose there is nothing wonderful in that. Perhaps you can tell me why I came here—what motive I had?"

"Yes, I can tell you that. You profess to come out of idle curiosity, but that is not the truth. You are puzzled and annoyed because you cannot understand. You would not have come to me in London, because you would have

deemed that to be beneath your dignity. What is it that you desire to know? Do you hope to become as celebrated as a poet as you would be as a statesman?’

Hardy started slightly. Despite his common-sense, he was feeling just a little impressed.

“What have I to do with poetry?” he demanded.

“You write it. You are fond of it, and yet you conceal the fact from your friends because you think that your weakness is likely to stand in the way of your political career. So much ashamed are you of this gift that you have not even mentioned it to the girl you are going to marry. Believe me, it does not promise well for domestic happiness for a man to start with these secrets.”

“There may be secrets on both sides,” Hardy said.

“Of course, there are. The man tells the woman he has never loved before; the woman swears that no amorous thought of hers has ever strayed in another direction. It flatters a man’s vanity to think that, and yet how rarely is he justified in hugging this delusion to his breast. Take your own case, for example.”

“There is no occasion,” Hardy said stiffly. “I am perfectly satisfied to know that in my case—but I am talking nonsense.”

“And yet you infer that I am talking nonsense also,” Eleanor said boldly. “Now you came here to scoff at my methods; you came here to expose a cheat if you could; therefore, I am going to challenge you. Now, suppose I tell you that

not only has the fortunate young lady loved before, but that passionate love letters have passed between her and a man who need not be named? Suppose I go further, and say that the individual I allude to is under this roof at the present moment?"

Eleanor dropped her voice to a thrilling whisper. She was acting the part of the sorceress to perfection. Hardy was touched more deeply than he would have cared to own. The extraordinary magnetism of this woman was fascinating him; her low voice, her suggestion of absolute truth, the dimness of the alcove, everything conspired to impress the artistic temperament. And now it flashed across Hardy's mind how he had seen Lena not so long ago in earnest conversation with a man whose face was familiar yet strange to him.

"I ought not to be discussing this matter with you," he said, "it is my positive duty to decline any further argument, and yet——"

Hardy sighed impatiently. The woman laughed.

"And yet you are a man, with all a man's weaknesses and vanities," she said. "I have aroused your jealousy; I have compelled you to listen to me with respectful attention. Shall I say more, or are you satisfied to believe that the powers I claim are genuine?"

"You have said too much, or not enough," Hardy replied. "I am sorry now that I came near you. It was all done merely to oblige a lady friend of mine who is foolish enough to regard this kind of thing as a science. There is one thing I admire about you, and that is your audacity."

"Then I am to go no farther?" Eleanor asked. "You would not like me, for instance, to tell you of the feelings and emotions aroused in the heart of a young girl when the old lover comes on the scenes again, and she finds herself between the old and the new, not knowing which way to turn? It is a fine thing to be the affianced wife of a rich man like Philip Hardy—a man who some day may hold one of the highest offices under the British Crown. But every rose has its thorns, and Philip Hardy is not free of his. He is immaculate, and looks for the same attribute in the woman he loves. She knows that she could not go to him and tell him of her childish indiscretion—she dare not. And then, like a woman, she grasps at straws. She will go to this man and ask him to be silent for her sake; she will ask him also for those letters, and if he is a man at all he will yield up possession of those letters, and then the past will become merely an episode. I see it all in my mind's eye clearly. I see her walking down a path leading to the rose garden; I see the man standing there with the letters in his hand. In half-an-hour from now, exactly half-an-hour——"

The speaker broke off abruptly; the spirit of prophesy seemed to have fallen from her shoulders, and she laughed in a quiet sort of way that irritated Hardy.

"I am telling you too much," she said. "I meant to punish you for your want of faith in me. But see, there are others clamouring outside—disciples of mine, who are anxious to hear

all about their future. If you want to see me again, come to my rooms in Regent Street. Now go, and if you find there is nothing in what I say, then you will have the satisfaction of knowing that I was no more than the adventuress you took me for."

CHAPTER XI.

PROVING THE STORY.

PHILIP HARDY walked out into the garden with a feeling of shame and irritation upon him. It was the first time he had ever had an experience of this class of impostor who thrives so well on the follies of Society, and, so far as he was concerned, he meant it to be the last. He was annoyed with himself, too, that he had listened to Eleanor Marsh in the first instance. He tried to argue it out with himself that the whole thing was a bit of clever impudence on the part of Fiona Dear.

And yet the sting remained in his breast; he could not rid himself of it. Cold and self-contained as he usually was, his affection for Lena Grey was sincere and genuine. Hitherto, he had hugged himself with the delusion that he had won a virgin heart, but now the cold doubts were assailing him once more. From his earliest days he had been more or less of a self-tormentor, which is usually the weakness of the proud, self-contained nature. From time to time he had known cases where the most immaculate men

and women had fallen before temptation more or less acute, and he could not see now why Lena should be more exalted than the rest.

Then again, there was the man whose face was so familiar and yet so puzzlingly strange to him. Who was he, and where did he come from, and why did Lena appear to be so uneasy in his presence ?

These questions pressed upon the mind of Hardy like so many stabs from a dagger. He knew that it was his plain duty to go straight to Lena and ask who that man was. If his fears were groundless she would tell him at once ; indeed, he could not have imagined Lena saying anything untruthful, and yet it seemed a shabby thing to suspect the girl on the evidence of a common impostor like Fiona Dear.

Still Hardy hesitated, exactly as the adventuress who had fooled him knew that he would. She had assured herself that Hardy would be too reticent to go straight to Lena and demand an explanation. She knew perfectly well that at a given moment he would be waiting somewhere on the steps leading to the rose garden

Nor was the woman with her deep knowledge of the working of the human mind far wrong. It was a horrible thing to do, and in another man Hardy would have condemned heartily enough, for there he stood, waiting and lingering to see what the future held in store for him. He felt furtive and mean ; he slunk out of the way of passers-by, but he could not conquer the desire to verify his suspicions. For the next half-hour

he stood there, a lonely and solitary figure, waiting, waiting. . . .

Meanwhile, it had been an anxious time for Lena. She would have liked to go straight to her lover and pour out her troubles to him, as she knew she should have done; but then Hardy was not of a sympathetic nature. He did not invite confidences as most men do, when they have given all that is best in them to the care of some worthy woman. Lena could imagine herself telling any man of her acquaintance her trouble in preference to Hardy.

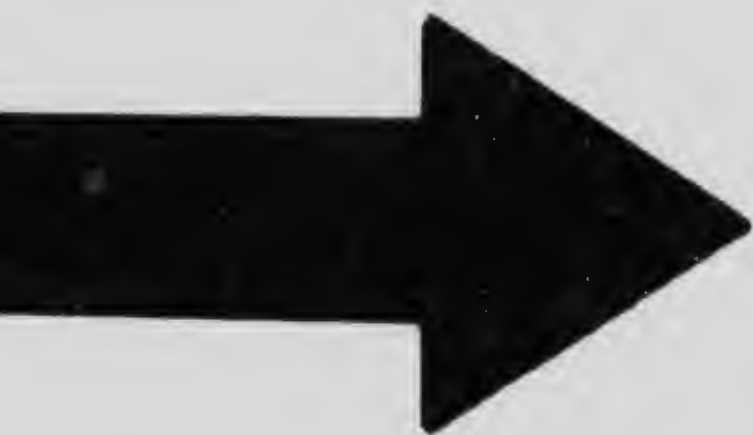
She passed the time as best she could, feverish with anxiety and full of a strange gaiety that somewhat astonished those about her. Even the Duchess seemed to notice that something was wrong, and called the girl to her side.

"What is the matter with you, my child?" she asked in her kindest manner. "You seem to be terribly uneasy about something. Now, don't tell me that you have been quarrelling with Philip, for I have set my heart on having your engagement announced at supper to-night. Philip is a great favourite of mine, and it won't be my fault if he does not finish at the very top of the tree. Indeed, this party is given in his honour, but if you have quarrelled——"

"Indeed, we have done nothing of the kind," Lena protested. "I have not seen Philip for some little time. If I have one fault to find with him it is that he rather neglects me when I come in conflict with his ambitions."

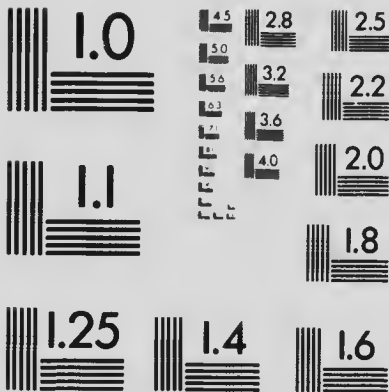
The Duchess sighed in sympathy.





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"You must learn to put up with that," she said. "It was just the same in our earlier days. It seemed a strange thing to me that the Duke who had everything that man could desire, with good health into the bargain, should give up everything for a political office, and never have anything but blame for what he had done. But then, I didn't understand men; I used to think so when I was young, but I know now that I was mistaken. Rest assured that Philip is very fond of you."

"I am quite sure of that," Lena smiled anxiously. "Only it does seem a little hard to be placed in the background."

Lena escaped at length and made her way in the direction of the garden. It was very near the appointed hour, and if Fortune befriended her the letters would pass into her possession in a few moments. Then they could be destroyed and the recollection of the past blotted out for ever.

There would be no occasion to mention this matter to Philip; he need be none the wiser. All girls had their secrets, as Lena knew, for had she not been the *confidante* of several? With these hopes to buoy her up she passed down the path leading to the rose garden. Her heart gave a great thrill as she saw Jasper Cleave standing there. There was a queer, strange smile on his lips that served to check the girl's rising hopes. She seemed to shrink from the man now, as one would from a wild animal which is supposed to be tame.

"So you have come," Cleave said. "I thought you would not fail me."

"You will not detain me," Lena said anxiously. "I am sure you would not do me harm; the recollection of the past——"

"The recollection of the past is no pleasant thing to me," Cleave said grimly. "When I look back to the past, I see a young man endowed with all the goods the gods can give him—fine health, troops of friends, a grand estate; and when I think that that young man was me, and realise what I have become, my heart does not grow any softer, or my consideration for others increase. It seems almost incredible that in those days you were fond of me."

"I suppose I was," Lena stammered. "But I was very, very young."

Cleave laughed bitterly. His eyes flamed with a sudden admiration for the girl by his side. She looked so sweet, and innocent, and beautiful, standing there with her pleading face turned to his, that a sudden passion filled him and he moved a step or two towards her. Perhaps that movement had bridged the past three years; perhaps Cleave had imagined himself for the moment to be the reincarnation of his former self.

"You did care for me," he said hoarsely. "You loved me then as you love that pedantic prig, Philip Hardy, to-day. I know you will say that he is the affection of your life, and that your fancy for me was merely the romantic outpouring of the schoolgirl, but you did care; and if I had only been wise you'd have been my wife

at this moment. Instead of which, you hate and despise me——”

“Indeed, I don’t,” Lena protested. She was quivering from head to foot, anxious to bring this distressing interview to an end. “I am profoundly sorry for you——”

“Nothing of the kind,” Cleave said roughly. “Your expression when you recognised me to-night was one of loathing and contempt. You were startled and ashamed to meet me again. You could not disguise your feelings. And yet you expect me to place in your hands the record of your childish folly. Why should I do it?”

Lena looked up in genuine alarm; the man’s violence frightened her. It occurred to her that he had been drinking, but she put the suspicion from her.

“Give me the letters,” she pleaded. “Give them to me and let me go. I have done you no harm.”

“Have you not?” Cleave sneered. “I tell you it is easy enough for a man like me to boast that he is never troubled by the pangs of conscience, but it is a miserable lie. For months together it is possible to forget, and then something brings it all back to one—the sound of a voice, the smell of a flower, and there rises in one’s mind a sense of almost intolerable torture. That is what I feel to-night, standing here in the full realization of all I have lost. It is none the less a punishment to me and such as me to know that we deliberately threw away our opportunities. But here are your letters.

You will be glad to have them and be rid of my company, but I am only human, after all, and I have your promise. It is not much to ask."

"What is it?" Lena stammered. "What can it possibly be?"

"By Heavens! I believe you have guessed it," Cleave cried. "I can see it on your face. For the sake of old times I want you to give me one kiss. Come, just one little kiss upon my lips, and we can part. It is not the first time, remember, and surely the price I ask is not a great one for the happiness of a lifetime."

Lena's face flushed crimson; the tears of mortification rose to her eyes. She could see that the man was in earnest, that nothing would turn him from his purpose. Very slowly he drew a slender packet from his pocket and held it over his head.

"Come," he said. "Why do you hesitate?"

The colour faded from Lena's face and her limbs seemed to be turned to stone. The packet in the man's hands fascinated her as a snake is said to fascinate a bird. Very slowly she came forward and lifted her white, dead face to his.

"Very well," she whispered hoarsely. "It shall be as you wish. Place the letters in my hands and take your price."

CHAPTER XII.

HARDY CHANGES HIS MIND.

LENA stood there, cold and motionless as a statue, so cold, indeed, that she hardly felt the touch of Cleave's hot lips on hers. The world seemed slipping from her; she staggered almost to a fall; then, with a great effort, she was herself again. Once more the cruel scarlet flame scorched her cheeks; she turned as quickly as possible in the direction of the house. She felt contaminated and besmirched. It was poor consolation to know that she was grasping the letters tightly in her hands. As she hurried on, breathlessly, with increased speed, she came in violent contact with someone who caught her elbows in a passionate grip. She was back now within the ring of light cast by the fairy lamps. She felt no surprise whatever to find herself face to face with Philip Hardy

It was the last thing in the world she expected or desired; the one cruel stroke that was possible for Fate to deal her, and yet she was conscious of no emotion, no passionate despair or anger. She was melting slowly but surely now, and coming

back to the consciousness of her own identity. Nor did it need more than a passing glance at Hardy's white, set face to prove that he knew everything. Lena waited for him to speak.

It was some time before the words came; when they did come at length they were slow and deliberate, cold and cutting as a well-tempered blade. It did not seem to occur to Hardy that he had been playing the cavesdropper. The feeling uppermost in his mind was that he had been betrayed. His vanity was wounded in its tenderest point.

"Well," he said, "have you no explanation to offer? I will pay you the compliment of listening to your story. It was very unfortunate that I happened to be here at that particular moment.

"You did not follow me, then?" Lena stammered.

Hardy hesitated for a moment. He could not find it in his mind to tell Lena everything. The whole thing savoured too much of the cheaply sensational.

"I saw everything," he said. "I saw you conversing with that man in the most friendly fashion. I saw him hand something to you—those papers you are carrying at the present moment presumedly. I saw you lift your face and kiss him. Good Heavens! it seems almost impossible to think that the woman whom I had chosen for my wife should so far forget herself. And he a stranger, too. His features are familiar

to me, all the same. Where have I seen him before?"

There was to be no mercy for Lena. She could see that plainly enough in the hard, almost cruel, expression of her companion's face. Yet she was not going to allow her happiness to slip from her hands without a struggle. She knew perfectly well that she cared for Hardy ten thousand times more than she had ever cared for Cleave; she realised bitterly enough what this parting meant.

"I will tell you," she said. "I will tell you everything. I should have done so before. That man was Jasper Cleave."

"Cleave? That scoundrel? The man who broke his mother's heart; the man who wasted one of the finest properties in the West in riotous living and extravagance. The man who was kicked out of all his clubs in London. And what is he doing here? Who gave him the *entrée* of a house like this? If the Duke knew, the fellow would be pitched into the lake by the servants."

"Don't ask me," Lena said wearily. "I cannot say; it seemed like a dream to me when we came face to face to-night; and when he saw I had recognised him, he stood there smiling at me, and I knew that something dreadful was going to happen."

"Indeed," Hardy sneered. "You did not seem so timid a few moments ago. Then I could have said that you——"

"If you have any sympathy for me at all," Lena cried, "do not speak like that. I am going to tell you everything. I am going to try to

clear my character in your eyes. Years ago, when I was a child, there was no more popular person in our neighbourhood than Jasper Cleave. You were always studiously inclined and cared little for outdoor amusements, but in that line Jasper Cleave was inimitable. I was but a child then and his admiration for me filled me with delight, and when he told me that he loved me, it seemed to me that I was the happiest girl on earth. Have a little pity for me, Philip; do not look at me like that. Remember, I was only sixteen—I had been brought up by a romantic mother. The world was very real to me in those days. And so it came about that we were secretly engaged. You see this packet I am holding in my hand at the present moment—in it are all the letters—six of them—that I wrote to Jasper Cleave. You may read them if you like; there is no reason why I should be ashamed of a single word there. They cover the six months that Jasper Cleave was in London. In those six months he passed from a handsome, honourable man into a dissipated *roué*. To not one of those messages did I have a reply, except to the last one, when he told me that he was not fit to hold the affections of any innocent girl; that I was to think no more about him. It was a terrible grief to me at the time, and yet I was astonished to find how easily I got over it. I know now that love, in its best sense of the word, did not enter into my little romance at all, and from that day to this I have never set eyes on Jasper Cleave."

"Truly a strange story," Hardy said. "And

you expect me to believe it. Are you not asking too much?"

"I am telling the truth," Lena said proudly.

"You say you care nothing for this man. You say that your heart is wholly mine; you would have me believe that your scorn and contempt for Cleave are absolute. And yet, of your own free will you kiss him——"

"Oh, do not force me to further shame and humiliation," Lena implored. "Cannot you see how anxious I was to get those letters which were so dangerous a weapon in the hands of so unscrupulous a man? He tempted me—the price of one kiss. Though my whole soul revolted from it, I yielded. Philip, I shall say no more; I have said too much already. If you refuse to believe me——"

The girl stopped and held out her hands in an imploring manner. On one of her slim fingers a glittering engagement ring shimmered in the lights from the trees.

"Take that off," Hardy said coldly. "Take it off and give it to me."

The blood mounted to Lena's face; then ebbed away and left her white and cold as the marble fountain behind her. Just for an instant she seemed about to burst into a torrent of tears, but her pride came to her aid and she restrained herself. She pulled the ring from her finger and flung it with passionate force into a thicket of laurels. At the same time she threw the packet of letters in the same direction.

"There," she cried, "that is done and ended."

I care nothing who finds your ring ; I care nothing who has the privilege of reading those letters. But one thing let me tell you—hard and cold and cruel as you have been to me to-night, I will never cease to care for you ; I will go on loving you to the end. You stand on a high pinnacle now ; you are envied amongst men—a brilliant career lies before you, and yet Fate has an awkward trick of breaking the strongest bowl and leaving the weak one afloat in its stead. Tomorrow you may be a broken man and need assistance. If that time ever does come, you will not have to plead to me in vain. I tell you with all the force and strength——”

But Lena was speaking to the winds. Long before she had finished her impassioned speech Philip Hardy had turned away. It was a hard matter to assume perfect indifference, but amongst the chattering throng, no one could have guessed what was passing in his mind. He found himself presently face to face with Eleanor Marsh, who greeted him with a cynical smile on her face of inquiry.

“Well,” she asked, “did you consult the Oracle ? I was going to consult her myself, but just on the stroke of midnight they tell me that she vanished. A good many of the guests seem to imagine they have been swindled, though I am informed that Fiona Dear always melts away at midnight. Now tell me honestly—what did you think of that remarkable woman ?”

The question was asked in a perfectly artless fashion.

"I confess I was impressed," he said. "I learnt something that surprised me; in fact, I am still puzzled and bewildered over it. But it served a purpose, and it leaves me a free man."

"Free man?" Eleanor echoed. "You mean to say that your engagement to Miss Grey——"

"There is no engagement to Miss Grey. So far as the public is concerned there never has been. To be quite candid with you, we have come to an understanding. Miss Grey is not adapted to be the wife of a statesman, and therefore——"

"Then the whole thing is off?" Eleanor asked, her dark, flashing eyes seeming to fascinate her companion. "But, tell me, why do you choose me as your *confidante*?"

Hardy hesitated for a moment. He was reckless and desperate—sore and sick at heart. He was just in the mood, too, to commit the indiscretion which men in his position had often committed before to their sorrow.

"This is why I am telling you," he said slowly. "I am telling you because I think you have a right to know. I am telling you because I am going to ask you to do me the honour of taking Miss Grey's place. In other words, Mrs. Marsh, will you confer upon me the inestimable privilege of calling you my wife?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A SUCCESSFUL VENTURE.

DESPITE the marvellous way in which she had her feelings under control, the adventuress could not repress a start. She had laid her plans very carefully, and from the first moment of the conspiracy she had had no doubt as to her ultimate success. But she had not anticipated that Philip Hardy would fall so easily into the net. She turned her face away from him so that he might not see the triumph in her eyes.

There was something in her heart, too, which was inspired by feelings altogether removed from the joy of victory. In her own strange way, Eleanor Marsh was passionately fond of the man by her side, and would have gone any length to obtain his affection, even had he been poor. It seemed to her now that the whole world lay at her feet. She vowed to herself that in future her life should be very different. These thoughts passed through her mind like a flash. She seemed to see it all clearly before Philip spoke again.

"I am afraid I have frightened you," he said,

“by the abruptness of my question. If you wish to think this important matter over——”

“It is not that so much,” the adventuress said eagerly. “Naturally, I am startled by your question, though I cannot help feeling honoured at the compliment you have paid me. But, surely, you are speaking with a rashness quite foreign to your nature. Now, confess it—have you not had a quarrel with Miss Grey, and on the spur of the moment——”

“There has been no quarrel,” Philip said coldly. “I have been greatly disappointed; I have made a discovery in time—fortunately. The engagement between myself and Miss Grey is at an end, and that is why I have asked you to be my wife. Let me be quite candid and tell you why I have taken this step. I will not deny that I was exceedingly fond of Miss Grey, and that, in ordinary circumstances, I should have married her; but I am sure now, if I was not sure before, that she is not calculated to help a man of boundless ambition.”

“You are very ambitious, I know,” Eleanor Marsh said softly. “Oh, I have the greatest admiration for a man strong and able to carve out a great position for himself; and you shall do it, Philip, with me by your side—you shall do and dare anything. I will work and slave for you, I will entertain your friends and smile at your enemies as Lena Grey could never have done. Your aims and ambitions will be part and parcel of my life. I will sink everything for your sake.”

The woman was speaking sincerely now, carried

away by the vehemence of her emotions. Philip thrilled, too. He felt strangely uplifted and elated. Here, then, was the woman he had longed for—a glorious, peerless creature who should sustain and accompany him on his upward path. She was a beautiful woman, too, handsome and brilliant—a real ally in the fierce work of politics

And yet deep down in Philip's heart was a feeling that he had wronged the girl who had placed her heart in his keeping. That Lena Grey loved him and would love him to the end, Philip knew full well. He thought now of her pretty, pleading face and piteous eyes; his sense of honour told him that Lena might have made good her tale had he given her the opportunity. He had not listened; his outraged feelings, his wounded pride, had prevented that. But he stifled these feelings and walked back to the house with head erect, trying to assure himself that he had won everything and that life held nothing more to be desired. The Duchess of Daventry eyed him curiously. Like most people, she had accepted Eleanor Marsh at her own valuation, but she had no liking for the American, whose success in the great world had been so sudden and startling. On the other hand, she was very fond of Philip Hardy and was always ready to advance his interests. A vague feeling of coming evil possessed her. Why was Philip looking so handsome and elated? Why did the woman by his side hold up her head so high? Why did her eyes shine with the consciousness of victory? These questions the Duchess asked herself as she came across the room to Hardy.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," she said, "and have been searching in vain for Lena. What have you done with her?"

"I have not seen her," Philip said somewhat coldly. "I have been engaged in a most interesting conversation with Mrs. Marsh."

There was something in the intonation of the speaker's voice that caused the Duchess to look at him uneasily. Now was the time to strike a blow, and she made up her mind to do so.

"Well, you must do so at once," she said, "especially as we are going in to supper within the next five minutes. My dear Philip, have you forgotten that the engagement of Lena Grey and yourself was to be announced to-night? I understood, also, that it was your intention to give her the family diamonds. I am looking forward to seeing Lena wear them."

Perhaps the Duchess had raised her voice on purpose; perhaps she wanted to warn Eleanor Marsh that she was playing too bold a game. Certain it was that many guests passing by stopped to hear the end of the conversation. At the same moment, beyond a pair of folding doors, Lena appeared and came rapidly in the direction of the Duchess. For a moment she did not seem to notice Philip and his companion. Her face was resolute, but very pale; she could not disguise the aching misery of her eyes. And yet, young as she was and inexperienced in the ways of the world, she knew what had happened, and felt sure that the blow was going to fall with cruel swiftness. Perhaps it was better that the knife should cut

to the heart of the wound at once, better than the constant whisperings of idle curiosity. As she stood there with the light full upon her face, the fatal words came slowly and clearly from Philip's lips.

"I am exceedingly sorry to disappoint you," he said coldly. "Indeed, I feel that I owe you a profound apology. There is no engagement between Miss Grey and myself. We have come to the conclusion that anything of the kind would be a mistake. Miss Grey has not sufficient sympathy with my ambitions; she does not understand how isolated is the life of a politician's wife unless she shares his views. But not wholly to disappoint you, allow me to present to you Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, who has consented to become my wife."

The Duchess bowed somewhat coldly; she was deeply vexed, but not for a moment did she display the feelings which were uppermost in her mind. Instinctively she reached out her hand and Lena caught it in a convulsive grip. The elder woman was very fond of the girl; she prayed now that for her own sake she would be strong and brave. There would be plenty of time afterwards for an explanation of this strange conduct on the part of the rising statesman.

Lena rose to the situation, though her heart was aching horribly, though she would have given five years of her young life to find herself alone in the seclusion of her room. She forced a smile to her lips and spoke with a firmness and clearness that surprised herself.

"Philip is right," she said gently. "He is always right. I am not fitted to become the wife of a man who gives himself up almost exclusively to public affairs. It was far better and kinder for Mr. Hardy to speak before it was too late. His candour and honesty have prevented the spoiling of two lives. Mrs. Marsh, let me hope that you will be happy together."

By this time the little group which had gathered round had increased in numbers and from one end of the room to the other the news quickly passed.

"Had we not better go into supper?" the Duchess said. "I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Philip, but I have been taken so utterly by surprise that really. . . . And what about the diamonds? Are we still to go through the intended ceremony, or do you mean the stones to remain——"

"Exactly where they are," Hardy said coolly. "They are in my bedroom, and there they can stay for the present. I am quite sure that Mrs. Marsh would not——"

"Not for worlds," Eleanor Marsh laughed. "I am a little too old for that kind of thing. Besides, what would be a pretty ceremony where a young girl is concerned, would be a little bizarre in the case of a widow like myself. Now, if you are ready——"

The speaker paused and moved along with her hand on Philip's arm. The Duchess was free now to turn to Lena.

"You did it splendidly," she whispered.

don't understand what it all means, but there is something very wrong here. I won't worry you about it now, my child, but if there is anything that I can do to assist you——”

“Get me away,” Lena whispered. “Anywhere that I may be alone with myself for half an hour. To-morrow I will tell you everything. Please don't speak to me, please don't pity me, or I shall break down before all these people and think of my weakness with shame for the rest of my life.”

“Very well, my dear,” the Duchess said. “Come this way with me, and I will see that you are looked after; and if that woman is not a designing adventuress, then I know nothing of the world.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MESSAGE.

HEEDLESS of the shame and pain which she had brought upon an innocent young life, Eleanor Marsh swept proudly on with her hand under Philip's arm. She had won him now, and had fairly established her position in Society. Doubtless Hardy would soon be in a position to exact a title in return for his services, and Eleanor decided in her mind that that time should not be long. There was no further reason to fear her creditors either, once her engagement was announced; a certain vindictive tradesman would not take the threatened proceedings. Indeed, he would only be too glad to give her more liberal credit. The triumph of the hour was none the less sweet because she had gone so perilously near to the edge of ruin. An hour or two more and Eleanor might have found herself within the relentless grip of the law. Indeed, she knew now that a warrant had been issued for her arrest, and was not quite certain whether it was in the hands of the police or not. At any rate her movements were being carefully watched, a fact that she had

pointed out to Jasper Cleave earlier in the evening. Still, if these men made up their minds to be unpleasant, Eleanor could prove to them that the payment of the debt was only a matter of hours.

It was fortunate for Hardy that he could not see what was uppermost in the mind of the beautiful and fascinating creature by his side. She smiled into his face, chattering indifferently on ordinary topics, and yet the whole time her imagination was far away, busy with her own affairs. One thing stood out like a beacon light in the darkness. In a room upstairs, almost within her grasp, lay that which would give her freedom from all anxieties. The diamonds! Try as she would, Eleanor could not forget them. She had heard of them before, and knew that they were historic in their way. Could she but lay her hands upon them, if only to show them to the two men who were watching in the grounds, she would ask no more. As she sat there at the table, apparently immersed in the enjoyment of the moment, she was thinking about nothing else. It was possible, perhaps, that Philip would trust them into her hands. She might obtain possession of them for the time being under some plausible pretext.

Another more simple and confiding than Eleanor Marsh would have asked the question of Hardy directly, but she shrank from that line of policy. She was terribly afraid lest she should frighten the man or rouse his suspicions as to her good faith. Naturally inclined to underhanded methods,

she could not think of any other mode of securing the gems save by fraud. She did not need them for long, she told herself, only a few hours, and then they could be restored to the shabby old cases in which they had lain for countless years. She could profess to Hardy that she cared nothing for jewels, and that so long as she had him all the rest did not matter.

The supper drained itself out, and despite the brilliancy and gaiety of the scene, it seemed to Eleanor as if it were never coming to an end. Gay words were on her lips; never had she been more charming and witty; she responded to the congratulations of the other guests in a way which proved to most of them that Philip Hardy was an extremely fortunate individual. Nobody could have guessed what was passing in the woman's mind, or how she was scheming to obtain the stones that meant so much to her. Her mind was still bent on the project when a footman respectfully handed Eleanor a card on which a few words were pencilled. Self-possessed as she was, and with her nerves in absolute control, the woman turned a shade paler as she crumpled the card in her fingers. Hardy noticed the sudden change and looked up interrogatively.

"Something has disturbed you," he said. "Tell me what is the trouble. Remember that I have the right to share all your vexations and worries now."

Eleanor forced a laugh to her lips.

'It is really nothing," she said, "only one of the little bothers that come at unexpected times.

You may not believe it, but I am more interested in charitable works than you think for. One of my pensioners, a countrywoman of mine, has got into difficulty, and has actually come all the way down here to see me. But she can wait till after supper in the servants' hall."

Eleanor turned away as if the incident were closed; an artistic sigh came from her lips. It was artfully done, and produced just the impression she intended.

"I had better go," she said, "it will be on my conscience all the evening if I don't."

"Perhaps you had better," Philip responded. "I am not displeased to find that you are so considerate of other people; only don't be long. If you like me to come along——"

"Not for worlds," she laughed as she rose from her seat. "Besides, my pensioner would not care about it either."

Once outside the supper room and in the seclusion of the corridor, the woman changed entirely. Her face grew hard and resolute, and there was a vindictive gleam in her eyes which would have astonished Hardy had he seen it. She caught up a wrap, carelessly thrown down by someone, and muffled it about her head and shoulders; then she passed out into the garden and straight down the path leading to the alcove where she had so successfully impersonated Fiona Dear some time before.

It was not so dark as altogether to disguise the outline of a man standing just inside. He gave a little cough as Eleanor's white satin shoe scraped

over the gravel, and the woman responded in the same fashion.

"Is that you, Jim?" she whispered.

"Oh, it's me right enough," the man said bluntly; "and a nice dance I had to find you. That's the worst of you confoundedly clever people; you always regard your confederates as poor fools who are not to be told anything unless it suits your purpose to do so. If you had only let me know where you would be to-night, it would have saved no end of trouble."

"Is there any danger?" the woman asked anxiously. Now that fortune and happiness were within her grasp she felt strangely nervous and ill at ease. She would have faced any peril, but the thought of failure at this juncture filled her with dread and misgiving.

"Of course there is danger," the man growled. "Isn't there always trouble in anything that you take in hand? I came down to tell you that those people had issued a warrant for your arrest, and it's on its way here now. They may be asking for you at the front door at this moment. I managed to put them off the scent for a time——"

"I know all about that," Eleanor said impatiently. "Those two jackals of Monkwell's are here even now. In fact, they have been watching me all the evening."

"Waiting for the warrant, I expect," the man said. "You stay here and I'll try to find them; not that it's any use arguing with them, unless you are in a position to make some definite offer."

"But I am," Eleanor cried eagerly. "I have

had a wonderfully successful night, and when I tell you that I am going to marry Philip Hardy, and that the marriage has already been announced publicly, you will see that I have not been wasting my time."

"Well, that's something anyway," the man muttered. "But I am not quite sure that even this will be good enough for Monkwell. I saw him only this morning, and I can tell you he is pretty bitter. Clever woman as you are, you are a great fool to lead men on as you do. Why, here is Monkwell telling me that you as good as promised to be his wife, and he is ready now to do you any injury. Fortunately, he is a little more fond of his money than he is of you, and that is your one chance of salvation. I am not quite sure that the mere fact of this engagement will induce those fellows to wait."

"But I can show them something much more tangible than that," Eleanor went on in the same fierce whisper. "I can show them something which is as good as money. I can show them a handful of the finest diamonds in the world."

The listener's tongue clicked against his teeth; he chuckled hoarsely at the mention of the word diamonds.

"Trust you for finding where the valuables are," he said. "I have heard before now of the Hardy jewels. Do you mean to say that chap is so fascinated with you that he has handed those stones over to your tender mercy already?"

"No, he hasn't; but I know where they are, and if I cannot get them into my possession in

half an hour then all my training has gone for nothing. Stay here while I return to the house and find those men if you can. Bring them here so that we may have an interview. I am running a terrible risk, but this is not the time to hesitate. It would be almost fatal to fail just when I have the world at my feet."

Eleanor turned away abruptly and hurried along in the direction of the house. The guests were still in the supper room, but in the hall a body of servants had gathered round the half prostrate figure of a woman who was reclining in a chair.

"Funny thing," one of the servants was saying. "A gamekeeper found her in the grounds. She says she is a guest, but the poor thing hardly seems to know what she is talking about. Better send one of the servants up and ask her Grace if she will come downstairs for a moment."

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW FOE.

ELEANOR would have passed on, but a certain thought occurred to her and she forced her way into the little knot of servants so that she could get a better view of the woman in the chair. One glance at the features of the half-unconscious creature served to reveal her identity. Eleanor recognised Fiona Dear instantly. It was annoying that a *contretemps* like this should happen; but there was no means of connecting her with the outrage on the popular mind-reader. Eleanor had confidently counted that the woman would lie unconscious for some hours, and that she would not put in an appearance until the Duchess's brilliant gathering was at an end. It might have been possible, too, to get hold of her and close her lips by a liberal fee, under the plea that the Duchess of Daventry was anxious that the outrage on one who was practically a guest of hers should not become public property. And, again, there was Philip Hardy to consider. If the facts of the case lea ed out, he was bound to know that he had been imposed

upon by somebody who had deliberately usurped the place of Fiona Dear in order to poison his mind against Lena Grey.

But there was no time to worry about that now. It was necessary to obtain possession of the diamonds without the loss of a moment.

"I seem to have seen this woman before," she said in her most commanding manner. "I fancy she is not altogether unknown to Mr. Hardy. Go and see whether he is still in the supper room."

One of the servants was under the impression that Mr. Hardy had gone up to his room. Here was the very opportunity that Eleanor desired. She would fetch Mr. Hardy herself, if somebody would be so good as to show her in which corridor his room was situated. Properly worked, here was the very chance of procuring the diamonds. All her lifetime Eleanor Marsh had always possessed the faculty of turning danger into security, and she did not hesitate now. She followed a servant along the corridor till he stopped and respectfully indicated a door at the end. No sooner had the servant gone than Eleanor walked boldly up to the door and turned the handle. She had barely time to slip hurriedly into the next room, which was all in darkness, before Hardy himself emerged. It was not part of her plan for him to see her there. She intended to wait until he had reached the hall before she entered his apartment. She knew that she had a good excuse for being there; she knew, also, that she had not a moment to lose. Boldly and resolutely she entered Hardy's room and closed the door behind

her. The electric lights were still burning brilliantly, so that not so much as a corner even was in shadow. So far as Eleanor could see, her task was not likely to be a very difficult one, for Hardy was not in the habit of travelling with much luggage, and an investigation of the dressing-table and the chest of drawers disclosed nothing of any value. The only thing to be examined now was a portmanteau and a dressing-case. The dressing-case was locked, but carelessly enough a bunch of keys in the portmanteau afforded Eleanor the aid she desired, and a moment later the dressing-case lay open on the bed. In one side of it three flat slabby leather packages were placed side by side. Cautious as she was, Eleanor could not repress a little cry of delight as she tore back the fastenings of one of the cases and exposed the contents to view. Here was a diamond necklace of almost priceless value. The stones seemed to live and breathe under the glare of the electric lights. Streams of purple and orange and blue radiated from the velvet bed.

"Oh, you beauties!" Eleanor murmured. Her breath was coming thick and fast now. "How exquisitely lovely you are, and what a deal you mean to me! Within the compass of this small circle lie fame and happiness and life-long prosperity. I have only to show you to those vampires waiting below and they will fall before me and kiss my feet. But I am wasting time here, valuable time. Suppose Philip should come back, suppose that he has forgotten something. What a terrible thing——"

She broke off abruptly and turned from the

room with the cases under her arm. There was not a soul in sight, not even a stray chambermaid, so that Eleanor was free to make her way back to her own room and no one the wiser. She knew the house fairly well by this time, she was perfectly aware that there was another staircase by means of which she could return to the garden, and a few moments later she stood in the open, palpitating and trembling from head to foot, yet thrilled with fierce triumph and a sense that the game was in her own hands. She flew down the path in the direction of the alcove, where not one figure, but three now awaited her. She stood there regarding them scornfully. She was mistress of the situation, and the men seemed to know it by a kind of instinct.

"Well," she said impatiently, "why do you haunt me in this fashion? Did I not give you my promise that before to-morrow I would see your employer was paid to the uttermost farthing? All the world will know to-morrow that I am the affianced wife of Mr. Philip Hardy——"

"There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," one of the strangers laughed. "To put it quite plainly, that isn't quite good enough for us. If you can give us some cash, or something equivalent to cash, we are ready to stop the messenger on his way to the police-station and no more unpleasantness need arise. If you can't give us that, you are wasting our time and yours."

"Strike a match," Eleanor said curtly. "There, what do you think of those? Do you suppose a woman who is in possession of jewellery like this

cannot find the means to pay your employer the paltry thousand pounds I owe him?"

The diamonds flashed and gleamed in the feeble light of the wax match. Not for a single moment did either of the trio doubt their genuineness.

"I'll call in to-morrow," Eleanor said carelessly, "and pay Mr. Monkwell the money——"

"Oh, no, you won't," one of the men said harshly. "It's to-night or not at all. We've been had that way before. You know you can trust me, so I am going to put you to the test. Give me that diamond necklace to take back to London to-night, and Mr. Monkwell shall hold it security till your debt to him is paid. That is the one and only condition I make, and if you are not disposed to fall in with that, why, matters must go their own way, and before morning her Grace's guests will enjoy the rare sensation of seeing one of their company arrested on a charge of fraud. Oh, you can stamp your foot and clench your teeth as much as you like. I have got you in a tight place now and I don't mean to lose my grip of you."

Eleanor's heart seemed to stand still for the moment; then a violent rage gripped her till she fairly shook with passion. But there was no way out of it; no other terms were possible. She would be literally compelled to obey the command of her tormentor, and thus the peril which she had hoped to escape was rendered far more deadly than before. Filled with an utter despair, she snapped the lid of the case down and handed it over to the speaker, and without another word,

turned and hurried back to the house. The form of Fiona Dear had vanished, and several guests stood laughing and chatting, Philip Hardy amongst the number. His back was turned to Eleanor.

"Very well," he was saying. "Personally, I don't think much of jewellery myself, but if you ladies would like to see the Hardy family gems, I shall be happy to oblige you. As a matter of fact, they are in my bedroom, and if you will wait here a few moments I will go up and fetch them."

Eleanor caught her breath and a deadly faintness came upon her.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE BRINK.

THE brilliant adventuress had been in some tight places in her time, but never did she stand nearer the brink of ruin than at that present moment. It was as if Fate had conspired to bring about her downfall. If Philip Hardy looked round he would not have failed to notice the jewel cases which Eleanor was carrying in her hand; unfortunately, too, she could do nothing with them. For there she was, in evening dress, with nothing better for a hiding-place than the flimsy wrap which she had twisted about her shoulders. With a great effort she managed to regain her composure, and stood there smiling with her hands behind her back. She did not dare to attempt to reach the grand staircase; she could only stand and rack her brains for some means of getting rid of the cases.

It was a desperate moment, calling for desperate expedients. On a side table in the hall she noticed a pile of magazines and weekly papers littering about. At the present instant it was any odds against their being touched, so that Eleanor

backed towards the table and thrust both cases under the litter, where by great good luck they might remain undiscovered.

The danger was not over yet. At all costs Philip Hardy must be prevented from going upstairs to bring down the jewels, which were no longer in his keeping. Freed for the instant, Eleanor Marsh was in a position to think out a likely expedient. She crossed over to Hardy and laid her hand upon his shoulder. Outwardly, she was quite calm and self-possessed; nobody could have guessed what was passing in her mind.

"What are you saying?" she asked. "Something about your family jewels?"

"I was explaining to Lady Ventmore that I had come down here with the gems actually in my custody. She tells me it is a very foolish thing to do, and no doubt she is right."

The Society beauty by Hardy's side turned her head away a little haughtily. Eleanor Marsh was no favourite of hers, and she had expressed herself quite freely as to the woman whom Hardy had chosen to be his wife. She had never been inside Lady Ventmore's house, and was not in the least likely to see it. There was no love lost between the two.

"You men are quite as fickle as our own sex," Lady Ventmore said. "Of course, I may be wrong, but I was under the impression that those diamonds were brought down here to grace a fairer form than that of Mrs. Marsh. Still, I suppose it is no business of mine. All the same,

I am rather curious to see the gems, and I will ask you to fulfil your promise."

"At once," Hardy laughed. His face flushed slightly as he took in the meaning of his fair companion's words. "There need be no delay about that. It is very good of you to take such an interest in my family jewels, especially as they are so poor by comparison with some modern collections. There is Mrs. Van Trupe over yonder, for instance, who carries more on her person at the present than most people see in the course of a lifetime. Still, I daresay that I shall be able to show you something——"

Hardy was moving away in the direction of the stairs when Eleanor Marsh shot out her hand and detained him. She began to see her way now to saving the situation, at any rate for a moment.

"No, no," she cried. "I really must have a word to say in this matter. You may call it a foolish sentiment if you like——"

"No woman is too old for sentiment," Lady Ventmore sneered.

"Let that pass if you like," Eleanor went on. "But I have a foolish fancy to have the stones that I am to wear in future in my possession before anybody else sees them. I mean that I should like Philip to give them to me when we are alone together, and I can thank him properly. Two-thirds of the pleasure would be gone if I am to handle the diamonds in common with a dozen other people."

Hardy smiled as if he quite understood what Eleanor meant. Lady Ventmore shrugged her

shoulders and insisted that the promise should be carried out.

"I could understand it in a young girl," she protested. "But really, in the case of Mrs. Marsh, with all her knowledge of the world, the whole thing strikes one as being a little——"

"The way out of the difficulty is quite easy," Hardy hastened to say. "I will bring the stones downstairs and hand them to Mrs. Marsh, who shall open the cases herself. Come, Eleanor, I do not see how you can object to that."

Before any reply could come from the lips of the distracted adventuress, the Duchess came bustling into the hall. She appeared to be very much annoyed about something. She was discussing some matter with a stranger, who gave the rest of the spectators the idea that he was a doctor.

"A most disgraceful thing," the Duchess exclaimed. "To think that the poor creature could not come from our private station to the house without being assaulted in this terrible fashion. I am greatly relieved to find that no harm is done, and that your patient is so much better."

"What is it all about?" Eleanor Marsh cried eagerly. Here was a chance at last to turn the conversation, and perhaps prevent the loss of the jewels from being discovered. Once she had Hardy alone with her, she had no fear for the result.

"It was one of my performers," the Duchess explained. "A thought reader. She tells me that she was coming in the direction of the house when she was roughly grasped from behind and rendered

insensible by the application of some powerful drug, then she was thrown into a ditch as if she had been a dead animal, and left to herself. It was very lucky that one of the keepers found her and brought her here. She was so ill that he could not move her into the house at once, but had to leave her in one of the alcoves while he rushed for some brandy."

"What is the name of the woman?" Hardy asked.

"Why, didn't I tell you?" the Duchess exclaimed. "It was Fiona Dear. As you know, she always likes to come and go very mysteriously, and that is the reason why she declined the offer of a carriage to bring her from the station."

Hardy regarded his hostess in some astonishment.

"Really, this is quite incomprehensible," he said. "Like most people, I have heard of Fiona Dear, but I am bound to confess that I take a very cynical view of such people and their little tricks. It is astonishing to me how persons of education and intelligence can contribute to the support of people of this class."

"But you went to see her yourself," the Duchess exclaimed.

"Well, I did," Hardy confessed. "Mrs. Marsh persuaded me to do so, and, much against my will, I went. Of course, it is all nonsense; but that is not the point. I saw this woman, I had a fairly long interview with her, and I am bound to confess that she gave me certain information which would have startled me had I not

been posted in some of the tricks of these charlatans. But once more I am wandering from the point. If I saw and conversed with Fiona Dear, as I most certainly did, how was it possible for her to have been assaulted and left unconscious in a ditch and at the same time be in a position to exhibit her wonderful powers to her guests? Can you explain that?"

"I saw her, too," Lady Ventmore said. "I am certain it was Fiona Dear, because I have visited her more than once in London. Depend upon it, there is something very wrong here, and the matter should be investigated."

Eleanor Marsh stood by smiling as if the matter was of no interest to her.

"Might I make a suggestion," she asked, "with a view to clearing up the puzzle? I think it must be admitted that people of the class of Fiona Dear all, more or less, belong to the adventuress type. Don't you think it possible that the woman has concocted the whole story with a view to making money out of it? She would argue that the Duchess is very generous and kindly and has a great horror of anything like scandal that the newspapers are so fond of publishing. A fat cheque would seal her lips, and the thousands of people who take such a keen interest in the doings of Society would be none the wiser. I don't wish to be uncharitable, but this is the only explanation I can think of, and I believe you will find it is the correct one."

"Excellent," Hardy cried. "I am certain that Mrs. Marsh is right. If I can have a few words

with this Fiona Lear, I will soon see whether the story is true or not."

"Well, you will have an opportunity before long," the Duchess said. "Though I am bound to confess that Fiona Dear has made no sort of suggestion as to compensation for the outrage. On the contrary, she seems to think that she has done nothing to earn the fee I paid her, and has offered to give us a specimen of her powers if we like to put them to the test."

"What, here and now?" Lady Ventmore exclaimed. "Without her mask or the dark room? Come along, and let us begin. I am so fond of all these kind of mysteries."

CHAPTER XVII

A NEAR THING.

THE little group of guests, which had been considerably augmented by this time, followed the lead of Lady Ventmore. For the present Eleanor Marsh was only too thankful that things should remain as they were. Evidently Lady Ventmore had forgotten about the diamonds, and, in all probability, would not allude to the topic again that night. There was just a chance of recovering the diamonds from under the newspapers and replacing them in Hardy's bedroom, though Eleanor did not dare risk it. What she wanted was a few moments' conversation with Jasper Cleave, who appeared to have vanished. It would be impossible to speak to this man under Hardy's eye now that Hardy knew who Cleave really was, for it was palpably Eleanor's cue to pretend that the man was a total stranger to her. Considering the part he had played in the misunderstanding between Lena Grey and Hardy, she rather wondered that the latter had not denounced Cleave at once and insisted upon his being turned out of the house. No doubt he had made up his mind to

adopt the more diplomatic course of warning his host in the morning, and getting Cleave away without any scandal to the innocent Duchess. On this point, however, it was impossible to get any information, for it would have been madness to mention Cleave's name to Hardy at all.

Still, she would have to find him and warn him of what had taken place. She did not distrust her ability to convey the diamonds safely back to Hardy's room again, but there was no getting away from the fact that one of the cases was gone—for the present, at any rate—beyond the hope of recovery. The real danger lay in Hardy's movements after the guests had retired for the night. Would he dismiss the diamonds from his mind entirely, or be sentimental enough to open the cases merely to examine the jewels which were intended for his future bride? It was no use thinking over this, however, for that really lay in the hands of the future. The thing now was to find Jasper Cleave and warn him that his services might be required at any moment. Eleanor went swiftly to her room and rang for her maid.

"I can trust you, I know," she said. "I want you to find Mr. Jasper Cleave for me. You will have no trouble in getting one of the servants to help you. Tell him I want to see him for a few moments in the garden and then let me know. One thing before you go, get me out a bottle of smelling salts and make them very strong, for I feel terribly shaky to-night. I think that will do for the present."

The girl vanished obediently, and Eleanor hastily rejoined the rest of the guests. In one of the small drawing-rooms a number of people had gathered, eagerly watching the movements of a tall, slender, dark-eyed woman, who was engaged in answering a number of questions more or less connected with thought-reading. Eleanor stood in the doorway watching intently. It seemed to her that Fiona Dear's piercing black eyes were fixed upon her with a glance of mingled recognition and malignity.

"What an oddly fascinating creature!" Lena Grey said half aloud.

She was standing just beyond the doorway, she did not notice that her remark was addressed to Philip Hardy. He turned to her with a smile, then seemed to realise what he was doing and moved a little way off. A sudden impulse came over Lena and she stretched out her hand to detain him.

"Are you very much interested in this kind of thing?" she whispered. "For my part, it always seems to me that there is some trickery behind it. I suppose this will go on for the next hour or two, and, really, it does not appeal to me. Philip, it is all over between us now. Goodness knows when I shall see you again, but let us part friends."

"Come out on the terrace for a few minutes," Hardy suggested. "I see that you have something to say to me."

The little comedy was not lost upon Eleanor Marsh, who drew aside to let the others pass. So

far as she was concerned, she was glad enough to have Hardy out of the house for the next half hour. Hardy had forgotten her now; he was more interested in the study of Lena's sweet, sad face. A thrill of pity and compunction passed over him, a feeling that he was not doing right by the girl; a vague suspicion that he had not ceased to love her. Eleanor Marsh fascinated and dazzled him, but never would he entertain towards her the tenderness that he had felt for Lena.

"I am sorry for what has happened," he said. "But the thing is done, and we must make the best of it. You will be happier in the long run, Lena; you could never have been quite content with a man of my impulses and ambitions."

"I suppose not," Lena said sadly. "And I hope that Mrs. Marsh will be successful where I fail so lamentably. As for myself, I shall not be sorry to get away from all this dazzle and frivolity and fashion. After to-night, it will be a long time before I look upon a scene like this again."

"What are you going to do?" Hardy asked.

"I am going to accept my uncle's offer. You see, I have no money of my own, and, in a measure, I have to get my living. My Uncle Gregory tells me if I will go and look after his household and see that he has his creature comforts, he will leave me his property when he dies. It is not this latter promise that allures me particularly, because I care so little for wealth. What I shall enjoy is the quiet country life and the opportunity of taking up my books again."

"But Sir Gregory is such a frightful old martinet," Hardy exclaimed. "He will wear all the life and energy out of you. He will make you old before your time. I know he professes to be a great invalid, but there are many years before him yet."

"What does it matter?" Lena said wearily. "I have lost your love, because you belong to the class of men who never forgive. I don't know why some men should be so hard and cold; but you are one of them, and if I were to abase myself here at your feet I should have my humiliation for my pains."

Hardy remained silent. He always prided himself upon his own rectitude, so that he judged others harshly whose standard was not so high as his own. He would have been a happier man, perhaps, for a little more humanity and a little more toleration of the weaknesses of others.

"I see it is exactly as I say," Lena went on. "I give you the opportunity to say a few words to me, but you remain cold and proudly silent. Do you know if I had my own way what I would do with you?"

"Something very terrible, I suppose," Hardy said.

"Well, yes. I would inflict upon you some terrible misfortune or humiliation. I would, for the time at any rate, wreck your career; I would make you the object of mingled pity and contempt. Then you would be better able to appreciate the feelings of those good men who have fallen by the way through temptation or unexpected

weakness. After such an experience you would be far more lovable and attractive. . . . But I am talking utter nonsense. I see you are laughing at me."

"It does seem rather absurd," Hardy admitted. "Besides, what misfortune is likely to fall upon me? I can suffer no trouble so long as I preserve my honour and integrity intact. I have good health, ample fortune, and the whole world before me."

"And I, on the other hand," Lena said sadly, "have nothing. I am dependent for my daily bread upon the caprices of a selfish old man, who may take some of the best years of my life and then cast me adrift on some shallow pretext. There is a wide difference between your lot and mine, my dear Philip, but it is impossible to tell what fortune holds in store for one. It may be that before long I shall be able to hold a helping hand out to you. I may come to you when you are deserted by the world and in need of a friend."

"If the time ever comes," Hardy said, "I feel quite sure I can depend upon you. Really, in my heart of hearts, I wish that I could be kind and forgiving as you are, but you have deceived me and I cannot forget it. I should think of it night and day if we were together. The knowledge of that deceit would poison your life and mine. Still, it is useless to talk over these things. I see you have quite made up your mind to sacrifice your life to Sir Gregory, and so there is no need to say any more about it."

"It would be quite useless," Lena said. "I

have made up my mind, but because we are parting, perhaps for ever, I shall none the less take an interest in your career and watch it carefully. At the risk of being laughed at again, I tell you, I feel sure that some day you will need my friendship. I seem to see it all so clearly as if it were a vivid dream."

Lena spoke with an intensity of feeling which was not without its effect upon her companion. He turned his head away and moved a step or two towards the house. It seemed to both that their conversation had reached its logical conclusion.

"Let us shake hands, Philip," Lena said. "I shall be all the happier if we part as friends. I am glad we have had this little conversation; it will be something to think of afterwards."

Philip took the little trembling hand in his.

"Good-bye," he said. "May God be with you wherever you go! More than this I cannot say."

CHAPTER XVIII

DESPERATION.

THEY were back in the house again, where the experiments were still going on. Something appeared to have happened during the last quarter of an hour, for the little audience were charged with an electric excitement which one does not generally find in fashionable assemblies. Usually they take their amusements more or less languidly, but now everybody seemed to be on the tip-toe of expectation. At the end of the room stood Fiona Dear, a tall, slight figure, vibrating with anger, her eyes flashing like points of electric fire. So far as Hardy could see, her gaze was turned directly upon Eleanor Marsh. The latter, with a half-disdainful expression on her face, was laughing gently as if something amused her.

"I am sorry," she said, in a most scornful way. "but I refuse to believe it altogether. Clever as Fiona Dear undoubtedly is, even she is not clever enough to be in two places at once. At the moment when she imagined herself to be prostrate in a ditch, I had the pleasure of speaking to her in an alcove in the garden. Of course,

it may be that the sensational story is only the prelude to some brilliant act of thought-reading, or, what is still more probable, is a figment of a disordered imagination."

"I tell you it is true," the dark-eyed woman gasped. "You seem to doubt my power, therefore we will put it to the test. I told you just now that I was attacked from behind by someone whom I did not see, and that I was drugged and thrown into a ditch. Would you like me to throw myself into the hereafter and beyond, and tell you who my assailant was? Is that a challenge?"

"Undoubtedly," Eleanor said. "It all sounds vague and incomprehensible, and does not impress me in the least. At the same time, I am certainly curious to know who was responsible for your misfortune."

The woman passed her hand across her eyes and appeared to be thinking deeply for a moment; then she whipped a handkerchief from her pocket and blindfolded herself.

"I can see now," she cried in a ringing voice; "there were two of them; one a man in evening dress—a tall man with a dark eye and a dissipated expression. With him was a woman, also in evening dress. She is tall and fair and very beautiful, though, perhaps, her beauty depends more upon brilliancy than tenderness. . . . Then I recollect no more until I find myself lying on a seat in an alcove, struggling to regain my breath. Out of the mist come four figures—no, five figures. Three are men, who are in quest of the tall, fair woman. The man with the dissi-

pated face stands by her side. An angry discussion takes place, and presently the woman takes from her pocket a shabby green case. When the case is opened there appears something splendid, in the form of precious stones. It is only for a moment, and then the necklace passes into the possession of one of the three men and I see no more. My eyes fail me once again."

The words fairly rang through the room, half convincing everybody by their very earnestness. Try as she might to appear unmoved, smile as she might, Eleanor Marsh turned deadly pale and her lips trembled. She forced something which passed for a genuine laugh, and there was a gay ring in her voice as she spoke.

"Excellent!" she cried. "From a dramatic point of view, nothing could be better. Only, unfortunately, the whole thing lacks proof, which a prosaic age like ours invariably demands. I am anxious to know to whom the diamonds belong and whence the fair-haired woman obtained them."

It was some little time before Fiona Dear took up the challenge.

"If you will wait a moment," she said by-and-by, "I will try to tell you. I have to cast my mind back a little way, but presently it will come to me. . . . Now I begin to see—my mind goes a long way back to a dark safe where the diamonds have been lying for many years. They are not wanted, for the owner has no need of the jewels, because he has no wife, neither does he think of one. But see! his mind changes, and he wants the stones to give to his future bride. Then they

come out of the dark safe and travel by train until they reach a great house in the country. As to the man, he has a fine, resolute face, clean-shaven and strong; he is possessed of vast ambition. He might have been a successful soldier, he might have been a daring sailor, he might have been a great power in the Church; but he cares for none of these things; he prefers to sway the destinies of his country. A little time ago people spoke of him in whispers. To-day he is a tower of strength in his political party. Beyond all doubt, he will hold Cabinet rank in the next Ministry. I do not give his name——”

“No need to,” Lady Ventmore cried. “You are speaking of Mr. Philip Hardy. Everybody here must recognise the likeness at a glance. And so a tall, fair woman, who might easily pass for Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, has been making free with the Hardy diamonds, and giving them away at the dead of night to three mysterious men, who were obviously waiting for the coveted necklace in the alcove. A more extraordinary story I never listened to. Really, we must put this to the proof. Where is Mr. Hardy? Will someone kindly fetch him? I positively decline to let this matter drop until we have had full evidence whether it is true or not.”

“I am here,” Hardy exclaimed. “What can I do for you? I have not heard everything that has passed, but——”

Eleanor Marsh turned swiftly and left the room. She was dazed and half stunned with the amazing and unexpected turn of events, and

not blind to the danger. In the hall she found Jasper Cleave waiting for her, a sullen frown on his face.

"Well," he exclaimed, "are you going to keep me all night? I have been outside all this time in the garden——"

"Not a moment to waste," Eleanor whispered hoarsely. "Take these three cases upstairs at once, and put them in Philip Hardy's dressing bag. You must find the room somehow. Two of these cases are full and one is empty. Directly you come downstairs again, remain outside the little drawing-room by the conservatory, and when I cough twice, put your hand inside the doorway and switch out the electric lights. Don't stop to ask a single question, but do what I say without delay."

Cleave went off obediently enough with the shabby cases under his arm. With a great sigh of relief Eleanor saw Cleave coming down the stairs again. As he passed behind a belt of palms, it seemed to her also that he was being followed by another man, whose face was not familiar to her. A moment later Philip Hardy came along and made his way rapidly up the stairs. So far as Eleanor could judge, he seemed to be reading a telegram which appeared to cause him not a little annoyance. He crushed the flimsy in his hand and dropped it in his pocket. The woman waited till he came down the stairs again, carrying the cases of precious stones in his hand. He did not look in the least now like a successful lover, but more like a man who was suffering from the

effects of some terrible tidings. The telegram came uppermost in Eleanor's mind.

"What is it?" she asked. "What has gone wrong with you?"

"We will come to that presently," Philip said, in a hoarse, strained voice. "I'll tell you as soon as we have finished this silly business. Something has happened——"

"Then why go on with it?" Eleanor asked eagerly.

"Oh, I must," Philip said. "Please don't worry me now. If you only knew what I have heard to-night——"

Eleanor choked down her curiosity; she had almost forgotten her own peril for the moment. She coughed twice; there was a click and the light went out.

"What on earth has happened?" Hardy said. "Has a water pipe burst somewhere? My face is all wet, and my eyes are smarting terribly. Please turn up the light so that one can find out what all this means. I am positively blind."

CHAPTER XIX.

A GREAT CALAMITY.

HARDY'S exclamation was a little cooler and more business-like than Eleanor had expected. Just for one moment her heart seemed to stand still, for it seemed as if her plan had failed. If the smelling salts had failed to penetrate to the man's eyes, then the delay gained would only be a matter of a few moments. To do the woman justice, she had not paused to think what might be the result of dashing the potent salts into the eyes of her companion.

"Is it so very bad?" she asked

"Well, yes," Philip said, quite composedly.

"I can't see anything. I hope this little joke, or whatever it is, is not going to be the means of depriving me of sight."

The light had been turned up again now, and Eleanor looked searchingly into the face of her companion. In her quick, intuitive way she half suspected that he was playing some sort of a part; then she dismissed the suspicion as ridiculous.

If he was taking it coolly, it was no part of Eleanor's game to do the same thing. She must

make a fuss and a disturbance, or she might be suspected. The whole thing was a mere matter of seconds, and yet she saw the position quite clearly.

How it had all come about and how Fiona Dear had obtained her wonderful knowledge, Eleanor did not know, and, sooth to say, did not much care. Sooner or later she would discover the source. But that would have to keep for the moment. It behoved her now, without further delay, to raise her voice in fear and fright, so that she might pass for one who had come within an ace of sharing the same calamity which had fallen on the head of Philip Hardy. She called out now like a child that is frightened and fears the terrors of the darkness.

"Help! help!" she screamed. "Something terrible has happened. Who turned out the light?"

Instantly the little room was filled with guests demanding, in an excited chorus, to know what was wrong. Hardy had fallen forward into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

"Oh, won't someone come and help me?" Eleanor moaned. "I cannot tell you what has happened; I don't know any more than you. I was talking to Mr. Hardy when someone put out the light, and Mr. Hardy cried out that he was blind. It looks as if there has been an attempt to rob him of his jewels."

A guest more cool-headed than the rest turned on the extra lights, which flashed upon the grave faces of the men and the white, agitated features

of the women. Hardy still sat in his chair, dazed and unable to comprehend what was going on around. He had no explanation to offer; he could only sit in his chair, smiling and protesting that it was nothing.

"Can't you tell us something about it?" one of the men asked.

"I can tell you nothing more than I have done," Eleanor Marsh replied. "The light went out suddenly, and there was that fearful cry of pain. It seems to me that I have been exceedingly fortunate to escape from a similar outrage. I am certain that the diamonds have disappeared. Why not organize a search party, instead of standing here helplessly like this?"

"There is no occasion," the man who spoke first responded. "Whoever the miscreant was, he has not got away with the precious stones, for here are the cases lying on the table."

Eleanor Marsh realized the danger at once. It was no part of her plan for anybody to learn that the diamond necklace was missing. She flew to the table and tore open two of the cases, which she knew to be full. She flashed the contents about the room and then snapped the lids down again. It was done quickly and cleverly, in the audacious way that a practised conjurer deceives his audience. Nobody appeared to have curiosity enough to ask for the third case to be opened and Eleanor breathed freely again. Doubtless, before very long, Hardy would find himself little the worse for his adventure. Meanwhile, he lay huddled up in his chair quivering from head to foot with the

intensity of the pain. Eleanor crept to his side and murmured something that was intended to be loving and sympathetic. Whatever happened to her now it seemed to her that she was safe. For Fiona Dear's experiments were forgotten, and from sheer humanity could not be resumed again to-night.

"Don't you begin to feel better?" Eleanor asked Hardy. "Probably when your eyes are bathed they will soon be right again."

"Philip's eyes are the one weak spot in an otherwise perfect constitution," Lena Grey said tearfully. "Oh, this is a terrible misfortune. And yet how well he bears it; except for the first minute or two he didn't seem to trouble at all. Perhaps he does not realise it yet."

"It will be all right presently," Eleanor said cheerfully. "I don't think anybody would be so cruel as to use stuff that would cause a permanent injury. I believe that even Cayenne pepper thrown in the eyes is not very dangerous."

"I don't know about that," Hardy said, cynically. "But, at any rate, I do not want to go through the same experience again; and, as I am not able to find my way up to my own room, perhaps somebody will be good enough to take me there and send for a doctor. No doubt I am frightening everybody unduly."

Hardy was led away by the coolest of the whole party, and a messenger was despatched for the nearest doctor. Meanwhile, the three cases of diamonds lay on the table, forgotten by everybody except Eleanor Marsh. She was scheming now for a way of turning the incident

to the best advantage. It was Lena who saved the situation by taking up the cases and handing them to the Duchess.

"To avoid accidents, I think we had better take care of these," she said. "They had best be locked up in you safe."

The Duchess hastened away with the cases in her hand. There was just the chance that she might open the cases, but apparently nothing of the sort happened, for the Duchess returned five minutes later, her face betraying only the grave concern she felt for her injured guest. Eleanor breathed more freely now. The Duchess turned to Lena with an anxious air.

"The doctor will be here very soon," she said. "My dear child, I have not the remotest idea how this could have happened. I suppose a set of miscreants must have discovered that Mr. Hardy had brought those stones here. It seems impossible to imagine a more audacious thing. One of them must have turned the light out whilst the other dashed the stuff into Philip's face. Do you mean to say, Mrs. Marsh, that you saw nothing whatever of either of them?"

"Nothing whatever," Eleanor said, looking into the face of her questioner with frank eyes. "It was so unexpected that already it has become as misty as a dream. I suppose the sudden cry frightened the men, who could easily escape by way of the hall and garden. If you will excuse me, I will go to my own room. Now that the danger is over I feel very faint and giddy. Please let me know as soon as the doctor comes."

Eleanor Marsh spoke no more than the truth. The last half-hour, thrilling and eventful as it had been, was beginning to tell even on her perfect nerves. She was glad enough to find herself in the seclusion of her room behind closed doors. She took from her travelling case a small flask of brandy and proceeded to pour out a strong dose. The glass clicked as it touched her strong, white teeth. Presently a little colour crept into her face.

"A close tning," she murmured. "A very close thing! Another moment, the slightest hesitation, and I should have been lost. As it is, the whole situation is saved and I have nobody but Fiona Dear to fear. I must see that woman to-morrow. I must ascertain how much she knows. At any cost, I must buy her off."

Here, indeed, Eleanor had placed her finger on the right spot. She had known from the very first that she had a dangerous and clever antagonist in the thought-reader. Whence the woman had obtained her information, Mrs. Marsh had not the remotest idea, but she was going to find out. On that head her mind was thoroughly made up.

"Had she gone too far?" she wondered. "Was it possible that the salts which she had used on the spur of the moment might really prove fatal? Was there a chance that Philip Hardy would never see again?"

The woman debated this point coldly and cynically. It really did not much matter either way. If Philip recovered his sight, well and good. If he did not, there was still no reason why he should not marry her, so that she would be

mistress of a large fortune and a man who would be physically incapable of thwarting any of her wishes. If no damage was done, then she would be in a position to recover the diamond necklace and replace it in its case. The whole situation was debated deliberately, with no thought whatever of the unhappy victim of her greed and passion.

She was herself again at length. She came down into the hall filled with an easy sense of triumph, and yet properly subdued under the eyes of the other guests. At the same moment, a grave-looking man, who had been talking earnestly with the Duchess, came across and addressed Hardy's future wife.

"It is a nasty case," he said; "but I can say nothing definite without another opinion."

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE AND SYMPATHY.

"OH, is it really as bad as that?" Eleanor cried. "I cannot believe it. Without wishing to give you the slightest offence, don't you think it would be as well if Mr. Hardy went to London at once and saw a specialist?"

"That is exactly what I have suggested," the doctor said. "Of course, I may be mistaken—indeed, I hope I am. But whatever that stuff was, it has produced an immense amount of mischief."

"Can't you tell what it is?" Eleanor asked innocently. "Have you no idea what the substance was composed of?"

"Frankly, I am altogether puzzled," the doctor replied. "I have done everything that lies in my power, and at present the patient is asleep. Indeed, it seemed to be my duty to give him a draught, so as to produce a good night's rest."

There was nothing more to be said or done; gloom seemed to have settled over the house, and one by one the guests retired to bed. Without appearing to be particularly interested

in the matter, Eleanor listened to the information that Fiona Dear had departed some time before, so that she might catch the early morning train to town. It was getting towards dawn by this time. Indeed, it had already begun to break as Eleanor Marsh crept wearily to her own room. Utterly exhausted and worn out with the exciting events of the past few hours, she slept the sound sleep of a healthy child, as she generally did, which was perhaps one of the secrets of her wonderful nerve. It was very different with Lena Grey, whose white face and red eyes, as she came down to breakfast, proclaimed that she had passed a restless night.

"I have just come away from Philip Hardy's room," the Duchess explained. "He seems more quiet and resigned now, though, as far as his sight is concerned, things appear to be as black as possible. I have arranged to take him up to London at twelve o'clock."

"We will travel together," Eleanor suggested.

"There is no occasion for that," the Duchess went on. "In the circumstances of the case, it would be positively cruel to put Philip into a train and then lead him through all the turmoil of a London station. I am going to take him up in a car straight to Harley Street, and then back to his own rooms. You had better come round there in the afternoon, and hear what the specialist has to say. We shall know the worst by that time."

Lena bent over her plate and cried gently. As for Eleanor Marsh, something like a sigh of relief

escaped her. No arrangement could have been more convenient to her, seeing what a lot she had to do. It was dangerous to delay in the matter of Fiona Dear, whom it was necessary to see at once. It was easy to assume a loving sympathy towards the unfortunate Hardy. When finally he was brought downstairs, his face was very white and set. He was not the kind of man who offered much sympathy or expected it from others.

"Please don't overwhelm me," he said. "I cannot stand it just now. It has pleased Providence to afflict me in this way, and I shall know how to bear my trouble without complaining. Even at the worst, other men before now have enjoyed life, although they could not see. In spite of all that has happened, I shall be, I hope, in a position to meet my friends soon, unless my doctor absolutely forbids it. You can come and see me in the afternoon, Eleanor, when we can discuss this new condition of affairs; and if you feel that you have a right to your freedom——"

"No, no," Eleanor cried. "What 'do you take me for? As if this would make the slightest difference to me or any woman worthy of the name."

"We will reserve that for the present," Hardy said coldly. "I am in no mood for tender emotions. When I get more resigned to my unhappy lot, my feelings of gratitude—but further discussion is out of place. If you are quite ready, my dear Duchess, I should like to depart without delay."

The car was out of sight at length and Eleanor

absolutely alone. It was a moment she had longed for—this half-hour or so in the quiet of the garden where she could plan out the future over a cigarette. Her meditations were broken into, however, by the appearance of Jasper Cleave.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “Why didn’t you get back to town as I told you? Don’t you know that it is most dangerous for you to be lingering here——”

“Dangerous be hanged!” Cleave growled. “There was only one man I had to be afraid of, and he is no longer in a position to expose me. Now, look here, if you think you are going to use me in this easy way, and toss me aside like an old glove when you have finished, you are mistaken. I want to know what little game you played last night when I turned out the light for you.”

“As if you didn’t know! Surely you were in the house last night and heard all that was going on. But there is no occasion for us to quarrel. We are much too useful to one another for that. I want your help and am prepared to pay liberally for it. I had to take a desperate step last night to prevent the loss of the diamond necklace from becoming public, and I acted on the spur of the moment. Directly the light went out, I dashed the contents of a smelling bottle in Philip Hardy’s face, and I am told that he is likely to lose his sight. But, of course, you must have guessed something of this kind without being told.”

"Naturally, I knew you had a hand in it," Jasper Cleave said. "My word! You will get yourself into a nice mess if this ever gets known. For an outrage like this you are liable to imprisonment for life."

Eleanor smiled, but her face grew paler.

"Honestly, I didn't mean it," she protested. "I only wanted to create a diversion, and never dreamt for a moment that the consequences would be so serious. But the thing is done and there is an end of it. And now there are much more important matters to speak of. By some means or other Fiona Dear has found out all about it. Of course, I shall have to pay her for her silence, and pay handsomely. By great good luck I have the means to do so since that diamond necklace has come into my possession. You see what I mean?"

"I don't," Cleave muttered. "Monkwell won't part with it till he gets the whole of his money."

"Well, he shall have the whole of his money. As things have fallen out, it will be many months before anybody is likely to discover that Philip Hardy's diamond necklace is missing. Monkwell has not the remotest idea where I got those stones, so I shall commission him to sell the necklace and hand me the balance. This ought to mean a matter of eight or ten thousand pounds, which will make everything plain-sailing in the future. Now I want you to go to town for me by the next train and see Fiona Dear. I want you to make an appointment for me with her for this afternoon about five o'clock, and let

me know the result. You can telephone to my house in town as soon as you have put the matter on a satisfactory footing."

Cleave went off without further protest. An hour later Eleanor Marsh was on her way to London. She had given no further thought to Philip Hardy. From her cynical point of view it mattered little or not what the verdict of the specialist would be. At any rate, she was not going to trouble about the man she had promised to marry until she had surmounted the danger that threatened from Fiona Dear. She waited impatiently for Jasper Cleave's message, which came at length. Fiona Dear had been graciousness itself, and would be pleased to receive Mrs. Marsh any time after six o'clock.

A little before the hour appointed Eleanor Marsh set out to walk to Bond Street. The usual crowd of people thronged the street; the newsboys were making night hideous with their cries. There had been a sensational smash in the city, followed by the suicide of a great merchant.

"Terrible tragedy in the city!" came the cries. "Bankruptcy and suicide of Sir John Blatchford. All the latest details!"

Eleanor wondered where she had heard the name before. It was associated in her mind somehow with Philip Hardy. At any rate, she was certain that Blatchford was a relation of his, and in some way identified with a large mercantile firm from which Hardy derived the bulk of his income. Still, it was perhaps no

more than a coincidence, and Eleanor dismissed the matter from her mind. She had more important things to occupy her attention at the moment.

She came at length to the luxuriously-appointed flat where Fiona Dear carried on her thriving business amongst the fools and the faddists, who never appear to tire of wasting their money in some ridiculous manner or another. Apparently business was over for the day, for Fiona Dear sat in a small drawing-room at the back of the flat, where she was engaged in drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. From the blue haze which floated round the room, she had evidently been engaged in this occupation for some time. She rose and tendered her hand in the frankest possible way to Mrs. Marsh.

"I am delighted to see you," she said. "Sit down and have a cup of tea. If you don't care for the tea, have a cigarette. I am sure you smoke—women of our class always do."

CHAPTER XXI.

RED RUIN.

WITH a light laugh on her lips Eleanor Marsh took the proffered cigarette and lighted it. She knew now on what lines the interview was going to progress, and adapted herself to the situation accordingly. Her manner was frank and engaging.

"I see exactly what you mean," she said. "I suppose you intend to infer that, like yourself, I am an adventuress?"

"Of course you are, my dear creature," Fiona Dear cried. "As a matter of fact, we both are. At the same time, I am much more honest than you are, because I merely take advantage of fools who have more money than sense, and it seems to me that I might just as well have that money as anybody else. Mind you, I certainly serve a useful purpose occasionally. I have prevented more than one Society woman from taking that step that leads to utter darkness, and more than one man who has come to me desperate and reckless has gone away in a position to retrieve his fortunes. These are amongst my successes, and

I may as well admit to you at once that they cost money. On the top of that, I am a very extravagant woman, and at the present moment I don't know which way to turn for, something in the neighbourhood of two thousand pounds."

This large amount was mentioned with an emphasis which left nothing to chance. In her quick, incisive way, Eleanor saw at once that this woman was asking her for the amount in question. It was neatly and adroitly done, but none the less was it meant in grim earnest. Eleanor smiled drily as she puffed at her cigarette.

"I am frequently in the same predicament," she said, "and when I am in that position I am usually more reticent than at other times. Let us not be so ambitious; let us say at the outside that five hundred pounds or six——"

"Won't do at all," Fiona Dear replied. "I am in absolute need of two thousand pounds, just as you were on the verge of ruin for half the sum yesterday. But luck favoured you on that occasion, and to-day you are in funds. Come, my dear creature, like all the rest of us, you are generous enough when you have the money to spare. Lend me that money, and there will be an end of it."

"You mean, I shall never see it again, I suppose."

"There are more unlikely things," Fiona Dear said coolly. "For instance, I might go as far as Monkwell's and cause a deal of trouble; I might go even still farther, and make myself known to a rising young statesman, and bring about still greater trouble. But I am not in the least vindictive,

though you treated me most shamefully last night, and I am not going to hurt you if I can possibly help it. You would cheerfully give a year of your picturesque life to know where I got my information."

"You are certainly a very wonderful creature," Eleanor Marsh admitted candidly. "I was very much struck by the way in which you seemed to get to the inner life of so many of the Duchess's guests last night. There was Lady Ventmore, for instance. But why did you stop in her ladyship's case, just when you were coming to the piquant part of the story?"

Fiona Dear laughed as she helped herself to another cigarette. She certainly felt herself to be mistress of the situation

"Lady Ventmore annoyed me," she explained, "and I wanted to show her that I wasn't going to stand any nonsense. But, on the whole, she is not a bad sort, and I found her very useful to me. Cannot you see that a great deal of my power lies in the way in which I play one woman off against another? Those foolish creatures come to me when they are in trouble, and they favour me with their most sacred confidence. I have a discreet shorthand writer concealed behind a curtain, and all the precious information I glean is carefully tabulated in a set of books which are invaluable to me. Then there are at least a score of ladies' maids in my pay. If I liked to descend to blackmail, there is no end to the money I might make. As it is, I like to feel my power, and see those silly Society butterflies gape and stam-

mer when I speak to them freely of their inner lives."

"Aren't you blackmailing me now?" Eleanor said with a slight sneer.

"Not a bit of it," the other said cheerfully. "You treated me very badly last night, and, more by good luck than anything else, I managed to find out exactly what was going on. You are going to make ten thousand pounds, to say nothing of becoming the wife of a rich man, who will be all the more easily handled because of his misfortune. How that misfortune came about does not in the least concern me. However, I am in no hurry for a few days, and if you will come round here this day week with the money, in note the incident will be closed."

"And if not?" Eleanor Marsh asked

"My dear woman, there is no 'if not' about it," Fiona Dear cried cheerfully. "You know perfectly well that you have already made up your mind to do exactly what I ask. You are too clever to struggle and fight when the odds are all against you. I have not the slightest doubt that you are both ready and willing to get me out of the way, and would not hesitate to do so if the thing could be done safely. But then, the thing can't be done safely—you are in my power. Once this matter is settled, you will never hear from me again, and we can meet as friends. Indeed, I should not wonder if we could be of mutual service to one another."

Eleanor Marsh made no reply; she was thinking the matter out thoughtfully. There was only

one conclusion to come to, and that was to pay the money, though it was like taking from her so many drops of her heart's blood.

"It shall be as you say," she said slowly. "I will call here at the same time next week and bring you the money. Now, I really cannot stay any longer, as I have to go and see how Mr. Hardy is getting on. I am neglecting him terribly."

"And your conscience pricks you," Fiona Dear smiled. "But I will not interfere with the course of true love. This day week, at the same time, and after that——"

The speaker paused significantly, as Eleanor Marsh rose and held out her hand. A few minutes later and she was in the street again, making her way in the direction of Hardy's rooms. In answer to her ring a man-servant came to the door, and shook his head gravely. "Dr. Chambers has been here, madam," he said, "and he has seen my master. So far as I know, there is nothing fresh to tell you. I wish there were."

"Take me up to him," Eleanor said.

"I am very sorry, madam," the man-servant replied, "but Mr. Hardy gave me special instructions that I was not to admit anybody. This includes yourself, as he told me so."

"But surely there was a message," Eleanor protested.

"Yes, he left a note for you. Perhaps you would like to read it here, madam, or will you take it with you?"

Eleanor elected to take it with her. She was not particularly anxious to see Hardy, nor did

she care much what he had to say. It was with a feeling of quite languid curiosity that she walked down the street, turning the letter over as she went. There were only a few lines typed on a sheet of notepaper.

"I am dictating this to my secretary," the words ran. "Dr. Chambers has just been here, and up to now there is no possibility of getting a verdict one way or the other. There is just a chance that my career is spoilt, though I have not given up hope yet. But that is not the most important thing I have to say to you. That is not the reason why I told my servant that I could not see you when you called. Misfortunes never come singly, and I have within the last two or three hours received a blow which, on the whole, is more crushing than the other misfortunes. Sir John Blatchford is dead—he was my partner. He died a ruined man, and every penny of my money has gone down in the wreck."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE UNEXPECTED THING.

THE blow was so absolutely unlooked for, so swift and crushing, that tears of disappointment actually rose to Eleanor's eyes. It was not often that she allowed her emotion to get the better of her in this way, but she had been much tried during the last few hours, and even her well-disciplined nerves were feeling the strain.

Not that she had the least compassion or pity for the man whose life she had more or less deliberately ruined. She knew perfectly well now that Philip Hardy would never have the use of his sight again, and yet she had been quite prepared to pass the rest of her life with a man whom she had so terribly injured. It never occurred to her that this last misfortune practically reduced him to the level of a pauper.

There was only one point of view, and that was her own. Instead of becoming the wife of an exceedingly rich man, she was once more a needy adventuress, up to her eyes in debt and difficulty, and with no way to save herself and her reputation, as far as she could see. As she walked along

the street, with her head high in the air, people turned to look at her and wondered who she was. A couple of milliners' apprentices nudged each other as she passed, and one told the other that this was Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, the great American heiress, whom Society made such a fuss about.

Eleanor smiled bitterly as she caught the words. Those poor girls were much happier than she, if they only knew it, and yet it was no use repining. She would have to be up and doing without further delay. There were many other creditors besides Monkwell, and doubtless now they would begin to press for their money. Then it flashed across the adventuress's mind that, at any rate, she was in possession of Hardy's diamond necklace, which, with any luck, she might be able to sell for ten thousand pounds. She had quite made up her mind by this time that she was going to sell it, whatever the consequence might be. So far as she could judge, she was perfectly safe for the present. The diamonds were secure in the custody of the Duchess of Daventry, and there they would probably remain. Of course, there was an element of risk. Supposing that when Hardy discovered his loss he placed the matter in the hands of the police—what then? If the thing were advertised, Monkwell would immediately recognise the source from which Eleanor had derived the necklace. The only chance in her favour was the fact that the man was exceedingly fond of his money, and perhaps would hold his tongue and profess to have seen nothing of the police notices.

Eleanor was still busy over this intricate pro-

blem when she came face to face with Lena Grey. The latter was hurrying along in the direction of Hardy's chambers. She pulled up and addressed Mrs. Marsh by name. Her face was very white and drawn; there were dark lines under her eyes, evidently caused by recent weeping.

"Have you been to see him?" she asked eagerly. "Have you heard this last dreadful news? But, of course, you have. He would have sent for you at once."

"As a matter of fact, he declined to see me," Eleanor Marsh said. "His man told me that he was not receiving anybody, not even me. He sent me out a cold, curt note, to the effect that he was ruined and that all was over between us."

"That is exactly what he would do," Lena said. "That is so like the noble nature of the man. I know that he is hard and cold and suspicious, but Philip could not do anything that was wrong. Of course, in your position, the fact that Philip is blind and ruined will make no difference to you. It is a merciful thing that he has found a woman to love him who is possessed of ample means of her own. I am so very glad."

Eleanor Marsh muttered something. Hardened as she was, a little colour crept into her face. She could not but admire the openness and candour of Lena's nature.

"I don't know what to say," she said. "Of course, Philip is the sort of man who is always bound to have his own way. However, I will go back again later this evening, and make another

effort to see him. If I may hazard a guess, you are going to try to obtain an interview now?"

"That is my intention," Lena faltered. "I really could not sleep until I have seen Philip and told him how sorry I am."

Lena passed on her way and came at length to her destination. Like most timid, retiring girls, she was capable of a certain audacity at times, and this was one of them. She knew the house perfectly well. She had been there with her aunt many a time before. She opened the door boldly and went upstairs to the little sitting-room where she knew Philip would be seated. The blinds were down, throwing the room into half shadow, but it was not too dark for Lena to make out the figure of the man whom she had come to see. She crossed the room gently and knelt by his side. Then she touched his brown hair tenderly, and spoke in a voice which was intensely low and sympathetic.

"You won't be offended with me," she implored. "My dear Philip, I could not stay away. It was impossible for me not to make an effort to come here and attempt to tell you a little of the compassion that there is in my heart for you."

"Is that you, Lena?" Philip said calmly. "It is your voice, and yet, at the same time, it is the voice of someone else. You cannot tell how strange and different it seems when one can no longer see. Don't you know that I gave strictest orders that no one was to come near me to-day? I suppose you thought——"

"I did not know what to think," Lena cried.

"I could not stay away. I want you to know that there is not one drop of bitterness in my feelings towards you. I want you to feel that you have now and ever will have a sincere friend in me. I rejoice, I positively rejoice, in the knowledge that you have somebody behind you now who will be stronger and more helpful to you than I have ever been. The loss of your fortune does not mean much so long as you are going to marry a woman who has ample means of her own."

Philip shook his head moodily. He was by no means so sure of that. Indeed, from the very first, he had had no illusions on the subject of his proposed alliance with Eleanor Marsh. He believed that she admired and respected him, and that she was the kind of wife that an ambitious politician required. For a long time he lay there, with his head back, listening to the soothing tones of Lena's voice. Terribly worried and cast down as he was, the soothing charm of her presence was not lost upon him. In a way it seemed to him that he had thrown aside a precious thing to grasp at a glittering bauble. Eleanor Marsh could never have talked to him in this fashion, and all the while he could not get away from the feeling that Lena was talking with the voice of someone else. An hour passed, and Lena rose to go. Philip stretched out his hand and caught her fingers. It was as if he were holding on to life, and she was the one plank between himself and the deep, unfathomable sea.

"You will come and see me again?" he asked,

almost imploringly. "You have done me good to-day. It is too much to hope——"

"So this is the way you treat me," a voice in the doorway said. "I came round to try to get a sight of you, and your man told me that Miss Grey was here. After that, I walked boldly up and I make no apologies. Are you going, Miss Grey?"

"I must," Lena said. "And now that you have come I am quite sure that Philip does not require me any longer."

Lena crept away, and Eleanor Marsh seated herself in an armchair opposite the pathetic figure by the fireplace.

"This is a sad business altogether," she said. "Have you heard any more details? For myself, I know practically nothing."

"Yes," Philip explained. "My lawyer has been here; he is the one person I could not refuse to see. It appears that everything has gone, and that, when all my money is expended, the debts of the firm will be paid to the uttermost farthing. Blatchford appears to have been perfectly business-like in all he did, and they found on the table in his room after he was dead a clear and straightforward balance-sheet, showing the position of affairs to a penny. It is the old story of reckless speculation, covered by appropriating other people's money; but there is no occasion to go into that. Nobody will lose anything except myself. There is nothing left except the clothes I stand up in. In addition to that, my eyesight has gone, and what to do I cannot tell."

Eleanor gave expression to no sort of sympathy, She was very sorry and very disappointed, but, so far as she was concerned, the matter was at an end.

"It is very unfortunate," she said. "My own affairs have been going very unsatisfactorily lately, and if things do not mend I shall be almost as badly circumstanced as yourself. It is quite impossible that I can ever marry a poor man, so I accept your letter in the spirit in which it was written, and acknowledge the wisdom of your decision. Still, I should like to feel that you had some means to fall back on, if they are ever so small."

"It has just occurred to me that I have," Philip said, smiling slightly for the first time. "Of course, it is nothing by comparison with the knock-down blows I have had during the last four-and-twenty hours. One source of income had escaped my memory. Of course, I am alluding to the family jewels, which are now in the possession of the Duchess of Daventry. I shall get those from her at once and put them on the market without delay."

CHAPTER XXIII.

PUTTING ON THE SCREW.

ELEANOR drew a long, deep breath. She had not expected Hardy to take this step quite so soon. It was still possible to her to scrape together the money that she owed from Monkwell and redeem the necklace. All the same, she decided to do nothing of the kind. She would let the thing slide and risk the consequences. A clever little scheme began to form itself in her mind, but that she could work out in detail later.

"I think you have come to a very wise decision," she said, as she rose to leave. "After all, it is very foolish to have a lot of money locked up in diamonds. Those shining bits of crystal often represent a large fortune, and a large fortune means a good deal of enjoyment. Good-bye; I daresay we shall meet occasionally. I hope that things are not quite so bad as they appear."

She was gone without another word, leaving Hardy to his own dark and bitter thoughts. Her own thoughts were only a little less disturbed as she walked homewards by way of Bond Street. A little crowd had gathered around one of the

shops there, and, looking up, Eleanor could see that the usually well-upholstered windows of Fiona Dear's flat were now blank and staring. A bystander afforded the information that Eleanor required.

"A police raid," he exclaimed. "They have been looking up these thought-readers pretty sharp the last day or two. They came here with a warrant for the arrest of Fiona Dear, but somebody had given her a hint and she had vanished. She even managed to get her furniture away, and all that the police found was a black cat. I daresay that cat could have told some stories, miss."

Eleanor smiled and passed on. Here, at any rate, was a slice of unexpected good luck. Doubtless, Fiona Dear had escaped to Paris or some such congenial spot, and probably Eleanor would never be troubled by her again. It only remained for her now to carry her plan out, which would require the assistance of Jasper Cleave. In a frame of mind that was almost lighthearted, Eleanor entered her house and made her way to the drawing-room. It was a magnificent apartment, replete with every comfort and luxury, but so far nothing had ever been paid for. The room appeared to be empty, till a tall, slender figure arose from a deep armchair, and throwing back her veil disclosed the dark, mobile features of Fiona Dear.

"You here?" Eleanor cried in genuine dismay.

"What is the meaning of this? I came past your establishment just now and I saw that your flat was empty."

"There is no occasion for an explanation on

my part," Fiona Dear said coolly. "I was told last week that Scotland Yard were going to move in the matter, but I did not altogether believe it till this morning, when I received a note which admitted of no further delay. I warehoused my furniture at once and paid my rent up to the end of the year. I understand that the police are not disposed to be vindictive, and I have not much to fear if I keep out of their way. Unfortunately, I had to pay one or two pressing debts, and I stand before you now with a few shillings in my pocket and no means of getting any more. Therefore, I am going to ask you to hurry up matters, and give me the money you have promised to pay me at once."

"Impossible," Eleanor cried. "I could not do it."

"My dear woman, you will have to do it. You know that you are as desperately in need of money as I am myself. I advise you to call a cab and go as far as Monkwell's, and arrange with him for the sale of the necklace. Now, don't stand staring at me like that, because I am not going to tell you where my information comes from. Monkwell will give you ten thousand pounds for the necklace and ask no questions about it. It is not too late for him to procure you notes and gold, and in half-an-hour you can be back again. Now, run along, and don't waste any time in idle talk. I must be in Paris to-morrow night."

For once in her life Eleanor turned away with a feeling that she was utterly beaten. Obediently enough she left the house, and made her way in

the direction of Monkwell's establishment, which was situated in one of the smaller thoroughfares behind Regent Street. The little man with the solemn face and large blue eyes received Eleanor with a grin of admiration. There had been tender passages between them, and a sort of affection on Eleanor's part which had been assumed for diplomatic reasons. The little man's feelings had been deeply wounded, and but for the fact that he loved money a little more than anything else, Eleanor Marsh might have found herself in an exceedingly awkward position. But she had no time to think about that now. Now she was in a private office, she went straight to the mark.

"I have come about that necklace," she said.

"Of course, you know it is an exceedingly valuable one, and worth ten times the amount of the money that I owe you."

"That is quite true," Monkwell smiled. "But what has that got to do with the question? On condition that you gave me the security for the goods you swindled me out of——"

"Swindled you out of?" Eleanor cried angrily.

"You little reptile, do you mean to insinuate——"

"Softly, softly," Monkwell said. "There is no reason why we should not speak plainly. If I had put the law in motion, as I had threatened to do, the brilliant and dashing Mrs. Marsh would have found herself in the dock, and subsequently you would have spoken as an expert upon the administration of our prison system as applicable to women. But you found me some security and I am content to wait. I presume you have come

round now with the cash in your hand to redeem your security."

"Well, not quite that," Eleanor said uneasily. "On the contrary, I want some more money. If you like, I am prepared to sell you the necklace for ten thousand pounds. This should be a tempting offer to you, for the stones are worth a great deal more than that."

A cunning twinkle lit up the little man's blue eyes. He crossed over to the door of his private office to see if it was quite closed. His face grew hard.

"You are a clever woman as well as a beautiful one," he said. "But I never met a woman yet who was absolute mistress of business. There is little risk in lending you money on that necklace, but a considerable risk in buying it. Do you know that for purity and beauty and symmetry of stones, that necklace of—er—yours is probably unexcelled? There are only about five like it in the world, and their history is well known. Shall I make a guess as to where that necklace came from, and why it has been hidden from the public gaze so long? But I see, you would rather that I did nothing of the kind. You take that necklace to one of the great dealers in Bond Street, and he will not look at it until you can prove that the thing is honestly yours. Still, I am prepared to take the risk and buy it."

"You will give me the ten thousand pounds, then?" Eleanor cried.

"Certainly not; does the woman take me for a fool? I know no dealer in London who, in the circumstances, would give you more than three

thousand pounds. I am prepared to go as far as that myself and not one penny more. You may take it or leave it just as you please."

"Then I refuse it," Eleanor said between her teeth. "I could do better than that by breaking the thing up and disposing of the stones one by one. Without another word, is the bargain to be complete?"

Full of rage and fury, Eleanor dashed from the office and into the street. She made her way back to her house and plunged headlong into the drawing-room, but Fiona Dear was no longer there. She rang the bell and a footman came in response.

"The lady has gone, madam," he explained. "A gentleman called here for her, and they went together in a cab. A message, madam? No; there was no message for you at all."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LAPSE OF MEMORY.

THE whole thing was amazing, almost incredible. Still, there was consolation in the fact that Eleanor had time now to look about her. Of course, Monkwell, if he liked, could have given the name of the owner of the necklace; and he made a deliberate attempt to frighten her into parting with it by the insinuation that he was prepared to act as a receiver of stolen goods. Eleanor shut her teeth together; she made up her mind that nothing would induce her to play the cat's paw in this business. She would make every effort to redeem the stones, which she was in a position to do on tendering Monkwell the amount of his claim. Gradually the plan which had come into her mind earlier in the evening took definite shape. She rang the bell and ordered her servant, Robert, to be sent to her. He came, quiet and reserved as usual, just as he had appeared to Jasper Cleave on the eventful night when the latter had been brought into Eleanor's house.

"I am not dining out to-night, Robert," she said. "I should like to have as nice a little dinner

as you can prepare for me. I don't quite know where Mr. Jasper Cleave is at present, but I shall expect you to find him and bring him here at eight o'clock."

It was a few minutes before the hour that Cleave put in an appearance. The dinner was finished at length, and before the coffee and cigarette stage was reached Cleave had had a lucid account of all that had taken place during the last twenty-four hours. Then he inquired why Eleanor had told him all this, and of what use he could be?

"I am just coming to that," Eleanor said. "In the first place, I am not going to become a tool in the hands of that little scoundrel, Monkwell. It is bad enough to be in the power of a woman like Fiona Dear. Monkwell knows that I am hard up; he feels pretty sure that within the next few hours I shall accept his offer for the necklace. Instead of doing that I shall take him the thousand pounds I owe him and get the necklace back. Now, I told you just now that Philip Hardy intends to turn those jewels into money for his immediate needs. Within a few days he will ask the Duchess for them, and then nothing can prevent the discovery of the loss of the necklace."

"But you can put it back again," Cleave suggested.

"Oh, of course, I can put it back right enough. But I have decided to do nothing of the kind. My dear friend, no shadow of suspicion attaches to me except so far as Fiona Dear and Monkwell are concerned. I know how to close the woman's

mouth, and the man is not likely to make himself unpleasant when he gets his money back. I would do anything to prevent him from getting the better of me. I see a way of doing that and filling my pockets at the same time. !I might have done it at first, only the danger was too great and I could not quite see my way. But my mind is made up now. My dear Jasper, with your assistance we will get the whole of the diamonds. We will get them to-morrow night."

"I should like to hear how," Cleave murmured.

"The thing is delightfully simple. At the present moment those stones are reposing in a small safe in the Duchess's boudoir, at her place where all these dramatic events have taken place. I happen to know that the Duke will be away to-morrow night and the Duchess is giving a bridge party. I know this, because I am one of the invited guests. I am going there to-morrow afternoon and will stay till Wednesday. Now, I want you to come down by the 8.15 train and meet me in that little alcove at ten o'clock. You must be in evening dress, so that if any of the servants see you in the grounds they will take you for one of the guests. The rest is comparatively easy."

"I am not so sure of that," Cleave muttered. "After the so-called attempt to rob Hardy they will be sure to be on their guard. But I daresay you have some clever plan in your head. Only don't rely upon me for any safe-breaking or anything of that kind, because it is beyond my power."

"There need not be any safe-breaking," Eleanor

proceeded to explain. "The safe in the Duchess's boudoir is a small one, and she generally carries the key on that long, old-fashioned watch-guard which she is so fond of wearing. I will tell you exactly how things have gone when I meet you in the alcove. But you may depend upon one thing—I shall manage to possess myself of the key and pass it on to you. It will be an easy matter for me to make some excuse to get into the boudoir, the windows of which you must watch. When I have been successful I will leave one of them open, and when you see me flash the electric lights three times, you will know that it is safe to enter the room. In addition to these precautions, I will place the key of the door inside the lock so that you may fasten yourself in. You will also find the key left in the safe, and all you have to do is to abstract those cases and make your way back here as fast as you can. Then I will so contrive it that the Duchess shall get her key again without ever knowing that she has parted with it. All you have to do now is to meet me to-morrow night, as arranged, and I will pay you handsomely for your trouble. It seems to me that I am showing you a very easy way of making a thousand pounds. Now let us go out somewhere."

It was a little before tea-time the next afternoon that Eleanor Marsh found herself once more in the presence of the Duchess of Daventry. A number of smart Society women were at tea in the hall, and Eleanor called her hostess on one side.

"I have come fully prepared for the fray," she whispered. "I suppose we shall gamble in real earnest to-night? Do you know, I rather wonder that a woman like yourself who is so terribly afraid of scandal allows such high play."

"We all have our weaknesses," the Duchess smiled.

"We have," Eleanor agreed. "And that reminds me. I have over a thousand pounds in my pocket, and I shall be very glad if you will find a place of safety for it. Haven't you a safe in your boudoir where you keep little treasures?"

"The very place," the Duchess cried. "Come along with me and I will lock up your notes for you. As I always keep the key myself there is no chance of your being robbed."

There stood the safe, and when the door was thrown back Eleanor beheld the cases of which she was in search. She did not omit to notice that the gold-plated key was suspended from the Duchess's neck by a fine, old-fashioned gold chain, to which it was attached by a spring ring. Like a flash Eleanor saw her way. All her plans were complete now, and she had only to wait till the gambling began in earnest. It was a little before ten o'clock before the party of twenty began to gather round the card table in the small drawing-room set out for the purposes of play. Eleanor slipped into the garden and walked rapidly towards the alcove, and there she was relieved to see Jasper Cleave awaiting her. She came eagerly forward.

"It is all right," she whispered. "Everything is working out beautifully. If you follow that

path in front of you, you will come to a terrace which faces the boudoir windows. The middle one has been left open, and the safe is just to the right of it. All you have to do, as soon as you see the flashes, is to walk in and take the cases. You will find the key of the safe just on the top. Really, I cannot call to mind a case in which a man ever earned money so easily."

Eleanor vanished into the house and within half-an-hour play was in full progress. From the very first it seemed as if luck was dead against the adventuress. At the end of the second rubber she rose and declared that her purse was empty.

"Luck is dead against me," she cried. "Duchess, will you be good enough to come with me and replenish my exchequer?"

"Take the key and get it yourself," the Duchess suggested.

"Not for worlds," Eleanor replied. "I could not think of such a thing. I know it is a bother, but——"

The Duchess rose quite good-naturedly, and Eleanor followed her to the boudoir. The key was produced without being detached from the chain, and Eleanor proceeded to take out two or three notes. As the lock snapped to, the adventuress bent down as if to admire its beauty of decoration. At the same time her right hand grasped the spring ring of the key, which was detached from the chain without the Duchess being any the wiser. As Eleanor had anticipated, her hostess was too anxious to get back to the game to think of anything else. A moment later

the key was on the top of the safe. The electric light flashed three times, and Eleanor Marsh was amongst her fellow guests again. Quite self-possessed, she sat down to the table and laid her purse before her. She lay back in her chair, watching the cards being dealt. The moments slipped away till, at length, Eleanor calculated that Cleave must be well on his way now with the cases in his keeping.

"Hearts again," she exclaimed. "You double? What a disastrous evening this has been for me! Really——"

The sentence was never finished. The silence was broken by a crash of glass, the quick snap of a revolver shot and a howl of pain. Then there came a hoarse shout.

"Got him!" the voice cried. "Got him this time, anyhow!"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE DARK.

INSTANTLY the little party of card players rose to their feet and looked at one another in consternation. Eleanor Marsh was white and agitated like the rest, but in her case, from different motives. She alone knew exactly what had happened. Jasper Cleave had failed in his attempt, and had fallen into the hands of one of the Duchess's servants. Eleanor's luminous mind was working rapidly. Her intuitive faculties had carried her ahead of events. She was annoyed with herself, angry that she had not taken more complete precautions. She ought to have known that after the outrage on Philip Hardy increased vigilance would be manifest. There was nothing for it now but to await the course of events, her main fear being that Jasper Cleave might betray her.

"Some attempt at robbery, I suppose," the Duchess said. "I am sorry that none of our menkind are here."

Without waiting to say more the hostess rushed through the hall. Only a few seconds had elapsed between the sound of the disturbance and the

flight of her Grace from the room followed by Eleanor Marsh alone. The other frightened women were huddled up together, wondering what was going to happen next.

Eleanor's wits were all about her, and here was a chance which she did not fail to avail herself of. As the Duchess ran forward, Eleanor's slim fingers crooked into the gold chain about her hostess's neck, the fastening parted without the wearer's knowledge, and a moment later the whole of the delicate workmanship lay in Eleanor's hands. Fortune had favoured her as usual, for she had intended to break the chain if necessary, but the fastening had given way and the whole thing was perfectly simple. It would be an easy matter, presently, to attach the key of the safe to its proper ring, and place it where the owner would be likely to find it. Therefore, no suspicion could be engendered.

Four or five excited servants had gathered in the hall, and the dim figures of other domestics could be seen outside. A footman, bearing considerable signs of ill usage, staggered into the hall, wiping the crimson stains from his face.

"Where is he?" the others cried excited

"I thought I had got him," the footman muttered. "I got him down once. I believe I broke his collar-bone, but I am not quite sure about that. He jumped through one of the windows of her Grace's boudoir and ran into my arms."

"You don't mean to say he has got away?" the Duchess asked in a vexed tone of voice; "but you will be able to recognise him again."

"I am afraid not, your Grace," the footman said regretfully. "You see, we were locked in a close struggle before I had time to observe his features. I had it all my own way till he managed to get an arm free and use his revolver. He meant to murder me, but the bullet glanced off, and before I could recover myself the man had escaped. Still, we ought to find him, for he was badly cut by the broken glass, and there are little pools of blood all over the gravel."

"Then search must be made instantly," the Duchess cried excitedly. "Was he tall or short, Robert? And how was he dressed?"

"Well, so far as I can judge, your Grace, he looked like a gentleman. At any rate, he was in evening dress."

"I am afraid that won't help us much," the Duchess murmured. "I understand the more educated class of thief often does that sort of thing. Still, a man in evening dress who has obviously been in some sort of trouble ought not to escape attention; if he is knocked about as much as Robert says he is, he cannot be very far off. Get the men-servants together and send for the keepers."

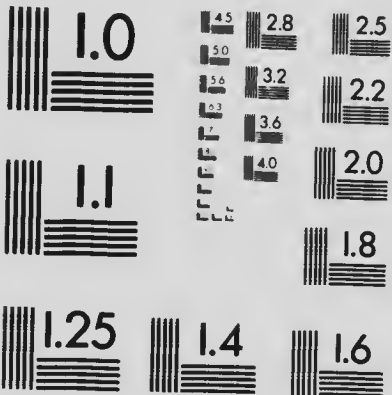
"Would it not be well to see if anything is missing?" Eleanor asked. "Possibly, this may be only some kind of vulgar intrigue between the stranger and one of the maids."

So saying, Eleanor turned aside as if she had made up her mind to see for herself. She walked directly into the boudoir and mentally congratulated herself upon her foresight when she saw



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that the door of the safe was open. One glance at the inside showed her that the cases of diamonds were missing. So far, Cleave had succeeded, but what had happened afterwards under cover of the darkness? Had he got away with the cases, or been compelled to abandon them in his struggle for freedom? As far as Eleanor could judge from what the footman said, Cleave had had his hands pretty full, and in all probability those jewels were lying on the gravel in the dark.

Still, there was no help for that. That part of the programme would have to keep for the present. There was no time to be lost. Eleanor softly closed the door of the safe and turned the key in the lock. Then she attached the key to the slim, gold chain she concealed in the hollow of her hand. A moment later she was back in the hall again, in the midst of an excited throng of servants and guests.

"Excuse me," she said coolly, as she bent over the Duchess, "but your chain is hanging from your neck. The fastening appears to have come undone." Dexterously and coolly the thing was re-adjusted without notice. Indeed, it seemed impossible in the excitement of the moment that anybody could have been aware of what had happened. So far as the Duchess was concerned, she did not hear a word. Eleanor thrilled with a certain sense of pride at her own courage and dexterity. Then she managed to detach her hostess from the noisy throng and led her into the boudoir.

"Don't you think we are rather losing our heads over this business?" she said. "So far

as one can see, nothing has been missed. The man can only have been in this room for a few moments, because we came here shortly before to get some money of mine out of your safe. Of course, if the fellow contrived to open the safe—but that is impossible.”

“Quite,” the Duchess agreed. “Besides, you can see for yourself that the safe has not been tampered with.”

As she spoke the Duchess laid her hand upon the safe and tried the handle. The steel door did not yield; there was no sign of violence about the lock. The owner smiled triumphantly into Eleanor’s face. Obviously she was perfectly satisfied.

“There,” she said, “you are quite right and we are altogether wrong. Looking about me, I do not miss a single article.”

“Unless somebody managed to get a key to the lock,” Eleanor suggested. “I suppose there are duplicate keys?”

“Indeed, there are not, my dear. There is not another key in the world that would fit that safe.”

“Unless somebody managed to get hold of yours.”

“Now it is you who are talking nonsense,” the Duchess laughed. “You saw me lock that safe up quite securely, and you know the key has never been off the chain. I am inclined to agree with you that some bold scamp came here after one of the maids, and that this little amusement was spoilt by that zealous footman of

mine. Still, if the man is lying in the grounds injured, it is our duty to look after him. That being so, I shall not interfere with the search party."

"I should like to be one myself," Eleanor exclaimed. "It would be great fun, and I am not in the least afraid. Would you mind going back to your guests and starting the card playing again? I promise you I will not go beyond the lodge gates."

Eleanor waited for no opposition, but darted from the room in the direction of the staircase. A moment later and she had dragged on a pair of boots and thrown a thick fur coat about her shoulders. So far, she had succeeded beyond her wildest expectations. She had managed to deceive her hostess thoroughly; she had contrived to open the safe without alarming anybody, and in a fashion calculated to disarm the smartest detective from Scotland Yard. If a clue to the crime ever came to light, the Duchess of Daventry would be prepared to swear that not for one moment had the key of the safe parted from her possession. Her guests could also testify to the same fact. The manufacturers of the safe would declare that no duplicate key existed."

So far, everything was plain sailing, but there was still more to be done. Eleanor blamed herself, inasmuch as she had not foreseen a disaster like this. What she was anxious now to do was to obtain possession of the cases of diamonds without delay. Jasper Cleave would have to look to himself, which he was perfectly capable of

doing. Slipping a box of vestas in her pocket, Eleanor made her way into the garden. As far as she could tell she had the whole place to herself, though she could hear the search party rambling about in the distance. It was a still night, and there was no difficulty in searching the ground round the windows by the boudoir for the missing stones. But careful as the search was, no sign of the missing cases rewarded Eleanor's scrutiny. She turned away disconsolately towards the alcove.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE ALCOVE.

It was just possible that Cleave might be lurking there, since that was the appointed place for the meeting, and Eleanor tried to put herself in the shoes of her accomplice. He would fly there, where there was every chance of his being overlooked; he would calculate that Eleanor would hear about the trouble and create some pretext for visiting him and giving him the aid that he so sorely needed. Almost at the same moment as Eleanor arrived at the mouth of the alcove three of the search party came up. They were obviously bent upon searching the place.

"Nobody seems to have been in here," one of them muttered. "But it is possible we may find him in a dark corner."

"Not much chance of that," another said.

"Well, why not?" the first speaker retorted. "According to your showing, he could not get very far away. Anyway, I am going to see for myself. Come along, chaps."

"You are merely wasting time," Eleanor said coldly and haughtily. "I have already examined

the alcove. You are much more likely to find your man beyond the shrubbery yonder, for, as I came up here, I thought I saw a figure crawling along the grass."

The three gamekeepers needed no further bidding. They touched their hats respectfully and made off hastily in the direction of the shrubbery.

"That was a pretty close call," a faint voice muttered from the inside of the alcove. "You came just in time to save me, Eleanor. A moment later and they would have had me for certain."

A thrill of relief shot through Eleanor Marsh as she recognised the voice of Jasper Cleave. She knew now that, bar accidents, the situation was saved. If only Cleave had had the wit to retain the diamonds in his possession her little scheme had been successful all along the line. It was possible for her to remain there and get a full explanation from her accomplice without the slightest fear of detection. If anybody came along with a view to searching the alcove, she had only to tell the same audacious lie.

"Are you badly hurt?" she asked

"My collar bone is broken," Cleave groaned. "The man was a Hercules, and I should never have got away from him if I had not used my revolver."

"How did it happen?" Eleanor asked eagerly.

"It was a pure bit of bad luck," Cleave proceeded to explain. "I got in through the window which you had left open for me, and in less time than it takes to tell, the diamonds were in my

possession. I locked up the safe again and put the key on the top, just as you told me, when I heard a noise and a shout, and that footman was on my back before I knew where I was. I made a flying leap for the window, thinking it was the window I came in by, but it wasn't. I believe I am full of splinters and glass from head to foot, and I am bleeding like a pig into the bargain. If you could only manage to get me a little brandy——”

“Oh, presently,” Eleanor said nervously. “Get to the end of your story first and I will see that you don't suffer. What happened afterwards, and where are the diamonds?”

No reply came from Cleave, and Eleanor repeated her question in the same impatient manner. A moment or two elapsed and then she grew uneasy. There was some little danger in lighting a match, but it had to be done and a little flare of blue flame exposed the form of Cleave lying on the floor in a state of utter collapse. Eleanor started back. She noticed the ghastly white face, smeared and streaked with blood. It was some little time before Cleave opened his eyes again and looked stupidly about him.

“Tell me about the diamonds,” she cried.

“I can't,” Cleave groaned. “I seem to have forgotten everything. In falling from that window I dropped on my head and lay half stunned for a minute or two. Whenever I try to think, it seems as if a wheel is going round in my brain and everything grows misty and confused. From the time I fired the revolver shot till I came to

myself here, I remember nothing. And yet I have some dim recollection of hiding those two cases somewhere in the event of my falling into the hands of the police. I fancy I pushed them under something, but I couldn't swear to that. If you were to give me all the money in the world, I could not tell you what I did with those stones."

Eleanor stamped her foot furiously on the floor.

"What is the use of telling these lies to me!" she cried. "Do you really expect me to believe you? You are an unprincipled scoundrel now, as you have been all your life. If you think you are going to put me off with such a paltry story as that, you are mistaken. You are merely pretending all this so that you can have the diamonds to yourself and make the most you can out of them."

"I am telling you no more than the truth," Cleave said doggedly. "Besides, I am not quite so foolish as you imagine me to be. You offered me a thousand pounds for this night's work, and I should have stipulated for the money to be paid in gold so that there might be no trace of it. I have got brains enough left to know that a thousand pounds earned without the slightest risk is far better than twenty times that sum made by playing the dangerous game you have embarked upon. I tell you, I can't think. My mind is all a blank. Perhaps a bit later I shall be able to recollect; then I can come back here some night and recover those missing cases. Meanwhile, I can't lie here like this; I shall bleed to death."

"Oh, nonsense," Eleanor said coolly. "You are frightening yourself far more than is necessary. Still, I suppose I must do what I can for you. Nobody is likely to come back here again, so if you will stay where you are I will go back to the house and get a stimulant for you. Later, when everybody has retired, I shall try to smuggle you into the house for an hour or two, though you will see I am running a great risk by doing so."

"I suppose there is nothing else for it," Cleave growled. "You wouldn't take it quite so coolly if you were in my place."

Eleanor turned away without reply and made her way to the house. By this time the excitement had simmered down, and the card players had resumed their occupation. It was past one o'clock in the morning before they showed signs of having had enough of it, and then, to Eleanor's great relief, the Duchess rose and declared that she could not see another card

"I am tired out," she said. "Besides, I have to be in London by eleven o'clock to-morrow."

There were some signs of dissent, but finally the cards were abandoned, and gradually the little party dispersed. For some time Eleanor sat in her own room, not daring to move until the last lights had been extinguished. Then she crept noiselessly along the corridor and made her way down into the hall. One or two lights were still burning, but these, Eleanor Marsh knew, were never put out, so that they caused her no anxiety.

She did not dare open one of the doors, for

fear of disturbing the household. But it was an easy matter to turn the key in the boudoir door and creep into the darkened room. With the carelessness characteristic of so many great households, no attempt had been made to secure the broken window from which Cleave had made a sensational exit, and Eleanor walked through this into the grounds. She found Cleave impatiently awaiting her, and inclined to grumble at being kept so long in the open air.

"I could not get away before," Eleanor said. "Besides, you seem to be a great deal more frightened than hurt. I am taking a great risk for your sake, and I hope you will be reasonable and grateful. Before I went to bed to-night I saw that the supper table in the dining-room had not been cleared, so that if you want anything to eat, your needs should be easily satisfied. And there is plenty to drink as well."

"I can do with both," Cleave growled. "What I want more than anything else is soap and water and a clothes brush. Now, don't stop here asking foolish questions. There will be time for that when I have had something to eat. If you want to know where the diamonds were put, I'll tell you quite frankly that I don't remember. For a good hour I have been puzzling over the thing, and the more I puzzle the more confused I get. Now come along."

They were in the house at length, where Eleanor led the way towards the dining-room. She did not dare to turn up more than one light, but she could see that Cleave's bloodshot eyes gleamed

as his glance took in the dainty viands on the sideboard.

"The food is good enough for me," he said, helping himself to a huge plate of sandwiches. "Now, I should like a glass of champagne, but I dare not run the risk of pulling a cork. Mix me a stiff glass of whisky and soda."

Eleanor did as desired, and Cleave proceeded to pour the potent mixture down his throat as if it had been so much water. The effect was soon apparent. Almost immediately the colour crept into his cheeks and his limbs seemed to recover their elasticity. "Now let me have a wash and brush down," he said, "and I shall be pretty well all right. For Heaven's sake, do not bother me about the diamonds, for there are things even more pressing than these."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

Two or three days later the Duchess of Daventry was back at her country house again just for the afternoon. It was rather a nuisance having to come at a time when she was so busy with her social engagements, but Philip Hardy's business was pressing, and she had run down in her car in company with Hardy's lawyer to get the jewels, which she fondly believed to be reposing in her safe. Already the lawyer had acquainted her with the reason why these were wanted, and the Duchess had been sympathy itself. Nobody deplored the necessity more.

"It is a very sad case," she murmured. "To think that so brilliant a young man should have lost everything that life holds dear in this swift and terrible fashion. And do you really mean to say that when he has sold those stones he will only have a few hundreds a year to live upon?"

"That is so, your Grace," Mr. Mellor responded. "It is as you say, a very sad business. It would not have been so hard had my client retained his sight. But that, I fear, has gone. Now, if your

Grace will be so good as to hand over the stones to me, I will not detain you."

The conversation was taking place in the boudoir, and the Duchess crossed the room to the safe. The chain which she always wore was still about her neck. As far as she knew, she had not parted with it for a moment. Her face was full of the gravest sympathy for Hardy as she opened the door; then the kindly words froze upon her lips; her features expressed blank and utter dismay. She could not speak for a few moments; she could only stand pointing to the place where the cases had originally been. The lawyer hastened to her side.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "Is anything wrong?"

"The diamonds have vanished!" the Duchess gasped. "I placed them there myself the night of Mr. Hardy's accident, and, as far as I know, the key has not been out of my possession since. It is a patent lock, and nobody but the manufacturers could supply a key. How did those thieves the other evening steal the diamonds, seeing that I had the key all the time?"

"Your Grace must have parted with it in some way," Mellor insisted; "otherwise how could they——"

"The whole thing is a hideous mystery!" the Duchess cried. "I declare to you that the night before last those jewels were safe. I saw them myself. I had a bridge party, and one of my guests asked me to take charge of a large sum of money for her. She saw me place the money in

the safe and lock it up. That was before dinner, and then the cases were safe, because I saw them myself. My guest was very unlucky, and we visited the safe again, and still everything was as it should be. That would be about half-past ten. I locked up the safe again with the key, which was then, as now, attached to the chain I am wearing round my neck. Somebody did get into my boudoir, but he was discovered by a footman, who gave the alarm. Unluckily, the man got away and has not been heard of since. By some extraordinary means he must have contrived to open the safe and abstract the jewels."

"He could not have got your key for a few moments, I suppose?" Mellor asked. "If your Grace would be so kind as to cast your mind back to the events of the evening——"

"Impossible!" the Duchess cried. "I tell you I locked up the safe again with the key, without taking it from my chain. Within a few moments the alarm was given, and during those few moments the robbery must have been committed. The whole affair is so extraordinary that I cannot make head or tail of it."

"It is indeed extraordinary," the lawyer murmured. "After hearing what your Grace has to say, I can come to no other conclusion but that in some way a duplicate key of the safe was obtained. There is no end to the ingenuity of these rascals; but it is possible your guest may be able to throw some little light upon that matter. Tell me the name of the lady who was with you when you last opened the safe?"

"My companion was Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, a wealthy American lady, who is very prominent in Society. You may have heard of her. She lives in Courtville Square."

A peculiar smile trembled on the lawyer's dry face for a moment. Otherwise, he made no reply to the question.

"I will see the lady," he said, "and hear her version of the affair. Meanwhile, I am wasting your Grace's time and my own. Of course, I need not say that we hold you entirely blameless. We shall have to put the case into the hands of the Scotland Yard authorities, though I fear that little good will come of such a step. And now I must return to town and inform poor Hardy of the fresh misfortune which has befallen him. What he will do in the future, goodness only knows. One thing is in his favour, he is so wonderfully cheerful—so cheerful, indeed, that yesterday it occurred to me that he was playing a part. It is a hard thing to say, but, upon my word, I never knew a man take a knock-down blow quite in the same spirit."

Nevertheless it was a painful duty which Mellor had to perform, and he discharged it in a way which was no discredit to his humanity. Hardy sat and listened motionless, and Mellor could have sworn that there was a smile on his face. Then he asked a few pointed questions and laughed gently.

"Well, there is one comfort about this," he said; "things cannot be worse. I have lost everything that life holds dear, but I have still one little hope of which you know nothing. I have been blind in more ways than one, Mellor, and my

sight is coming back to me in more ways than one, too. I am beginning to understand the difference between true and false friendship, though I confess I am disappointed not to have seen Lena Grey to-day. I suppose you don't happen to see her?"

"Miss Lena Grey?" Mellor exclaimed. "Oh, yes. I was going to inform you that she could not come to-day because——"

"Never mind," Hardy said impatiently. "It does not in the least matter. But I feel amused when I think of a prophecy that she made to me only a week ago. It was the old story of the mouse and the lion. Little did I think how soon the lion would want the mouse, though these things are happening every day, and I can call to mind plenty of examples. Still, I did not quite expect that the little mouse would desert the lion after her protestations of fidelity. I daresay you will think I am speaking very bitterly, Mellor, but you can hardly expect me to take a philosophical view of things as yet. On the other hand, I have no cause for complaint against Miss Grey——"

"You ought to have married her," Mellor said curtly

"I don't think so. There are reasons why I never could do such a thing—certain things which it is impossible to forget. We have come to an understanding on that point. You may say that I am a hard man, and it may be my misfortune that I am so. But after what Miss Grey said yesterday in this very room——"

"But, my dear sir, you really must allow me

to say what I was going to. You are already aware of the fact that I am Sir Gregory Harvey's solicitor as well as yours. A day or two ago Miss Grey promised to go and live with her uncle, and in return he offered to make her his heiress. It was a risky thing to do, because Harvey is a very changeable man. At any rate, he was so delighted with the promise that he immediately made a will in Miss Grey's favour, which I have now locked up in my office. Strange to say, Sir Gregory was taken ill late last night and sent for his niece. When I got back to my office just now there was a telegram for Miss Grey, saying her uncle was dead, so that she comes into all his money."

"See," Hardy laughed bitterly, "see what I have lost!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BLOW FOR ELEANOR.

To go back to Eleanor Marsh. It began to dawn upon her that Cleave was speaking the truth when he declared that he could not tell where the diamonds were hidden. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to make the best of it. They were still discussing the matter in the dining-room of the Duchess of Daventry's country house; it was getting late, and there was always a chance of someone coming downstairs and disturbing them.

"You had better go," Eleanor said impatiently.

"It is not the slightest use wasting our time here."

"Where am I to go?" Cleave protested. "And besides, I dare not show myself up anywhere in my present condition."

Fortunately for both parties, there was a large and carefully-appointed lavatory on the ground floor, where Cleave contrived to get rid of most of his blood stains, so that, by the time the operation was finished, he was more or less presentable. He stood there, sullenly waiting for Eleanor's further instructions.

"You had better get back to town as soon as possible," she said. "An hour's walk will bring you to the junction where you can catch the train. Then come and see me in the afternoon and we will talk matters over. The next thing to do is to obtain that necklace from Monkwell and dispose of it to the best advantage. Goodness knows where the money is coming from to redeem it, but I daresay I shall think of some plan during the day. Now be off, without further grumbling, and be thankful that things have turned out no worse."

It was pretty late in the afternoon before Eleanor Marsh found herself in town again, thankful to get away without further questions being asked, and secure in the knowledge that Cleave had made his escape. There had always been a risk of the Duchess having the curiosity to open her safe, or to go there for something; and this would inevitably have led to Eleanor being detained. In this instance, however, the unexpected had not happened, and Eleanor Marsh was free to go away. She had thought it all out by the time she reached London. She began to see her way to the necessary funds to redeem the necklace from Monkwell. Her first visit was to a well-known money-lender, to whom she stated her case and asked for the loan of a thousand pounds. It was not such an easy matter as Eleanor had anticipated, but finally, after a deal of persuasion, she managed to get her own way.

"I will give any security you like," she said. "You must be well aware that I am only in temporary need of this money, and that in my flat

alone I have enough to pay you and everybody else ten times over. Is not that sufficient?"

"Well, no," said the financier. "It always pains me to have to refuse a lady, but you see, I have had some experience of Society people, with whom all that glitters is not gold. You will have to give me what is called a Bill of Sale upon your goods."

Eleanor opened her eyes in a charmingly innocent kind of way, as if the words conveyed nothing to her, though she knew exactly what the expression meant. It meant that she would have to sign a document, conveying all her property to the financier until the debt was paid. It meant, also, that the document would be registered and published, so that all who took an interest in such matters would know precisely what it implied. It was a dangerous step, especially seeing that the furniture at Courtville Square had not been paid for.

"If you will come back in an hour's time you can have the money," the little man said. "I will have the document prepared in the meantime, and, just as a mere formality, I will ask you to produce the receipts for your furniture."

"Certainly," Eleanor said stiffly. "I want everything to be fair and above-board, and I will come here in an hour's time with the things that you require."

It was very easy to talk, but quite another thing to fulfil the promise. Still, the thing had to be done at all hazards, and Eleanor began to see her way to repayment of the loan before the transaction could be registered, and thus give her other creditors an opportunity of seeing what had

happened. She would immediately redeem the necklace, dispose of it to another dealer, and repay the financier's debt before the day was out. Meanwhile, she would have to get somebody to forge the receipts. There would be no trouble with the bills; *they* were there right enough.

Cleave was impatiently waiting for her return. She lost no time in laying the matter before him.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said. "I have tried my hand at a good many little indiscretions before now, and forgery has been one of them. Give me a couple of dozen receipts down, with pen and ink, and I'll precious soon receipt your bills for you."

The job took upwards of an hour, but it was finished at length, and even Eleanor's artistic eye saw nothing to complain of. Dexterously thinning and thickening his ink, and using half-a-dozen different pens, Cleave contrived to give each receipt a character of its own; when he had finished, he regarded his work with the look of an expert.

"There," he exclaimed, "I don't think I need be ashamed of that. Now go along and get your money and then you can pay me my share, for I am broke."

It was an anxious ten minutes that Eleanor spent in the office of the capitalist; but, apparently, he had no suspicion, for he took a glance at the receipted bills and nodded his approval of them. He read the official-looking document to Eleanor, who did not appear to be listening. All the same, her active mind was following every line, and she frowned as she realised what she was paying for

the accommodation. But it was no time to wrangle and argue. Presently she left the office with a thick roll of notes in her pocket.

Monkwell met her with a smiling face and a pleasant feeling that his patience was about to be rewarded.

"So you have come back," he said. "I knew that you would accept my offer. Shall I write you a cheque now and say no more about it?"

"Certainly," Eleanor smiled, "if you will write the cheque big enough. Shall we say ten thousand pounds, or, to an old friend like you, nine thousand five hundred?"

The little man looked up suspiciously. There was a ring in the tone of the speaker that he did not care for.

"I don't quite understand," he said. "If you are disposed to be funny, why, I suppose I must humour you."

"Not at all," Eleanor retorted. "I am here strictly on business. You know that you can give me ten thousand pounds for those stones and make a handsome profit out of them. I am not going to part with them for a penny less than that, so you can make up your mind to it."

"Oh yes you will," Monkwell said coolly. "Sooner or later you will find yourself very hard up, like all women of your class; then you will come to me and take any terms I like. I have already offered you a fair sum, and if you don't like it, why, pay me my thousand pounds and take the stones away with you."

"That is what I have come prepared to do,"

Eleanor said, as she laid her notes upon the table. "If you will count those, you will see that they make up the amount of your debt."

An expression almost of dismay came over the face of the little jeweller. Then his face grew hard and cunning. He had evidently made up his mind how to act.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said. "I have no diamonds belonging to you, neither are you in debt to me. There is some strange delusion on your part. If you think that you have ever pledged a necklace with me, I have no doubt you will find a witness to prove the fact. As far as I am concerned, I repudiate the whole transaction. And now we understand one another."

It was well for Monkwell that Eleanor Marsh had no weapon to her hand. Her eyes blazed with fury, her whole frame quivered with anger, but all this had no effect upon Monkwell, who lay back in his chair with a pleased smile.

"Had not you better call in the police?" he said to the speechless Eleanor. "Have the matter thoroughly investigated. Tell your story and I'll tell mine. You can go away and I will wait here till seven o'clock to see what is likely to happen. But you will not come back, neither do I anticipate a visit from the police. Come now, you are a sensible woman and have swindled too many people in your time to mind getting the worse of a bargain for once. Put your notes in your pocket and let us shake hands over it, then we will go and dine and have a cosy evening at the theatre

together. What? Won't you do it? Really, I am disappointed. I thought you were a better sportswoman."

"You little reptile!" Eleanor hissed. "I could kill you. So this is the way you are going to behave, is it? You know that I dare not make a fuss over this matter, and you are taking advantage of the knowledge to rob me——"

"Of what does not belong to you," Monkwell said coolly. "But you won't change my mind if you rage here all night."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FALLING STAR.

SOCIETY had begun to whisper of late, and strange things were being said about Eleanor Marsh, though, as yet, they were mere murmurs and nobody appeared to know anything definite. She was supposed to be terribly in debt, and people had considerable difficulty in inducing her to pay her card obligations, and already she had been missing from some of the best houses in Belgravia. A year had passed since the eventful evening when Eleanor Marsh had got the worst of the encounter with Monkwell; but up to now she had managed, by a desperate struggle, to keep herself afloat on the tide of pleasure. In spite of her beauty and fascinations, she had not contrived to bring about the brilliant marriage which she had confidently expected would carry her into the haven of prosperity. Rich bachelors appeared to be scarce, and those who were about displayed a caution, which, in the circumstances, was very trying. Men did not seem to care to be too intimate with a woman who vaguely spoke of her property in Virginia and hinted at a husband who had died

some years before. One or two likely fish had been hooked, but they had managed to wriggle away, especially one young idiot, the heir to immense estates and a title who had been rescued by a guardian, who let Mrs. Marsh know what he thought about her. She was disturbed at the intimate knowledge which he exhibited about her past. If he knew so much, surely there were others who were equally aware of her antecedents.

For the last few months she had seen nothing of Jasper Cleave, and save for an occasional letter or two from Paris this was true also of Fiona Dear. But that Fiona Dear would, sooner or later, turn up and make herself disagreeable, Eleanor entertained no doubt. If ever she floated once again on the wave of prosperity, the thought-reader would certainly come along and demand her share of the plunder. Still, "sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," and there was one chance left of retrieving the situation.

Eleanor was looking her very best to-night as she put the finishing touches to her toilette. She had crept back to London from the country earlier in the day, arriving at Courtville Square after dark as plainly dressed as possible, so as not to attract attention, for some of her creditors were in deadly earnest, and several were only awaiting her return to throw her into gaol, unless they had their money. Everything hung on the events of the coming evening. A long-suffering costumier had been induced to part with one mo : gown in the faint hope of its being the means of getting the whole bill paid ; and as Eleanor stood there, she

felt confident that she would be able to hold her own with any woman at Lady Leicestershire's ball that night.

She was right enough in her surmise, for a murmur of admiration passed round the thronged reception rooms as she entered. Her eyes lighted and kindled as she saw, coming towards her, a fatuous-looking youth, who regarded her with an expression which spoke plainly enough of his feelings. True, he had very little brains, and his position in Society was measured by the amount of his money, but all this mattered little to Eleanor. She did not heed the fact that Algernon Blair's father had made his fortune in some shady way, seeing that the father was dead and the son had the spending of the millions. It was Eleanor's last hope, and she made up her mind to bring matters to a head. There was only one little thing that stood in the way. Like many of his class, Blair was nothing if not respectable. Infatuated with Eleanor as he was, he would have turned away from her had he known of her debts. He was meanly fond of money, and had no notion of marrying a wife who would spend it recklessly. Cleverer men Eleanor had met who wanted far less delicate handling than Algernon Blair.

"So glad you have come," he said. "I have been waiting for you for the last hour. Jolly dance, isn't it?"

He beamed fatuously in her face, his single eye-glass making him look a little more foolish than he would have seemed without it. Eleanor smiled in an absent kind of way and glanced round the

rooms. A dance had just come to an end, and the floor was dotted with guests chatting together. Suddenly Eleanor's face lighted as her eyes fell upon one of the girls who was standing apart from the rest, talking to a handsome man of military appearance. She turned to her companion.

"Do you happen to know who that is?" she asked—"I mean the girl in black. Her features are familiar to me, yet I cannot give her a name."

"Oh, that's Miss Harvey," Blair explained. "Her name used to be Grey. She came unexpectedly into a pot of money through the death of that old miser, Sir Gregory Harvey."

Eleanor nodded. She felt sure that she had not been mistaken. And so here was Lena Grey blossomed out into a brilliant Society woman. She had lost all her shyness and sense of constraint; her beauty had deepened wonderfully. Everything seemed to have changed about her; even her voice had become deeper and clearer in quality. But for the same frank smile and sweet expression, Eleanor Marsh was looking upon quite another Lena Grey to the shrinking girl she had known a year before. Presently Lena's companion drifted away, and she came towards Mrs. Marsh. Eleanor walked smilingly forward and held out her hand.

"You appear to have quite forgotten me," she said.

"I think not," Lena said slowly. "You are associated with too many painful events in my mind for me ever to forget you."

There was no mistaking the significance of the

speech, but it appeared to pass clean over the head of Eleanor Marsh.

"Very, very sad," she murmured. "Does anyone happen to know what has become of Mr Hardy?"

"As far as I know, nobody," Lena replied. "I have done my best to trace him and have failed. Other people have tried in vain. Rumour has it that certain articles in the leading Reviews are his work, but though one or two editors have been approached, they cannot or will not give us any information."

The music of the band struck up again and the two women drifted apart. The critical time for Eleanor was coming now. She meant to sit out the dance with Blair in some cosy secluded corner. She did not intend to go into the supper-room until he had made her an offer of marriage. They were drifting along now in the direction of the conservatory, when a servant came up to Eleanor with the information that her maid had come round with a note which needed an immediate answer. With a feeling that something was wrong, Eleanor turned smilingly to her companion.

"Go and find two cosy seats," she said. "I will be back in a moment. This is rather a pressing business."

In the hall Eleanor's faithful maid awaited her, but she had no note in her hand. Her face was white and agitated.

"I had to come and tell you," she said. "Two men called at the flat just now and wanted to see

you. I managed to get their business out of them. They have come to take you off to a debtors' prison unless you pay their claim at once. They appeared to know where you were, and may be here at any moment."

Eleanor gave a cry of dismay. If this happened she was undone. To be arrested for debt in the house of a friend would be to close the doors of Society to her for ever. And this looked likely to happen just at the very moment when she hoped to call herself the mistress of a million. There was no possible way of paying this money. She dared not tell Blair, for she could think of no story plausible enough to lull his suspicions to sleep. A desperate expedient came into her mind.

"I must risk it," she said. "I cannot possibly leave here for half-an-hour yet. Stay outside and see if these men come. If they do, get a hansom cab and have it waiting in Mortimer Lane, to which there is a garden entrance from the grounds here. If anybody comes for me, I will send word that I shall be down presently; then I shall slip through the grounds to the spot where your cab is waiting and we will drive away to my hiding-place in College Street. I have not had occasion to use it for two years, but it looks like being valuable to us to-night. Now go away and do as I tell you."

With the same easy smile on her face and the same assured manner, Eleanor returned to the ball-room, but she did not go immediately to the alcove where Blair was awaiting her. On the contrary, she was looking everywhere for Lena,

whom she was fortunate to find alone and unattended. She led the latter aside.

"I know you are good and kind," she said, "and that is why I make so bold as to ask you a favour. You are rich, and money is of no great object to you. With me it is quite the reverse. A poor woman——"

"That is not what Society says," Lena replied.

"That is where Society is mistaken," Eleanor said sadly. "Candidly, I am in urgent need of money. To make a long story short, I am going to ask you to lend me the sum of four thousand pounds. Do not : use till you have heard my story."

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND.

LENA'S astonishment was plainly shown on her face. She was the soul of generosity herself. Nobody in distress ever went empty away from her, but she was plainly staggered at the revelations that Mrs. Marsh had seen fit to make.

"It is a very sad story," the latter went on, "and one which shows you how wrong it is to trust to appearances. I have never said much to anybody about my husband, but as a man, he left a deal to be desired. Still, he had many fine qualities, and I am jealous for his good name. A year or two ago there turned up in America a blackmailing scoundrel, who had contrived in some way or other to learn certain secrets connected with my husband's family and mine. Now you must know that we Virginians are exceedingly proud. Your pride of race is nothing compared to ours, and we would make any sacrifice to keep our records clean. Very foolishly I allowed that man to blackmail me, and each time he came along his demands became more and more exorbitant. Unless he has a large sum of

money to-morrow, he has threatened to write to the man I am going to marry, and if he does so he will wreck my whole happiness. This must not happen."

"I had no idea you were going to be married," Lena said. "It is very strange that I have not heard of it before."

"The thing is at present a secret," Eleanor went on hurriedly. "And now you see how matters stand. I dare not go home to-night, for I know that that man will be waiting for me, and my nerves are not strong enough for the interview. Besides, I positively have not the money to give him. Little by little he has dragged everything out of me, and at the present moment I am deeply in debt and disgrace stares me in the face. I am not going to ask you to find me this vast sum without giving you time to think it over. All the same, I am confident that you will help me."

"I will do what I can," Lena said, in her generous way; "but I should like to have an opportunity of talking this matter over with you when we are not likely to be interrupted so much as we are here. Where can I see you to-morrow?"

"I am going straight away from here to stay with an old nurse, at 32, College Street. It is not a very desirable neighbourhood, but still, it is off the beaten track, and I shall be out of that scoundrel's reach. It may seem strange that I dare not go back to my own house, but such is the case. If you will promise to come and see me, I shall be extremely grateful."

It was all wonderfully cleverly done ; the tears stood in Eleanor's eyes, and she was a perfect picture of persecuted womanhood in the hour of deepest distress.

"Certainly, I will," Lena declared. "I will make a note of the address and call and see you to-morrow morning. I am quite sure we shall be able to find some way out of the difficulty, and, if you will take my advice, you will put this matter in the hands of the police and save yourself further anxiety in the future."

Eleanor expressed her thanks in a voice shaking with emotion. At the same moment, a footman came up with the information that a man was downstairs, desiring to see Mrs. Marsh for a few moments.

Eleanor turned smilingly away, inwardly blessing her maid for the warning she had brought. Without a second's hesitation she snatched up a wrap and slipped quietly down the second staircase into the garden. She gave a sigh of relief when once she found herself safe in the hansom. She was not in the least downcast now. She began to see her way out of the difficulty. With the four thousand pounds which she confidently expected to receive from Lena, she could contrive to pay off a portion at least of her most pressing claims. Judiciously spread out, this little stream of gold should be the means of giving her at least a month's freedom from further anxiety. By the end of that time her engagement to Blair would be announced, and she would take good care that the engagement was not a long one. Once

she was Blair's wife, she would not hesitate to let him know what responsibility he had saddled himself with. She laughed gaily as she lighted a cigarette.

"We shall be all right in a day or two," she said. "Though it makes me tremble to think how nearly I have been shipwrecked to-night. I suppose you have got a few pounds in your pocket? That's all right. So we will just go and lie low in those snug little rooms in College Street, and live on ham and eggs and bottled beer for a time. It will quite remind me of the old days when I first began to have dreams of Society. Unless I am greatly mistaken, before the end of the week we shall be on the top of the wave again."

The quarters in College Street were humble enough in their way, but they were scrupulously clean, and Eleanor Marsh was rather disposed to enjoy her adventure. Her first care was to remove her brilliant ball dress, and replace it with something more in keeping with her surroundings. An hour later she went to bed and slept as soundly and as innocently as a child. It was one of her great blessings that no amount of trouble or anxiety ever interfered with her night's rest. She had barely finished her breakfast the next morning when Lena was announced.

"I have come quite alone," the latter explained, "and nobody has the least idea where I am. Of course, I have not brought the money with me, for you will understand that I shall have to go to my solicitor befo. I can raise a sum like that."

"And he will persuade you to do nothing of

the kind," Eleanor smiled sadly. "On the whole, perhaps——"

"Nothing of the kind," Lena said. "I shall tell Mr. Mellor nothing whatever. And now, if you will give me the outlines of your story, I shall perhaps be able to give you some advice which will be useful in the future."

It was an artistically and well-told story, every point of which Eleanor had studied during the time she was eating her breakfast. Long before she had finished, she could see that Lena was utterly conquered and brought over to her side. When at length Lena rose to go, with a promise to come back again on the morrow, Eleanor beamed with a delight which she could not conceal.

Once she was alone she fairly danced round the room. A few hours later and her troubles would be over.

Meanwhile, Lena was walking thoughtfully back through the shabby little street which runs out of the main thoroughfare hard by Blackfriars Bridge. The traffic was heavy, and the dangerous crossing a matter of some difficulty. Here and there timid old ladies were being piloted across the street by the policeman. A cab had collided with a coster and his barrow, and a little crowd had gathered round it. The peril was rendered greater by the presence of a number of motor cars steaming their way across the bridge. A shabby-looking man, with a suggestion of better days about him, was creeping his way across the street with the aid of a stick, his one hand resting on the shoulder of a boy. The boy darted forward

to pick up some object which had fallen from a passing 'bus, and the man with the stick stopped in hesitation. So far as Lena could judge, he was feeble from illness, for he stood there absolutely confused as the driver of a car yelled at him. The next moment the car came in violent contact with the unfortunate foot passenger, and he lay in the road, unconscious.

Lena rushed forward, only to be anticipated by a big seafaring man, who picked up the body and carried it into a chemist's shop, which was hard by. Lena followed breathlessly.

"Do you think he is much hurt?" she asked, as she looked down on the white, still face. "See, he opens his eyes——"

Lena could say no more. She had found the object of her search, for the man lying there was Philip Hardy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHAT DID IT MEAN ?

SOME strange, unaccountable impulse caused Lena to draw back. She did not want Philip to see her at that particular moment, though she would have found it difficult to explain why. She seemed to have forgotten, too, that so long as she did not speak he would not be able to make out her features. He was slowly coming back to himself now ; he struggled to a sitting position and looked about him. As far as Lena could judge, Philip had evidently suffered much. There was no mistaking the shabby clothing, or the pinched features of a man who knows what it is to go without a meal. The face was still strong and resolute, but the overweening pride which Lena had secretly deplored was no longer there. In some subtle way, Lena could see that the man was all the better for his misfortune, and in her woman-like way she rejoiced in the fact. She had not the slightest intention of making herself known ; she kept herself entirely in the background whilst the chemist and the seaman did their best for Hardy

“ I don't think there is very much the matter,”

the chemist said. "He will be all right in a few minutes now."

"I feel much better," Philip replied. "The fact is, I have been ill lately, and it is foolish of me to get into a crowd. A kind of faintness came over me as I was crossing the road, and I don't recollect any more till I found myself sitting here."

"Give him a drink," the seafarer growled good-naturedly. "That's all he wants; then I'll put him in a cab and take him home."

"That's very good of you," Hardy responded. "Really, I don't think there is any occasion. I certainly should like a cordial of some kind. No, no, not that one. Isn't that brandy you have in your hand? I would much rather have something of a medical nature. I daresay you can give me another remedy."

Listening to the conversation, Lena fairly started. The chemist was behind the counter now, with his hand on one of the gilt-labelled bottles which unmistakably contained brandy, and here was Hardy, seated some feet away, actually in a position to read the letters on the bottle. For the life of her Lena could not understand it. On all hands, even from Philip herself, she knew that he had lost his sight, and yet he appeared now to have as clear a vision as any of them. Lena wondered if the shock had restored the paralysed optic nerves, but this theory she dismissed at once. A man who had suddenly recovered his sight could never have behaved in that cool, collected fashion. He could not have contained himself; he must have called aloud in his joy for

all to hear. And yet, there he sat, without a single manifestation of delight, as quiet as the rest of them.

"Better have the brandy," the chemist urged.

"I would much rather not," Philip replied.

"Besides, I have some work to do presently—some important literary work, and I want as clear a head as possible. Isn't that sal volatile in that little bottle on the top shelf? If you will give me a fairly strong dose of that I shall be quite satisfied."

"Sal volatile it is," the chemist laughed, as he proceeded to pour out a liberal dose. "Evidently there isn't much the matter with your eyesight. You will feel better after that."

Lena slipped out into the road and stood on the pavement a little way from the chemist's shop. There was no longer any cause for doubt; she knew now that Philip Hardy's sight was as good as her own. She felt convinced, too, that Philip had never lost it. Her thoughts went rapidly back to the strange dramatic incident by which Philip's hopes and ambitions had been shattered. Lena remembered how calm and collected he had been, and how light he had made of his misfortunes. Yet, all this time he had been playing a part, he had deliberately traded upon the sympathy of his friends; he was acting a sham. This was so unlike the Philip Hardy that Lena knew so well, that she grew more and more bewildered as she tried to work the problem out. And yet, there was also a kind of gladness in the discovery that Philip had weaknesses like other

people. Standing there, Lena made up her mind what to do. She would not lose sight of Philip again till she had followed him home and had an explanation of the mystery. If she had to wait all day, she would not be baffled in the resolution. As a matter of fact, she did not have to wait long, for Hardy came out of the chemist's shop a few moments later, attended by the small boy who had been the cause of the trouble. They walked slowly over Blackfriars Bridge, passing through neighbourhoods more and more mean, till at last they came to a thoroughfare containing small houses, occupied for the most part by the working classes. Hardy turned into one of these, opening the door by means of a latchkey which he slipped into the lock without the slightest hesitation. Then the door closed, and Lena found herself standing in the roadway, wondering what was going to happen next. She had barely time to turn and look into a little shop window when Hardy appeared again, and crossing the road passed into the shop into which Lena was looking. He did not appear to see her; probably she was the last person in the world he expected to meet. It was a newspaper and stationer's shop, and Philip appeared to be buying materials for his literary work. Once he was back again in the mean little house opposite, Lena entered the shop and proceeded to make a purchase or two.

"Who is that gentleman who just went out?" she asked of the woman behind the counter. "His face is rather familiar to me. In fact, he is very like an old friend of mine."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you, miss," the shopwoman said. "He is a very nice gentleman, and I should think that he has seen better days. He has been very ill lately, and a sister of mine helped to nurse him; but he wouldn't send for any of his friends, saying that he hadn't got any, and that he was quite alone in the world. But I know better than that."

"How does he live?" Lena asked.

"Well, I believe he writes for the papers and that kind of thing, because my little boy often takes packets for him to Fleet Street late at night. He has been here some few months now, and a precious hard struggle he has to live, I know. Of course he wouldn't like me to say anything about it, but we poor people soon get to know when anybody about here has to fall back on the pawnbroker; but I don't suppose young ladies like yourself understand what I'm talking about."

"Oh, I think so," Lena said gently. "I have been poor myself. So Mr.—I mean, the gentleman opposite, has had to fall back upon the pawnbroker. It is very sad when one has to part with personal belongings in that way. I have been poor myself, and I know something about it. Perhaps you are acquainted with the woman at whose house the gentleman stays. If I could do anything——"

Lena paused in some confusion, feeling that she was going a little too far. After all said and done, this friend of the supposed woman's was a stranger to her, and it would not do to tell her too much.

The woman smiled in a knowing kind of way as she saw the colour mount to Lena's cheeks.

"Oh, that's all right, miss," she explained. "I have been young myself and, after all, we have our feelings and affections the same here as they do in the West End, only we get it ground out of us a bit sooner. I'd like to help the gentleman if I can, and I'd like to help you. I know the landlady of the house opposite perfectly well, and a good kind, motherly soul she is."

"I am glad to hear that," Lena said. "The more I think of it, the more sure I feel that the gentleman opposite is an old friend of mine. Really, I think the best thing I can do is to go and call upon him."

"He won't see you, miss; I am sure he won't see you," the shopwoman exclaimed. "I know he has given strict orders that he is not to be interrupted by anybody. There is a little room at the back of the house where he works and has his meals, but beyond that, I can't tell you anything. If I were you, I should walk straight in and—but really, I beg your pardon. I am interfering where I have got no business to."

Lena murmured something to the effect that she was greatly obliged, then she turned and left the shop and walked slowly down the street. All the same, she was not going away now without hearing an explanation from Philip's lips. She was waiting for chance to give her an opportunity of carrying out her resolution. Then she turned and walked back on the other side of the street till she stopped before the house where Hardy was

staying. A moment later and the door opened and the small boy who had accompanied Hardy came out of the house. In a careless way he left the door open behind him, and taking her courage in both hands, Lena moved forward, until she was in the little passage in the dingy house, which smelt strangely of bygone meals. She could hear muffled voices behind a door somewhere, and it seemed to her that she could catch Philip's tones. Then the door somewhere opened and a woman's voice rang out loud and clear.

"Don't you worry about it at all," the woman said; "I'll see to all that. I'll be back in an hour."

The woman brushed past Lena without taking the slightest notice of her. She had gained the street before it dawned upon Lena that the speaker was no other than the thought-reader, Fiona Dear.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CHECKED AT MONKWELL'S.

ALL unconscious of what was likely to happen, Fiona Dear hurried down the street, and thence took her way by 'bus as far as Courtville Square, where she asked for Mrs. Marsh. The grave and unemotional Robert responded to the effect that his mistress was away, and that he had not the slightest idea when she would be home again. It was not for him to tell any visitor that Eleanor Marsh was in hiding in deadly fear of her creditors. If Robert had only known what the upshot of his polite denial was likely to be, he would perhaps have been a little more explicit. But Fiona Dear's countenance was as impassive as his own. All the rage that was flaming in her heart lay concealed. From her point of view, she had been coolly thrown over by Eleanor Marsh, who had left her to get out of her own difficulties as best she could. And, sooth to say, Fiona Dear's fortunes were at quite as low an ebb as those of Eleanor Marsh. Only dire need of money had brought her back to London, where she was likely to fall into the hands of the police at any moment.

In one way or another fortune was playing for the happiness of Lena Grey in a way that she little knew.

"Very well," Fiona Dear said politely enough, "I am sorry to miss your mistress, who ought to have been here to-day to meet me on most important business. If you don't mind, I will come inside and write her a note."

"If you please, madam," said the polite Robert. "But I feel sure that my mistress will not be home until the end of the week. If she writes and asks for letters——"

Fiona Dear pushed her way impatiently in and entered the little drawing-room. She seemed to be perfectly at home, so much so that Robert began to feel a little uneasy. With a quick jerk of her head, the thought-reader turned to him and demanded to know if he had seen Mr. Jasper Cleave of late. The old servant's blank expression caused her to burst into a laugh.

"Now, don't carry caution too far," she exclaimed. "because you know Mr. Cleave as well as I do. As a matter of fact, he is coming here to meet me presently, and you had better show him in here. Now you can go; I have nothing further to say to you."

Robert returned a little later to announce Jasper Cleave. The latter appeared to be surprised to find himself confronted with Fiona Dear. She wasted no time in idle compliments, but went straight to business.

"I dare say you have a pretty good idea why I sent for you," she said. "Your precious friend,

Eleanor Marsh, has thrown me over, and I am at my wits' end for money. I have an impression that you are in the same boat yourself. It is a great pity you can't manage to make out where you hid those diamonds the night that you stole them from the Duchess's country house."

"What do you mean?" Cleave stammered.

"Oh, my good man, why try to humbug me? I know everything. I know how you and Eleanor Marsh ill-treated me the night of the garden fête. I know how you got hold of that necklace between you, and how Eleanor Marsh had to hand it over to Monkwell's manager to keep his mouth shut. Believe me, I am not Fiona Dear, the thought-reader, for nothing."

"Then you had better read where I put those other diamonds," Cleave growled. "If you want me to tell you what has become of Mrs. Marsh, why, I can't do it, and you might just as well try to get information out of an oyster as to get old Robert to speak. I won't deceive you, because Mrs. Marsh has let me in just as she has let you in. Like you, I am at my wits' end for money."

"That's exactly what I expected," Fiona Dear said coolly. "As far as I am concerned, I have taken the side of Mr. Hardy. Oh, I daresay you think he has gone under and that he has lost his fortune, but nothing of the kind. If you like to stand in with me, I can show you how to make a hundred or two and save your skin at the same time. If you will do as I tell you, you shall have

the money I mention and an assurance from Mr. Hardy that he will not prosecute you for what you have done. When I tell you that before very long Mr. Hardy will be back again in the full enjoyment of his fortune, I think you will see the prudence of taking sides with us."

"I would do anything to get out of the country again," Cleave growled. "I am sick of England, and I know of two or three openings abroad where I can easily make a fortune with a little capital."

"Very well," Fiona Dear said gaily; "come along with me and you shall have it. First of all, we are going to see your old acquaintance, Monkwell. I am told that he was more or less instrumental in bringing about your ruin."

"That is so," Cleave growled. "I began by borrowing money from him. For every hundred pounds he lent me, he had nearly five back. When I was on my way to England, I telegraphed him to know if he would help me, and when I turned up he positively ordered me out of the shop. Indirectly, he was the means of bringing Mrs. Marsh and myself together again. For he left my telegram in her flat. Poor as I am, and poor as I am likely to be, I would sacrifice everything to be even with Monkwell once more."

"Well, you can be even with him if you will only do as I tell you. We are going down to his place now, and I will ask you to stand outside. Come in when I give you the signal, and you will see a pretty piece of comedy."

The two well-matched associates walked off

in the direction of Bond Street together, where they came at length to Monkwell's shop. Acting on the instructions of his companion, Cleave remained outside, as if absorbed in the beautiful things in the window, whilst Fiona Dear sailed in with the air of one who is accustomed to spend large sums of money and have the slavish attention of shopkeepers generally. If Cleave had been less preoccupied, he would have noticed how well Fiona Dear was dressed for the part. She swept up to the counter and asked to see something fine in the way of diamond ornaments. The glass counter was littered presently with sparkling gems, but, beautiful as they were, they did not seem to satisfy the requirements of the would-be purchaser. She wanted something more elaborate in the way of neck ornament. The astute manager turned aside and asked his employer to come forward. Monkwell smiled as he saw what he had to deal with. Fiona Dear was no stranger to him by sight, and confidently he anticipated a satisfactory deal. No doubt the thought reader had been plucking some foolish victim, and now was going to spend her money in a way calculated materially to benefit the little diamond merchant.

"Fortune smiles again," he said. "It was only yesterday that I heard a rumour to the effect——"

"Rumour is generally wrong," Fiona smiled, as she tapped a substantial-looking purse that she held in her hand. "As if any police could touch me. Besides, I should be grateful for the advertisement. Now let me see something that

is really good—something absolutely costly. I like investing money in diamonds. They don't take up much space and are so easily realised."

Monkwell hesitated just a moment; he was not quite sure whether it would be prudent to produce the necklace which he had obtained through Eleanor Marsh. But there was a certain amount of risk in keeping the stones, and he had no objection whatever to turn them into money. Customers who have the spending of ten thousand pounds do not wander into Bond Street establishments every day, and here was the desired opportunity. The necklace was produced and laid upon the counter. Fiona Dear drew a deep breath of admiration as her eyes fell upon the flashing fire of the stones.

"This is something like a necklace," she said as she poured the gems into the hollow of her palm, "and I don't mind telling you, it is exactly what I want. You say your price is ten thousand pounds? Well, whatever the price is, I am going to have it, though, to be candid, I am not going to pay anything like that amount. My good man, your audacity is beyond all words. This necklace was stolen from the Duchess of Daventry's country seat, and it found its way into your hands from Mrs. Eleanor Marsh, who gave it to your manager in the little alcove close by——"

"Nonsense," Monkwell said uneasily. He had lost all his confident manner; there was a green tinge on his ruddy face. "Do you mean to insinuate that I am a party to fraud?"

Fiona Dear gave the signal and Jasper Cleave

strolled into the shop and took his place by her side.

"I do," the woman went on. "As a matter of fact, I was in the alcove at the time, and I witnessed the whole transaction. To go a bit farther, I am here on Mr. Hardy's behalf, and I do not let those stones slip from my fingers till they are placed in his hands. I call Mr. Cleave to witness that this is the stolen necklace."

"Certainly it is," Cleave said coolly. "I ought to know, seeing that I stole it myself—eh, Monkwell?"

"It is a fraud!" Monkwell screamed, "a vile conspiracy to do me out of my money. Unless you put those diamonds down at once, I will call in the police and give you both in custody."

Fiona Dear slipped the necklace into her pocket.

"Very well," she said coolly. "You are at liberty to do just as you like, and I am prepared to take the consequences. Now, then, why don't you send for the police?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WEAK HUMANITY.

ONLY for a moment did Lena hesitate and then it came to her that if she waited any longer her chance would be lost. She pushed her way down the passage into the little room beyond, where Hardy was bending over a table absorbed in his writing. It was a mean, stuffy room, poorly-furnished and looking out on to a common backyard where some shrill-voiced women were hanging out clothes. The whole place was so mean and sordid, so different to Hardy's accustomed surroundings, that Lena felt the tears rise to her eyes. She was deeply sorry for him, but at the same time she did not forget that she had a duty to perform. This man had turned from her coldly and cruelly in the hour of her distress, and had inflicted upon her an indignity that few women can forgive. And yet, here he was, himself capable of a deceit which was far worse than Lena's. She had acted on the spur of the moment, sorely tempted to retrieve her life's happiness at the cost of an innocent caress; whereas, in his case, the whole thing had been carefully planned and

thought out from start to finish. It annoyed Lena not a little to see Hardy writing there. What would his friends say when they knew? Then everything but pity for the man's lonely condition left Lena's heart, and she stepped forward and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

He turned and confronted her; just for an instant his mind was still intent upon his work; then he realised what had happened, and his face flamed with shame.

"You here?" he stammered. "How did you manage——"

"That does not matter," Lena said. "My dear Philip, I am glad to see that your face can flush with shame like other people's. I am rejoiced to know that you have your weaknesses, that you have what some people call redeeming vices. There was a time when I thought that you were too good for me, when I almost regretted that you did not show those little faults which most of us possess. And now I have caught you in a deceit so great——"

"We will come to that presently," Philip said. "I asked you to tell me just now how you found me out."

"I saw you this morning by Blackfriars Bridge," Lena explained. "In fact, I witnessed your accident. I was in the chemist's shop where they carried you, and there I made the great discovery that you are not blind at all. The discovery so nearly overwhelmed me that I almost betrayed myself. Then I knew that you had been acting a part—I don't know why. And yet you were

so terribly hard upon me for an offence which was light compared with yours. I resolved to follow you here and I did so. Of course, you may say that it was no business of mine; you may say that all is over between us, but I cannot, in justice to myself——”

“Stop,” Philip cried. “Let me at once plead guilty to all the hard things you say about me. I am not blind—I never was blind for a single moment. Mind you, I know that an attempt was made to deprive me of my sight for the time being, and thus prevent me from displaying those diamonds to the Duchess of Daventry’s guests on that eventful evening. To go farther, I know who made the attempt—practically, I saw it done.”

“You have been confirmed in your opinion?” Lena asked.

“Indeed, I have. And by a woman who has just left me. You probably met her as you came into the house.”

“Yes, Fiona Dear, the thought-reader. I recognised her as she passed me, and wondered what she was doing here.”

“She came to me partly out of revenge and partly for the sake of money,” Hardy explained. “The story is too long to go into now, but I will tell it all to you in time. Cannot you guess who it was who made the attempt to blind me?”

“I have had my suspicions all along,” Lena murmured, “though I have not dared to put them into words. It is the woman for whose sake you changed your mind——”

“For whose sake I threw away the pearl and

took up a shell," Philip cried passionately. "Ah, my dear Lena, since I have been here, I have found another and still dearer eyesight than that which you deemed to be lost. The scales have fallen and I can see everything quite clearly now. By degrees, I am getting to the bottom of as black a conspiracy as ever wrecked the happiness of two lives. I know now that Eleanor Marsh is no more than an adventuress. I know now that she dared not let me produce those diamonds because the necklace was missing. I did not understand at the moment, not even at the time when I shammed blindness. But, at any rate, it is no more than your due that you should have an explanation of my strange conduct. When I went up to my room to fetch those stones my man followed me with a long telegram. It concerned my private affairs and my partner, Sir John Blatchford. I knew then that I was a ruined man, and that Blatchford had so contrived it that he was likely to escape the penalty of his crime."

"He did so," Lena said. "He committed suicide."

"When I came downstairs with that telegram, I give you my word that I had forgotten all about the jewels which I carried also. My whole attention was concentrated upon a scheme for defeating Blatchford and saving my fortune. I had not thought of any definite plan when that stuff was flung into my eyes, an act which did not trouble me much, except that I was indignant that anyone should presume to play a practical joke upon

me. When I found out that the Duchess's guests were taking the thing in terrible earnest, I let the matter pass, because I began to perceive a way out of the difficulty. Blatchford would think nothing about a blind man who chose to disappear from the ken of his friends and hide his troubles in obscurity. You will understand presently why I did this, and, when you understand, I am sure you will not blame me."

"I am not sure that I blame you now," Lena said thoughtfully. "Really, I almost rejoice in the fact that you can stoop to be human, like the rest of us. Philip, let me tell you now, whilst I can, the meaning of that scene between Jasper Cleave and myself——"

"Not a word," Philip said. "Did I not tell you that the scales had fallen from my eyes, and that I can now see things from the proper standpoint? You are as good and pure and innocent as you look. Why should you not in your girlish days have had innocent love passages with Cleave? Then he was, to all outward seeming, a gentleman. You wrote him innocent letters which were magnified into terribly indiscreet ones when the rascal came home again. You were afraid of me; you did not dare to come and tell me the truth, because you feared lest I should take a harsh view——"

"I know you would," Lena said boldly. "However, you were very different then to what you are now. Mr. Cleave offered me back the letters if I would give him one kiss—oh, it fills me with shame even to think of that moment. And then,

as accident would have it, you came along and caught me——”

“It was no accident,” Philip said. “The whole thing was a cruel conspiracy, craftily arranged. I must have been a fool not to have seen it at the time, but we are getting away from the point again, because I was going to tell you why I came down here and why the world is still allowed to believe that I am blind. If you will come this way, I will show you something.”

As he spoke, Philip glanced at the clock and then gently led Lena to a little front sitting-room. There was a wire blind across the window, behind which they could stand and watch what was going on in the street without themselves being seen. For some little time they stood there in silence, till, presently, Philip grasped Lena's arm. He pointed silently to a figure on the other side of the road, the bent figure of a grey-haired man, muffled to the throat, his eyes hidden by glasses.

“There is the mystery itself,” he said. “You do not recognise him though you have seen him many a time before. You want to know who it is? Then let me whisper in your ear. The man across the street is the so-called suicide, Sir John Blatchford.”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TO THE RESCUE.

LENA stared at Philip in amazement. She hardly comprehended what he was saying for the moment ; her eyes followed the shabby figure on the other side of the road until, at length, he was hidden from sight. Then Lena turned to her companion and asked him to explain what it all meant.

"I see you are surprised," Philip said, with a smile. "And, after all, the thing is easily explained. I told you that yonder figure is Sir John Blatchford, and I told you no more than the truth."

"But surely, you are mistaken," Lena expostulated. "I understood, like everybody else, that Sir John had committed suicide. He was found dead in his office, he was identified by his managing clerk and his own doctor, and subsequently buried. You surely don't want me to believe that some strange individual got Sir John away and impersonated him in that queer fashion?"

"Well, it comes to something like that," Philip said. "I daresay you have heard me speak of a man named Walters?"

"I have heard you speak of him, but I have

never seen him," Lena said. "Wasn't he a friend of your father's?"

"A friend of my father's and a friend of mine. Mr. Walters is one of the shrewdest men in the City of London, and more than once had given me a pretty broad hint to look after Blatchford and to get my money out of the firm if I could. I ignored all those hints foolishly enough, till the night we were at the Duchess of Daventry's. It was just after dinner that I had the telegram, telling me that Blatchford had been found dead in his office, and that he had committed suicide. I said nothing about it to anybody, because it seemed to me to be policy to keep the matter secret. To my great surprise, just as I was going upstairs to fetch those diamonds I received a long telegram from Walters. It suggested that there was something wrong somewhere, for the simple reason that he, Walters, had received a business telegram from Blatchford, and the official time which was marked on the face of the telegram was just ten minutes later than the moment when Blatchford's dead body was found."

"But that was impossible," Lena cried.

"On the face of it, yes. But if we assume that the body in the office was not that of Blatchford at all, we begin to understand. On inquiries, I found that the telegram to Walters was absolutely necessary, and Blatchford risked it, feeling that it was very unlikely that Walters would note at what hour the telegram form was handed in. However, he did notice it and sent me that warning. I was still pondering the matter when I

received the stuff in my face, and immediately the wild idea occurred to me to sham blindness. You see, I felt pretty sure what had happened. Blatchford had contrived to persuade people that he was dead, and was going off with everything he could lay his hands upon. There was no reason at all why he should not come to hear of my accident, and that would render him more careless as far as I was concerned. At any rate, right or wrong, I did it, and there is an end of the matter. My idea was that Blatchford, feeling himself absolutely safe, would not leave the country at once, but would wait until the coast was clear."

"But there is one thing you seem to have forgotten," Lena said. "I can't understand who the man was who was so like Sir John—I mean, the man whose body was found in the office."

"I had quite overlooked that," Philip said; "but that explanation is perfectly easy. I remember many years ago Sir John telling me something about a brother of his, who bore an extraordinary likeness to him. This brother had got himself into trouble some years before, and had discreetly disappeared. We will assume, for the sake of argument, that he had to return to England on business, and that he called upon Sir John probably with a view to obtaining money. Perhaps Blatchford refused, perhaps the unfortunate man committed suicide in a moment of despair. On the other hand, perhaps he died of heart failure, and Blatchford saw his way——"

"What a horrible idea!" Lena cried.

"Well, I don't want to harrow your feelings unduly," Philip said, "but the facts are pretty well as I have stated them. It would be an easy matter to change clothes with the dead man, and for Blatchford to disappear, all the more as he had all his arrangements made for leaving the country. My theory is that the whole thing was an extraordinary stroke of luck for Blatchford; but, be that as it may, you have just seen Sir John Blatchford walk down the street, and you know now that the body found in his office was that of his unfortunate brother."

"It seems a very plausible theory," Lena said thoughtfully. "But how did you manage to get upon the track of your partner?"

"Oh, that was comparatively easy," Philip smiled. "You see, Blatchford had to put himself out of the way for a time, and what more likely hiding-place could he have than the obscure lodgings or hotel where his brother was staying? He was wearing the dead man's clothes and had the dead man's papers in his possession. There would be sure to be a letter or two in the pockets addressed to Arthur Blatchford, somewhere in London, and Sir John would naturally go off to the address given on the letter. With the assistance of my friend Walters, who was in the secret, we had no very great difficulty in tracking down Arthur Blatchford; and, strangely enough, the man who stands in his shoes is staying in this very street. I have not been able to follow him myself, for reasons which you will not fail to understand, but I am having him carefully

watched and all his movements are known to me."

"You think he has the command of money?" Lena asked.

"My dear Lena, I am certain of it. He is in touch with more than one bank, and, as far as I can ascertain, must have the handling of more than two hundred thousand pounds. Now that the debts of the firm are paid, that money belongs to me. The thing that puzzles me is, why Blatchford should have taken this extraordinary step at all? The firm was sound and prosperous enough, and the only explanation I can think of is that he has lost his reason; but we shall know all about that in a few days now, for by the end of the week Blatchford will either have to disgorge his ill-gotten gains or fight the matter before a magistrate."

"You are not afraid of his slipping away in the meantime?" Lena asked. "He is a very clever man——"

"He is not clever enough to get out of this trouble," Philip said. "We practically know everything now. We know where nearly all the money is; we are even acquainted with the name of the ship on which Blatchford proposes to sail for South America next week. So you see that though things looked very black a little time ago, there is every chance of their mending. I hope before long to stand before the world again just as I stood before. Do you know, I am glad this has happened, for it has taught me a lesson that I sorely needed. All my hard worldly dreams

and ambitions are at an end now. I am going to lead a very different kind of life in the future. It is astonishing how one begins to feel for the weaknesses of others when misfortune overtakes one."

"I am glad to hear you say that," Lena murmured. "It is the one thing that you needed, Philip, the one touch of softness and sympathy wanted to make you a perfect man in my eyes. Not that it matters to me, of course, because we can never be anything but friends in the future, and without wishing to be in the least spiteful, I am quite sure that Mrs. Marsh will not care for the change. You won't mind my saying that, Philip?"

There was a peculiar smile upon Hardy's face as he looked into Lena's troubled eyes. He was blaming himself bitterly now for his mental blindness, his strange inability to discern between the false and the true, and yet he had always prided himself upon the fact that his fellow creatures to him were simply open books

"I had forgotten all about Mrs. Marsh," he said. "I daresay you may imagine that I have missed her sympathy and brilliant presence of late. It will perhaps be news to you that I have hardly given her a single thought. Come, my dear Lena, I know it is not in your nature to think harshly of anybody, but do you really suppose that a woman like Eleanor Marsh would think twice about a man who had lost his sight and his fortune at the same time? Now tell me candidly."

"I shouldn't like to say," Lena said.

"Then let me say it for you. Mrs. Marsh came to see me the day after my accident, and I declined to see her. When I did finally have an interview with her we parted in quite a friendly spirit, but we did part all the same, and that for good. There was no scene between us; no violent reproaches on my side, no deep regrets on hers. To use a business expression, we simply dissolved partnership and there was an end of the matter."

Lena was about to speak when the door opened and a tall, well-dressed figure came in. She started back at the sight of Lena.

"Come in, Mrs. Marsh," Philip said quite good-humouredly; "come in. We were just talking about you."

The woman's face changed just for a moment; then she dropped into a chair, glancing uneasily from one to the other.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DOG ROB DOG.

FOR once in his life, Monkwell had entirely lost the good-natured boyishness of feature which usually distinguished him. He stood behind his counter, pale with anger and almost beside himself with futile rage. He had not expected a trick like this; he began to realise that threats and bluster were thrown away upon Fiona Dear.

"Come, come—you will have your little joke," he said. "And now you have finished, kindly hand me back that necklace."

"There is no joke about it at all," Fiona Dear said coolly. "You are a cunning little man, and absolutely unscrupulous, I know, but you have met your match this time. Do you mean to tell me that you don't know that necklace was stolen from a case belonging to Mr. Philip Hardy? Because if you like to carry the thing out on those lines, I am prepared to fight you with your own weapons. All you can do is to give me into the custody of the police, which I shall not in the least mind, and then the matter can be fought out before magistrates. My word; I should enjoy

that. Just think of the sorry figure you would cut in the witness-box! Fancy how a smart barrister would turn you inside out, and you would have to admit that you were dealing with stolen property with your eyes open! Now call your police in and let us see what the result will be."

"You Jezebel!" Monkwell said between his teeth. "How did you come to find out all this?"

"Ask Jasper Cleave," Fiona Dear laughed. "I daresay he can supply all the missing links of the evidence. There is nothing about it that I don't know; and now, if you have decided not to carry the game any farther, I will wish you a very polite good-morning. I am going to take this necklace to Mr. Hardy, and in return I shall receive the money of which I am in such sore need. If you had played your part fairly, we might have sold that necklace and divided the plunder between us. As it is, you have lost your stones, to say nothing of the thousand pounds which Eleanor Marsh owes you. Good-morning, little man, and I hope this interview will not spoil your appetite for lunch."

With a laugh, Fiona Dear turned and left the shop, followed by Cleave. The latter's admiration was outspoken, the comedy had been entirely after his own heart. He had always hated Monkwell sincerely, and the jeweller's discomfiture filled him with the liveliest satisfaction. And yet, in spite of all, he was wondering now how he could turn the thing to the best advantage.

"That was splendidly done," he said. "Upon my word, I have never seen anything better.

But, my dear lady, what is the game? You are surely not going to carry out your threat and return that necklace to Philip Hardy?"

"Indeed I am," Fiona Dear declared. "Don't you see that it is to my advantage to do so? I am in desperate need of money, I am running a great risk in being here at all. If I attempt to pledge this thing, I will find myself in a very awkward position, whereas if I take it to Mr. Hardy, I shall get my thousand pounds with the knowledge that the money belongs to me and that I have defrauded nobody. You must admit that the criminal, however successful he may be, does not sleep so soundly at night as an honest man."

"But this is madness," Cleave protested. "I can show you where you can get five thousand pounds for that necklace within an hour, and no questions asked either. Besides, what is the good of taking it to Hardy? To begin with, I don't suppose you even know where he is to be found. At any rate, none of his friends do. No doubt he has left the country."

"There are times when strangers know more than friends," Fiona laughed. "You can take it from me that I know exactly where to put my hand upon Philip Hardy. In fact, to be quite candid, I have had a long chat with him within the last two hours."

Cleave looked up with some anxiety on his face.

"I can't make you out," he said. "You fairly beat me. What can you possibly have to gain by taking the side of Philip Hardy? And where

would he be likely to find the thousand pounds? Why, the fellow is as hard up as I am."

"He is not hard up at all," Fiona Dear said serenely. "It will astonish you, as it will other people, to see Philip Hardy occupying his old position within the next few days. Do you believe in coincidences?"

"Only when they bring misfortunes," Cleave said. "For instance, I have had my two unfortunate coincidences in meeting men I did not particularly want to see, and those coincidences have given me a pretty bad time. Once in Australia——"

"Oh, never mind about your rascalities. You will quite understand how a woman in my position gets hold of private information. And there is no end to the credulity of human nature. Scores of men who openly scoff at my methods have come before now creeping up to my room to ask me questions concerning their most inner lives. If I liked to try the game of blackmail, I could make more money than I want. If I liked to open my mouth, how many a promising career could I ruin! But all this is by the way. I suppose you have heard of Sir John Blatchford and his sensational suicide? It must be fresh in your mind."

"Oh, I know all about that, but I should like to know what Sir John Blatchford has to do with this?"

"Well, he was a client of mine. He frequently consulted me, and, like most of my clients, he told me a great deal more than he had

imagined. He told me enough, at any rate, for me to see that it was to my advantage to find Mr. Hardy and take his side. To be perfectly candid, I am after money now to get me out of the country, and once that necklace passes into Mr. Hardy's possession, the money I need will be mine."

"And where do I come in?" Cleave asked.

"My dear sir, you don't come in at all, as far as I am concerned. Now that you have served my purpose, I don't care two straws what becomes of you. Meanwhile, we are going as far as Mrs. Marsh's flat, where I have something to say to that inestimable servant of hers. Now come along and don't look sulky. If you behave yourself properly, I have no doubt I will put something in your way."

The strangely-assorted couple were back again at Courtville Square at length. They had barely settled down to cigarettes and some light refreshment in the dining-room when the door was flung violently open and Eleanor Marsh came in. She threw aside her veil and goggles and a long dust-coat, which afforded an excellent disguise, then she turned upon Fiona Dear in a sudden fury.

"What do you mean by this?" she demanded breathlessly. "How dare you come here in this fashion?"

"My good creature," Fiona Dear said sweetly, "you really must not get in these dreadful tempers. They spoil your features and induce wrinkles, which at your time of life are exceedingly hard to get rid of. If you want to know why

I came here, I will tell you. I came in search of the money you promised me, which money you have not paid, neither, so far as I can see, do you intend to. That being so, I have had to play my own hand in my own way."

"But I could not get the money," Eleanor Marsh protested. "Luck has been dead against me lately, and my creditors have very nearly ruined me. Still, I got that little fool of a Lena Grey to listen to me, and in a few days she has promised me quite a large sum in ready cash, then I can pay you."

"Not out of that money, anyway," Fiona Dear laughed. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, you will never see a farthing of Miss Grey's money. Doubtless, by this time, she and Philip Hardy have come to a proper understanding, which will likely——"

"Understanding?" Eleanor Marsh stammered. "Why, she doesn't even know where he is. Nobody does, for that matter."

"Oh, really, then let me tell you that I know where he is. I was with him this morning, and we came to a very amiable understanding on the subject of the missing bracelet. You need not trouble about me any more; you may look upon your debt to me as cancelled, because, indirectly, I have obtained the cash in another way. You may be surprised to hear that I have the necklace which Monkwell refused to part with in my pocket. Modesty forbids me to boast of the ingenious way in which I obtained it, but Mr. Cleave will tell you how I managed to get hold of it."

"But Philip Hardy has no money," Eleanor cried.

"Indeed, he has. He will have everything back in a day or two."

Like a flash Eleanor's mind was made up. All traces of anger vanished from her face, a look of anxiety came over her features instead. She turned eagerly to Fiona Dear.

"I am glad to hear this," she said. "Tell me where to find Mr. Hardy. I will go to him at once."

Fiona Dear took up a pencil from the table and hastily dashed the address off on a sheet of notepaper. With a careless smile, she handed this to Eleanor Marsh, who was already busily engaged in assuming her motor disguise. No sooner was this adjusted than she turned and left the room without another word. Fiona Dear burst into a ringing laugh of amusement which was genuine.

"Splendid!" she cried. "Simply splendid! Poor as I am, I would give half I possess to be present at the interview."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DAY TOO LATE.

ONCE arrived at her hiding-place in College Street, Eleanor Marsh hastily stripped herself of her driving clothes and assumed a dress which she deemed most likely to suit her appearance. She had no fear that she was being watched or followed, the only thing that was uppermost in her mind was the knowledge that in some way Hardy had come back into his own again, and must be persuaded to resume the old relations before he could have any suspicion that Eleanor knew anything of the fresh change of fortune. She felt quite confident of her power to manage this. It would only mean a little acting on her part and the thing was done. After all, so far as the woman could care for anybody but herself, she was genuinely fond of Hardy. From her point of view, he would be a far better husband than a congenital idiot like Blair.

Assured of victory, Eleanor knocked at the door of Philip's humble abode. She refused even to be announced, and pushed her way into the little back room with the air of a conqueror. Then

she fairly staggered back and dropped into a chair as she found herself face to face with Lena. The thing was so unexpected and so staggering that the woman utterly lost her self-possession.

"I did not expect this," she stammered. "I came round to see you; indeed, I should have come long before, only I had not the remotest idea where to look for you. But what I have to say will keep now until Miss Grey has gone."

"There is no occasion why you shouldn't say what you want to say in the presence of Miss Grey," Philip said. "Won't you take this arm-chair? I am afraid your seat is a dusty one and likely to soil that very pretty dress you are wearing. Really, I have never seen you in anything that suits you so well."

"Seen me," the adventuress faltered. "Do you mean to tell me that you can see what I am——?"

"As well as you can see yourself," Philip smiled. "Not to deceive you any longer, I have never lost my sight at all. I have just been explaining at some length to Miss Grey why I deemed it expedient to sham blindness and so impose upon the sympathy of my friends. It was not a nice thing to do, and I feel more or less ashamed of myself, the only excuse I have being that the end has justified the means. But we need not go into that, as it does not concern anybody but Miss Grey and myself."

At this somewhat pointed remark, Eleanor Marsh pricked up her ears. There was no mistaking the significance of Philip's tone; he was

quite polite, and not in the least indignant, but it was clear that he meant exactly what he said. It was time to play a desperate card, even if it had to be played in the presence of Lena Grey. Eleanor Marsh had made up her mind to win now, but if she failed, she knew that the humiliation would be unspeakable.

"I should have thought anything that concerned you would have concerned me also," she said gently. "Do you know, Philip, I have been hunting for you high and low? I am glad that Miss Grey is here, because I want to make my confession before her. I have behaved very badly to you, Philip. I have shown a lack of sympathy for which I have never ceased to reproach myself. I ought not to have let you go, I ought to have known that I had more than enough for the needs of both of us, but I allowed my selfishness to prevail; I could not make up my mind to encumber myself with a husband who was blind. It explains how hard and harsh Society makes one. And yet I was so different at one time."

"That I am prepared to believe," Philip said politely.

"Oh, of course, you are quite justified in being bitter. Anyone would be in the circumstances; but I have been severely punished for my coldness, Philip, and I have come here to ask your forgiveness. I began to repent almost before I had left you, and when you disappeared and I could not find you, all the pleasure went out of life for me. I thought I should never be the same again."

The woman was acting now, and acting superbly. There was a passionate tremor in her voice and a look in her eyes which would have deceived the most suspicious. Indeed, even Lena was carried away by it for the moment.

But it was all wasted upon Philip, who smiled in the same polite, dry way, as a man does who watches a comedy for the second time.

"I quite understand," he said; "and you found me by accident, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. It was a fortunate chance."

"Indeed. I thought perhaps the lady known as Fiona Dear might have helped you."

Eleanor caught her lip between her teeth. She clenched her hands savagely. It began to come home to her now that she was going to taste all the bitterness of defeat, and that in the presence of Lena Grey, whom she had done so much to humiliate. She made one last effort to recover her lost ground.

"What does it matter," she cried, "so long as we are together again? What does your poverty matter so long as I have more than enough for both of us? Our happiness——"

"I am afraid our happiness has nothing to do with it," Philip said, in the same cool, level tone. "On the whole, I think it will be just as well if we do not pursue this line of argument. We parted, I may say, by mutual consent, and, as far as I am concerned, there is really nothing to forgive. As I was saying to Miss Grey just now, I have had my eyes opened in more ways than one. I begin to see things now which ought to

have been plain before me from the first. That being so, I don't think I need detain you any longer. It was very good of you to come and look me up in my humble abode, but this is hardly the place to entertain visitors; and, besides, I have my literary work to occupy my attention."

It was all over, the acting had been in vain, and Eleanor Marsh sat there crushed and broken down in the presence of her rival. Not that Lena appeared to enjoy her triumph in the least. She was looking from one to the other with a puzzled and bewildered expression of face, as if she did not quite comprehend what was going on. Eleanor made one last attempt to recover her dignity.

"I am not altogether surprised that you take this tone," she said. "Perhaps it is natural, considering everything. And there are certain natures that rebel against poverty, natures which are soured and spoilt by it. I am sadly afraid that yours is one of those, Philip. But I will come and see you again when you are alone, and when I hope to find you in a more forgiving mood."

"I am afraid it is quite useless," Philip said. "You see, I have been finding out a great many things lately which have caused me immense surprise. I need not go into detail, because I think you know what I mean without that. If you do come again in the course of a day or two, I shall be much obliged if you will bring Mr. Jasper Cleave with you. An interview between us and that gentleman may be the means of saving both

of you a great deal of trouble. Need I speak more plainly?"

Evidently there was no reason for more plain speaking on the part of Hardy, as Eleanor Marsh's face fully testified. The colour left her cheeks, and she could not force to her lips the words she desired to say.

"I do not understand you," she faltered.

"Oh, I think you do. As I told you just now, my mental vision is clearer than it used to be; so also are the eyes which you deemed lost for ever. On the eventful night when one whom I thought to be a friend served me so badly——"

"Did you see who it was?" Eleanor faltered.

"Do you mean to say you know who——?"

"Indeed, I do," Philip replied calmly. "I can put my hand upon the culprit at this very moment."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TOWARDS THE LIGHT.

"You—you know who did it?" Eleanor Marsh faltered. "Do you mean to say that you are in a position——?"

"I spoke quite plainly," Philip replied. "I mean to say that I now know exactly what happened in the Duchess of Daventry's house. As a matter of fact, I saw the hand of my assailant go up just before the light went out. She was a little bit too eager, a little too ready to play her part. I suppose she wanted to prevent me from displaying those diamonds, and could think of no better plan for interfering with the programme than an attempt to blind me. To tell you the truth, for a day or two Dr. Chambers took rather a serious view of the matter. I might have been blinded for life, but I am spared that, and the woman who tried to bring it all about ought to be grateful that I did not prosecute her. Perhaps she does not know that a crime like hers is punishable with penal servitude for life. I assure you such is the case."

There was no more fight left in Eleanor Marsh;

she could only sit there white and set, waiting for Philip to pronounce his verdict. Lena seemed to understand at last; her features were aghast with horror and amazement.

"You did it!" she cried. "Oh, how could you think of such a thing! It seems incredible."

"I don't think we shall gain anything by carrying on the discussion. It is far better to bring this painful interview to a close. I am not likely to take any steps——"

"I deny the whole thing," Eleanor Marsh whispered, finding her voice at last. "I defy you to prove——"

"I am not going to attempt to prove anything," Philip said. "Have I not just told you I know everything? Instead of being the rich woman you profess to be, you are in desperate straits. You have been in difficulties for the last two years. It was essential that you should marry a rich man, and you did me the honour of selecting me as your choice, but I was not to know your position, because that would have been fatal to your plans. Please don't interrupt me. When I inform you that Fiona Dear has been here for an hour or more this morning, you will perhaps see the futility of further denial. I know all about the scheme for getting the thought-reader out of the way and how you impersonated her. Fortune always favours women of your class up to a certain point, and Fortune enabled you to get hold of Jasper Cleave just at the right moment; and I know all about that, too. No, you need not look con-

fused, Lena ; long ago I have fully acquitted you of any blame in the matter. I know how sorely you were tempted, and how those people conspired to humiliate you. It was the irony of fate that there was a chance witness to the transfer of my diamond necklace to Mr. Monkwell's manager. Now you will see how easy it is for me to put two and two together and deduce the reason why those smelling salts were thrown in my face. How you, Mrs. Marsh, obtained possession of the rest of my diamonds, I don't know, but, doubtless, that will come out in time. I don't think I have any more to say at present. Allow me to wish you good-morning."

Philip rose gravely and opened the door for Eleanor Marsh. It was useless for her to stay. The game was up, and she had to console herself with the reflection that things were no worse. As far as she could gather, Philip Hardy had no intention of prosecuting her, so that she would be free to go her own way in the future. True, she had not a sovereign in the world to call her own, and no prospect of obtaining money unless she could manage to marry Blair. In these circumstances she might still hold her own in Society ; but, then, she dare not appear at her flat for fear of being arrested for more than one pressing debt. Unless something unexpected happened during the next two days, Society would know Eleanor Marsh no longer, and the waters would close over that brilliant head for ever. There was no earthly chance now of deriving a penny-piece from Lena

Grey, and Eleanor cursed the evil fate which had overtaken her at this juncture.

"There is only one thing for it," she muttered to herself as she walked along. "I must see Blair at once. I should think that the blackmailing story would be quite good enough for him, seeing that he is such a fool."

Eleanor was fortunate enough to find Blair at home, and from the smug expression of the man's face, and the sort of half-familiarity with which he ushered her up the stairs, she inferred that little visits of this kind were by no means infrequent.

Blair was lounging over a late breakfast and had just lighted his first cigarette when Eleanor entered. There was something about his manner which she by no means liked. It was not given to this man to be over courteous and polite where women were concerned, but there was a jocular familiarity now which told its own tale.

"This is awfully good of you," Blair said with a grin. "Sit down and have a cigarette. No? Well, try a brandy and soda, or just a little bottle of champagne. You look awfully cut up, my dear girl. What is the matter with you?"

At any other time Eleanor would have resented this tone and put Blair in his place; but it was no time to be particular, and she had a story to tell. She began to reel it off in her own dramatic fashion. It was precisely the same narrative that she had told to Lena, but in this instance with far different effect. Blair lay back in his chair smoking a cigarette and smiling as if something amused him.

"Well," Eleanor exclaimed, "have you any-

thing to say? Isn't it enough that I should come here forced to make this humiliating confession to a man whose esteem and good-will I value more than anything in the world?"

Blair chuckled. Apparently he had not been touched at all.

"My dear Eleanor," he said, with the same insolent familiarity, "do you expect a man of the world to believe all that bally rot? This is too good a joke."

Eleanor drew a deep breath; she was quivering from head to foot with indignation. She could have slapped the leering, smiling face.

"I am telling you the truth," she said, "and unless you find me four thousand pounds to-day, everything must be at an end between us. I am very sorry to say this."

"Oh, come now," Blair said, somewhat uneasily. "None of that, my dear girl. There never has been anything between us, as you know perfectly well. I don't say I haven't admired you, or that I have not made a fuss of you, but I have never said a word to lead you to believe that my intentions were serious. Though, upon my word, I came precious near asking you to be my wife a day or two ago, for you *are* a fine woman and no mistake. Still, I have got my position to look to, and, when I do marry, shall choose a real high-flyer for my wife—big county family, a girl with a title and all that kind of thing. I will find the money and she shall find the position: and there you are, don't you know. Nothing easier, I assure you."

"You little wretch," Eleanor screamed. "I have a good mind to take up that riding whip and slash your silly face. You low-bred cad, how dare you talk to me in this fashion? You may have the money, and you may marry well, but you will never be a gentleman, if you live to be a hundred."

"Keep calm," Blair said. "Nothing to gain by making a scene, you know. You see, as a matter of fact, I have been hearing things about you lately. You have been blown upon, my dear girl. People are beginning to talk, and, unless you lie low, you will find most of the best houses closed against you."

"What are they saying about me?" Eleanor asked.

"Well, they are saying you are an adventuress, to begin with. I heard it last night at the club. Stratton has got the whole story, and he is one of the biggest gossips in London. Never knew Stratton to repeat a bit of scandal that wasn't true. He says you are the daughter of a game-keeper, or something like that, and that he knows a man who was acquainted with you when you were in a tobacconist's shop. He told us last night of poor old Archie Gordon, who used to be sweet upon you, and was mad to marry you. Like a sensible girl, you wouldn't have anything to do with him. Naturally, you thought you could do better than hook a tippler like Gordon, who was nearly at the end of his resources. Stratton says that when Archie died he left you about three thousand pounds, and with this money

you blossomed out into a fascinating American widow with a large fortune. That is the story, as far as it goes; and that is the reason, my dear Eleanor, why I propose to fight uncommonly shy of you in the future. Now come, don't bear any malice."

Wild words rose to Eleanor's lips, but she managed to restrain them. There was just the chance yet that she might do something with this little wretch, for she had not forgotten the fact that she stood there not only reckless, but penniless, too.

"Then you decline to help me?" she asked.

"Not to anything like the extent you suggest," Blair said. "It is not nice to be hard up, I know, and, if you like to take it, I'll give you a cheque for a hundred. Only don't come here again, because if you do you won't be admitted."

Eleanor swallowed her pride, bitter as it was; she would have liked to have torn up that slip of pink paper and thrown it in the face of the cad. As it was, she could only smile and shake her hand of the man whom she would have cheerfully seen dead at her feet.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SIR JOHN BLATCHFORD.

"REALLY, Philip, I cannot quite understand it even yet," Lena said, when she and Hardy were alone again. "I declare to you, I never suspected that woman. I have never liked her; there is something about her which has always aroused my suspicions. She struck me as being something different to what she really is. Not that one could take any objection to her manners or her style generally, for both are perfect. Anyone more to the manner born I never saw. And she was in the very best society, apparently in command of unlimited money, a welcome everywhere."

"I expect there are many like her," Philip said. "Her audacity and daring are superb. The thing that I cannot forgive her for is the cold and deliberate way in which she has injured you."

"Injured me?" Lena cried. "How so?"

"Oh, I had forgotten to explain that to you. The whole thing was a wicked conspiracy. That woman wanted a rich husband to get her out of her difficulties and she chose me. Unfortunately, she had not taken you into consideration, and it

was a great blow to her to find that we were engaged. She did not discover that till the night of the party at Lexington House, but that did not deter her. She knew that we were going down to the Duchess's place, and there she made up her mind to fire her mine and wreck your life. Just at that moment, Fortune brought Jasper Cleave in her way, and the whole path was cleared. Cleave was more or less smuggled into the Duchess's house to play his part, and he played it very well. The first thing was to get hold of Fiona Dear and keep her from giving her performance. This was done by Mrs. Marsh and Cleave between them. Fiona Dear was overpowered on her way from the station, and left more or less insensible in a ditch. Previous to this, Eleanor Marsh had managed to interest me in the doings of Fiona Dear and made me promise to consult the oracle. Needless to say, when I did consult the oracle, I was in contact, not with Fiona Dear, but with Mrs. Marsh, who was impersonating her. Being in ignorance of this fact, I was fairly startled with the revelations the woman made. So impressed was I that I demeaned myself by consenting to watch your movements, and when I saw that caress pass between you and Jasper Cleave, I was so overcome——”

“Please don't,” Lena whispered, her face flaming scarlet. “I want to forget that disgraceful episode. And yet if you only knew how innocent it all was, and how I was making that little sacrifice in order to save the happiness of my life——”

"I am bound to speak of it now," Philip went on. "Though, I promise you, that the subject will never be mentioned between us again. You see, I did not know then what I know now. I did not realise that you were violating your better feelings out of sheer affection for me. Now that I come to look back on the incident, it raises you higher in my estimation than ever. But we will discuss all that by-and-by. The immediate result of my watching you was that our engagement was broken off, and, on the spur of the moment, I offered my damaged affections to Mrs. Marsh, who, doubtless, had calculated on my doing that foolish thing. On the face of it the conspiracy was successful, she had managed to become engaged to a rich man, so that, apparently, all her money troubles were at an end. She thought she would be able to get as much credit as she needed, and was satisfied with the result of her wickedness."

"It does not seem to have done her much good," Lena murmured

"Indeed, it has," Philip went on. "But there was an urgent matter calling for immediate attention. That was a little trouble with a man named Monkwell, a diamond merchant in Bond Street. Mrs. Marsh had swindled him out of some diamonds, and he had given her a certain time to pay or be locked up. At the very moment of the woman's triumph the arm of the law reached for her. She had to find the money or give security for it at once. Of course, in common with a good many other people, she knew all about the Hardy

diamonds, and resolved to get hold of them, which, eventually, she did. With a necklace in her pocket she went down the garden to an alcove to interview Monkwell's manager. She showed him the diamonds as a proof that she was in funds, but Monkwell's man refused to be satisfied. He asked for the necklace as security, and Mrs. Marsh had to part with it. I know all this is true, because Fiona Dear was in the alcove and heard it all. She had managed to get as far as the alcove with the aid of a gamekeeper, who had been despatched to the house for some brandy. Being a clever woman, and, of course, knowing Eleanor Marsh by reputation, Fiona Dear took in what it all meant, with an eye to ultimate benefit for herself. She guessed the reason why she had been so badly treated, and, indeed, you will recollect how Eleanor Marsh was discomfited when she was confronted by the thought-reader in the drawing-room. And now you can understand what a perilous position Mrs. Marsh occupied when I was induced to go upstairs and fetch the diamonds. But I need not go over the old ground again, for now you must grasp everything that it is necessary to know."

Lena nodded thoughtfully. She felt inclined to forgive Eleanor Marsh for the part that she had played, for she saw the path of happiness opening out again before her.

"And you have quite forgiven me my indiscretion?" she asked.

"My dear Lena, there is nothing to forgive," he said. "On the contrary, I have to implore

your clemency for my own egotistical harshness. In the hour of trouble, I was as weak and prone to temptation as the rest of the world. The fact is, like most people who have been spoilt all their lives, I took too stern a view of humanity. I was like a rich man boasting of his honesty; just as if he would not be a fool to be anything but honest. Integrity and honour are no virtues when they are free from temptation, and there was I, judging you in that cold way when, all the time, I was just as bad. My dear Lena, if you will forget the past I am sure that we shall be happy together, happier than you ever expected. You will not find me in future disposed to sacrifice everything to my own ambitions. When I come to think of it, I am glad that things have fallen out as they have done."

"You cannot be more glad than I am," Lena whispered. "You know I have not ceased to care for you, and that I never shall. And if any forgiveness of mine——"

The sentence was not finished, for the door burst open and a short man, with grey hair and a keen, eager face, bustled in. He did not appear to see Lena for a moment, but rushed across the room and began to shake Philip violently by the hand.

"Congratulate you with all my heart," he said. "We have tracked him down at last; we have found where to lay our hands upon everything, and can now confront the gentleman and make him disgorge. He has everything arranged for flight, has changed his money into negotiable securities, and it is all in his handbag at the

present moment. Come along and let us interview him. It is fortunate, perhaps, that we have not very far to go."

"I am quite ready," Philip said eagerly. "But you appear to overlook the fact that Miss Grey is here. Lena, this is my good friend Mr. Walters, whom you have heard me speak of. You can guess the meaning of what he has just been saying. Would you like to come with us, or don't you think it would be better if you went home in a cab? This is hardly work for a woman."

Lena was inclined to the same opinion. A few moments and she was rolling homewards in a cab, filled with more happiness than she had ever experienced before. She knew now that Philip had come back to her, and refused to let her mind dwell on the past. There was no feeling of bitterness at the way in which she had been treated. It was all for the best in the best of all worlds. There was a new joy in the knowledge that a fresher and more enlightened love had come to her. There would be no fear in the future that ambition would come first and love afterwards. Lena looked eagerly forward to the evening when Philip had promised to see her again, when, no doubt, the last lingering misunderstanding would be cleared up. There would be no more clouds, and all tears would be wiped from her eyes.

Meanwhile, Hardy and his companion had gone a little way down the road till they came to a house before which Walters stopped. He did not even go through the formality of ringing the bell,

but merely turned the handle and walked in. Perhaps he had been there before, for he did not hesitate at all which direction to take. Upstairs on the first floor a door was slightly open, and the intruders looked in. Walters gave a chuckle of satisfaction and signified to Philip to follow. At a table a man sat almost doubled up, writing busily. There was a large pile of papers in front of him, and scattered about the room were travelling cases and portmanteaus, indicating that the occupant of the room was likely to undertake a journey soon. So engrossed was he in his writing that he did not look up or move until Walters leant forward and shook him by the shoulder. Then he gave a little gasp, and his spectacles fell from his nose.

"I don't understand this," he cried indignantly. "If you two gentlemen imagine that I——"

The speaker paused; he seemed incapable of further speech.

"All right, you need not worry," Walters said. "We'll do all the talking for the present. Meanwhile, let me relieve you of that very artistic grey wig and whiskers. Your spectacles have already welcomed us; and now, Sir John Blatchford, late of the City of London, Merchant, will you be so good as to inform your partner and myself what all this mystery means?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WINGS OF FORTUNE.

It was a little time before the man at the table found his voice. He looked from one to the other of his visitors, as if half expecting that they would give him a lead, but nothing came from either, and he was forced to begin the conversation.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked.

"I don't think you need say anything," Walters retorted, "so long as you transfer to us the securities which you have in that black bag by your side. What you have done with your own share of your money, and the money of the firm, matters little to us, seeing that all the debts are paid. I have been making a calculation, and find that you owe your partner, Philip Hardy, just over two hundred thousand pounds. If you will hand that sum to him, you are free to go your own way as soon as you like. It is not too much to ask."

"But I have no money," Blatchford protested. "I gambled it all away. I speculated to recover myself until there was absolutely nothing left. I dared not face my creditors or my friends in the

City, and was trying to find some way of escape when Fortune gave me the opening I so sorely needed. At the right time my unfortunate brother came along——”

“We will talk about your brother later,” Walters said bluntly. “Meanwhile, unless you drop all lies and stick to the truth, we shall call in the police and leave them to settle the matter. You have already caused misery and trouble enough by your shameless conduct, without trying to wriggle out of it as you are doing just now. Give us the bonds.”

“But I have none,” Blatchford whined.

“Oh, I am getting tired of this,” Walters said impatiently. “Do you suppose that you have a couple of children to deal with? I suppose you have forgotten that telegram you sent to me—a telegram handed in at the post-office some minutes after you were supposed to have been found dead in your room. The telegram had to be sent, and you calculated that I should not notice the time marked upon it, but I did notice it, and that aroused my suspicions at once. And when I heard that your unfortunate brother was in England again and had been seen in the City, I set inquiries on foot at once. Those inquiries were exceedingly satisfactory as far as I was concerned, but I have no doubt that that view is not yours. Now, to make a long story short, my man found you the very next morning after the supposed suicide. Since then, you have been carefully watched; indeed, you have not done a single stroke of business which is un-

known to me. We know the name of every bank you have been to. I have a full list of all the securities at present in your black bag. To go still further, I am acquainted with the name of the ship by which you mean to sail; I could even tell you the name of the house you have taken in Buenos Ayres. Now, after that, do you think it is worth while shuffling any longer?"

The bent figure in the chair seemed to droop and shrivel, and the lines about the careworn mouth to take a deeper carve. Blatchford made no resistance as Walters took up the black bag and emptied the contents on the table. Walters smiled triumphantly as he proceeded to check the securities on a sheet of paper with the aid of a pencil. He totalled up the figures rapidly and handed the paper over to Philip. The latter smiled.

"Did I not tell you what the amount would be?" Walters asked. "As I said, it is over two hundred thousand pounds. If you don't mind, Sir John, we will borrow this bag, because now you no longer have any need for it. We will drive down presently to Mr. Hardy's bankers, and then the incident will be closed. There is one thing I should like to know, however."

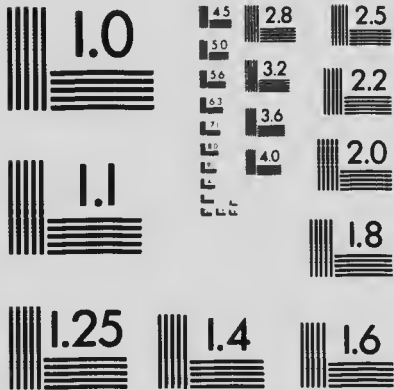
"Then you are not going to prosecute me?" Blatchford said in a shaking voice. "You won't expose me. Give me a chance to make a fresh start in America——"

"I am not going to stand in your way," Philip said coldly. "Neither am I going to prosecute you. There has been bother and trouble enough



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as it is, and badly as you have behaved, I am not altogether proud of the part I have played myself. So far as I am concerned, this is good-bye, and I hope I shall never look upon your face again. I want to forget you if I can."

"Half a moment," Walters exclaimed. "I have a little curiosity to know how the whole thing has been managed, and I will iask Sir John to explain. I want to know all about the suicide."

"That is easily told," Blatchford said in a low voice. "It was rather a slack afternoon and most of the clerks were away. There is a private stair up to my office; my brother came up that way without being seen. At that moment I was at my wits' end to know what to do, though I was more or less prepared for instant flight. My brother demanded money, which I refused to give him, for I wanted to drive him out of the country again. He was very violent and had evidently been drinking. As he sat opposite me in my chair, I could not help being struck by the extraordinary likeness between us. We even wore our hair in the same way. We were both clean-shaven. The conversation lasted some time, but I was quite firm in my determination to give him no money. When he saw that threats were useless, he drew a small revolver from his pocket and fired through the roof of his mouth. The bullet must have remained embedded in his brain, for there was practically no blood, and he fell from his chair like a stone. I was too stunned to give an alarm for a minute or two. Then I saw that my unhappy brother was dead. An

inspiration came to me like a flash. Why not change clothes?

"I locked the door of my office and in a few minutes the change was effected. Then it occurred to me that I did not know where my brother was staying or where his effects were to be found. Fortunately, some letters in his pocket gave me the desired clue, and that is how I found my way here. I filled that bag with all the papers, and for the last few days I have been busy turning them into what represents ready money. How perfectly my plan succeeded you know, and if I had not been compelled to send that unfortunate telegram to Walters, the world would never have been a bit the wiser. And now I do not think that I can tell you any more. If there are any further questions——"

There was no further information needed, and a moment or two later Walters and Philip were in the street again. The former had arranged to take care of the precious black bag for the present, as Philip had one or two things to clear up before he returned to the world again and resumed his proper place.

"I have a good deal to do," he said. "It will take me a couple of days at least to get my literary work finished. Do you know, I have got quite in love with that, and I think I shall take it up seriously in the future. I shall be very much obliged if you will see my bankers for me and arrange what is to be done with those securities. You need not imagine I am going to stay down here permanently—the neighbourhood is not so

attractive as all that, but I must finish that article before I go away, and, besides, I have promised to call and see Miss Grey to-night."

A little later and Philip was back in his lonely rooms again, striving to concentrate his attention upon the work which he had in hand. It was a useless endeavour, however, and presently he pitched his papers aside impatiently. He was glad to be interrupted by the arrival of letters. One was a postcard with just a few lines on it, lines mysterious and puzzling to the reader.

"The Duchess of Daventry gives another party on Monday evening. If you are there, you will do well to be in the neighbourhood of the alcove about ten o'clock. After this, the least said the soonest mended."

Philip pondered this for a time, but he could make nothing out of it. At any rate, he would go. There was something mysterious and inviting about the strange communication.

CHAPTER XL.

BACK TO THE WORLD.

PHILIP turned over the card in his hand, idly speculating as to the sender. Not that it mattered; nothing seemed to matter now that everything was going smoothly and his lost happiness looked like returning. It was possible, he thought, that the letter might have some reference to the missing diamonds. It was very irritating to lose the stones, but there was no help for it, though only the necklace remained. Still, the writer might be friendly disposed, and Hardy made up his mind to gratify his curiosity. It would not be difficult to get an invitation to the Duchess's entertainment and put the thing to the test.

But there was other business to occupy Philip's attention. For the first time for many months he began to take some kind of an interest in his wardrobe. Poverty and he had been close companions during this period, and Philip had had ample opportunities of learning how the poor live. Time was when he had crept into a pawnbroker's shop as if he were about to commit a crime, but he had long since lost that feeling, and now had no

compunction in entering one of those convenient establishments where a man can raise money and retain his self-respect at the same time. After all, it was a mere matter of business, with no obligation on either side, and a pawnbroker must have customers like any other tradesman or he could not live. It was far more honest and manlier than borrowing from friends sums of money which could never be repaid. But all that was at an end. Walters had not departed on his errand without leaving Philip in funds, and before the afternoon was spent he had collected his wardrobe and various articles of jewellery. When he had dressed himself becomingly, he took a cab and went off to his own rooms, where his faithful servant was awaiting him.

"It is good to see you back again, sir," the old man said. "Mr. Walters saw me last week, and as these chambers were still vacant, he told me to take them for you. Of course, it is no business of mine to ask where you have been, but I am more than glad to see that you have got the use of your eyes again."

Philip murmured something confusedly; he could not tell his man anything, of course, but he felt a little ashamed. He would have to face it out now and answer all sorts of extraordinary questions. That being so he would go to his club and get the ordeal over. The smoking-room was crowded with men, amongst them Stratton, whom Philip had long known as one of the most inveterate gossips in Society. The latter would save him a deal of talk.

A dead silence fell over the smoking-room as Philip entered, then a dozen voices hailed him

at once. Truth to say, Hardy had not been popular amongst his fellow-men; he was a little too superior, a little too prone to judge others harshly. Had he but known it there was about him a geniality and good-nature which hitherto had been conspicuous by its absence. The other men appeared to notice this, for they gathered round him and gave him a hearty welcome.

"What does it all mean?" Stratton asked. "You look as if you had never been out of London. You are as well dressed as any of us, and there is something about you that proclaims the prosperous person. But we were told that you had gone under and disappeared into the outer darkness, as many a good fellow before you has done. We had the most harrowing stories about your blindness. Is it all right now?"

"There never was anything wrong," Philip confessed with a smile. "My dear Stratton, it was greatly exaggerated. You, above all men, ought to know how these things get magnified. I was quite well in a day or two, but I never had an opportunity of saying so, because I was under the impression that I had lost all my money."

"Well, haven't you?" one of the group asked.

"Not one penny of it," Philip went on. "Blatchford was mad, you know. He was impressed with the idea that we were bankrupt, whereas the firm was perfectly solvent, and is going on to-day just as usual. I have not sacrificed a penny to keep the concern going; only, mind you, it is but lately that I have made these discoveries, and that is why I have not been amongst you.

When I thought that I was a poor man, I decided to take up my residence in a poor neighbourhood, and study life at first hand. I got fascinated with my work, and, on the whole, I did not have a bad time. Perhaps some day I shall try it again for a spell. However, I have given you the history of my past year in a nutshell, and I couldn't tell more, not even if Stratton were to cross-examine me."

"Stratton's gone," somebody laughed. "He has disappeared to spread the news. Stratton's always in luck in that way. His gossip about Hardy will be worth at least half-a-dozen dinner invitations to him."

Someone else came in with an interesting topic for discussion, and Philip dropped quite naturally into his own circle again without further question. It seemed to him as he sat there, faultlessly dressed and smoking an exceptional cigar for the first time for twelve months, that he had never been away at all. There was nothing strange or out of place about the big, perfectly-appointed room or the noiseless, attentive waiters. There was the same familiar roar of Piccadilly, the same sounds of life that ran on oiled wheels. And yet Philip was restless and ill-at-ease. He wandered away to the library, and in the vestibule ran against the Duke of Daventry.

"I have just been hearing about you," the latter said. "Stratton tells me that it was all humbug about your losing your money. He tells me that you had undertaken a year's pilgrimage to the slums, and that you are writing a book

dealing learnedly with the submerged tenth. What put that into your head?"

"That is Stratton all over," Philip laughed. "There is one grain of corn in his bushel of chaff, and no more. However, I am back again now and mean to enjoy myself for the time."

"That is right," the Duke said cheerfully. "The Duchess will be very glad to see you; she is going to our place to-morrow for a day or two, and I will get her to send you a card. You won't mind my being a bit personal, old chap, but I would much rather she didn't invite Mrs. Marsh. Nobody hates scandal and that kind of thing more than I do, but there are persistent rumours about which it is impossible to ignore. I daresay you feel inclined to punch my head for talking like this, but, as a respectable family man——"

"I am glad you mentioned that," Philip interrupted. "As a matter of fact, I am not in the least annoyed. My friendship with Mrs. Marsh is at an end. It ought never to have begun, but circumstances which I cannot go into led up to that foolish engagement. When it appeared as if I had lost all my money, the engagement terminated quite naturally, without sentiment on either side. The whole thing was a blunder, Daventry. I was annoyed at something between Miss Grey and myself, and for once in my life allowed my temper to get the better of me. I never had any affection for the woman, but she dazzled and fascinated me, and, between ourselves, I had a lucky get out. I might easily have married her."

"Congratulate you, my boy," the Duke said,

"And since we are in a candid mood, don't mind telling you that I considered you treated Miss Grey very badly."

"That, also, is perfectly true, but I have made that right again, as you will see for yourself in a day or two."

"Good," the Duke cried. "You must both come down to the Duchess's to-morrow."

Philip replied that that was what he wanted to do. Everything seemed to be falling out well for him now. In a few words he told the story of the receipt of the mysterious post-card, which seemed to puzzle the good-natured Duke sorely.

"Can you make anything of it?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I have a pretty fair idea," Philip said. "I fancy it has something to do with those stolen diamonds of mine. I know who took them from her Grace's safe in the boudoir, though, as yet, I have to learn how the robbery was brought about without the Duchess being any the wiser. I begin to feel that after I have kept that mysterious appointment I shall have my eyes opened. However, it doesn't much matter either way. Of course, it is most annoying to lose those stones after they have been in the family so long. But I must really be going. You will greatly oblige me by bearing those invitation cards in mind."

"I'll go straight back and tell my wife about them now," the Duke said. "Upon my word, I am as eager as yourself to get to the bottom of this mystery. I tell you what it is, my friend—you look all the better for your twelve months in the slums. You have lost that confounded

superior air of yours that made half the men you know long to kick you. Your expression is altogether changed, and decidedly for the better. One could come to you now for sympathy and assistance in time of distress, but I am hanged if I could have done so a year ago. How do you account for it?"

"That is my secret," Philip smiled. "But the change is there, and thank Heaven for it. And now good-bye."

CHAPTER XLI

TOGETHER AGAIN.

THE clock was striking eight as Philip walked up the steps of the little house in Mount Street, where Lena lived in company with an amiable old aunt, who acted as her chaperon. The elder Miss Grey regarded her charge as the most perfect of human beings, and in her eyes Lena could do no wrong. As to the rest, the chaperon was quite contented to do exactly as she was told, under the delusion that she was managing the house and taking all weighty affairs off Lena's shoulders. Evidently she had heard the whole of Philip's story, for she rose to greet him eagerly as he entered the drawing-room. Philip took her hand in his.

"I have heard such a lot of you," she said, "so much, indeed, that I have longed to make your acquaintance. Isn't it rather a strange thing, Mr. Hardy, that we have never met before?"

"Why strange?" Lena asked. "Up to a year ago nothing I could say or do would induce you to leave your little cottage in the country and your beloved flowers. It was only when I came

into uncle's money that I managed to persuade you to take pity on me. I was frightened to take a town house on my own responsibility, and, therefore, Philip, by dint of threats and tears I got Aunt Alice to come and stay with me for a fortnight. She has been going ever since, but she is still here, as you see."

"I really ought to get back," Miss Grey smiled. "You see, I have a lot of new roses, and, though my gardener is an excellent man, he does not possess the knack of growing roses. But what could I do with this foolish child on my mind? I couldn't leave her here in a town house all by herself, at the mercy of every good-looking fortune-hunter who came along."

Lena laughed heartily at the picture of herself followed by a mob of men anxious to induce her to share her lot with them. Miss Grey was still harping on the same topic as they went in to dinner. It was a very pleasant, quiet meal, and Philip was rather sorry when it came to an end. In the drawing-room afterwards Miss Grey promptly disappeared, pleading that she had letters to write, and Philip and Lena were alone once more.

For some time there was a long silence between them, the long placid silence which comes sometimes between people who perfectly understand one another. It seemed to Philip that Lena had never looked better than she did that night. The somewhat frightened, half-timid expression which he recollected so well had vanished from her face, leaving a placid, happy contentment behind. Had

Philip only known it, the cause of this change lay in the fact that Lena was no longer afraid of him. She had discovered now that he was human like the rest, and she rejoiced in the knowledge. There was a delicate pink flush on her cheeks, her eyes were gay and sparkling. It was Philip who broke the silence first.

"Do you know," he said, "I can hardly believe that it is a year since I was in a well-appointed house. And yet, on the whole, it has not been an unhappy twelve months for me. I have been finding things out, Lena. You have no idea how many discoveries I have made. The knowledge has been useful to me."

"I think I can guess pretty well what you found out," Lena said softly. "To begin with, you have found your true self. You have discovered that humanity is only a poor thing after all, and that if you wish to get the best out of life you must make allowance for the weaknesses of others. I doubt whether a year ago you realised what sympathy is."

"That is quite true," Philip said thoughtfully. "It was only when I began to get amongst the poor and saw how they helped one another, that I fully realised my own hardness. It first came home to me when I was down with a bad attack of influenza. My fortunes were at a very low ebb just then, and I wou'd not apply to any of my old friends for assistance. Mind you, I hardly knew my landlady. I always kept rigidly at a distance, and took care to let her feel that a gulf existed between us. I think I should have

gone mad could I have foreseen how sorry that good woman was for me and the trouble she took for me. She brought me all sorts of little luxuries, which I had to take, or I should probably have died, and she lied to me about them, Lena. She told me that they came from a well-to-do sister in the country, and that she did not value them herself at all, and all the while she had paid for them herself out of her hard-earned savings. I only found it out by accident; then she told me that she knew it was all right, and that I should pay her when I was well enough to get to work again. My word! how that touched me to think that that poor woman, despite her poverty and trouble, had gone out of her way for a stranger like me! I tell you I have sat on the edge of the bed and cried. And as I did so, I seemed to lose something, a certain cold frigidity which had always stood between me and the world before. I am not going to forget that woman or what she did for me, and the few pounds she spent are likely to come back to her fifty-fold. But why go on talking about myself? You say that I have changed, that I am altogether different, and, curiously enough, Daventry pointed out the same thing to me this afternoon in his candid way. And you have changed, too, Lena. You have lost all your shrinking timidity. I suppose your change of fortune accounts for that."

"My change of fortune has nothing whatever to do with it," Lena said, with a frank challenge in her eyes. "My dear Philip, I have changed because you have. I am happy because I am

no longer afraid of you. From the bottom of my heart, I am glad that this trouble came upon us, because it has enabled us to see each other's little faults more clearly. In the old days, Philip, you were disposed to be a bit of a tyrant. If we had married in the ordinary way, I am by no means sure that we should have been happy, because you would have always been regarding me critically and inclined to magnify any shortcomings I might be guilty of. Now, nothing of the kind is likely to happen. But, really, I am going too fast; I am taking too much for granted. It isn't as if we were——”

Lena blushed and looked down in some confusion.

“I know what you mean,” Philip smiled. “You are thinking that, although I am free from that entanglement of mine, there is nothing between us. Thank goodness there is nothing between us. I mean, nothing that is likely to mar our happiness in the future. My dear Lena, from the very first I was wrong in the estimate I had formed of my own character; I was entirely wrong in my standpoint of life. But, so far as I was capable in those blind days of loving anybody sincerely and honestly, I cared for you. Then came that shameful episode when I behaved so badly without giving you a chance of explanation. I am filled with shame and humiliation when I think of it now. I was not content with wounding your feelings; I humiliated you in the eyes of the brilliant adventuress who has been the cause of all our woes. For her I never

cared in the least. I acted on the impulse of the moment, thinking perhaps that she was the wife for me. And yet how well you behaved through it all, how nobly you bore up! You cherished no malice; you came to me in the same sweet and sympathetic way when my fortunes were at the lowest ebb. I know now, as I have known for a year past, that my love for you is deep and lasting. Lena, can you overlook the past? Can you give me your hand again and say that things shall be as they were? I can ask no more."

"As if you did not know," Lena cried, with the tears in her eyes; "as if you did not know that I expected this, that I have been waiting for it all the evening. I have never ceased to care for you, badly though you behaved to me, for I am not one to give my affections twice. Let us say no more about it, Philip; let things begin again where they left off. Besides, it is my positive duty to say as much as this, if only out of consideration for my dear aunt"

There was a laugh on Lena's lips, but those lips were trembling all the same, and Philip saw that she was hard put to it to control her emotion. There was only one thing to be done—to take her in his arms and kiss her tenderly. He had done this before, but it had not been the same experience as now. The first engagement had been more in the light of an arrangement. This was an understanding where one heart spoke to another and each responded in rapture. For a long time there was blissful silence between them; then Lena gently disengaged herself from

Philip's arms and stood looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"Auntie will be glad of this," she said. "Much as she loves me, and much as she has sacrificed for my welfare, her best affections are wrapped up in her roses."

"I had forgotten the roses," Philip laughed. "My dearest girl, here is a case where we must sacrifice our own selfish wishes for the good of others. This is the critical time of year for rose trees, and we must not detain your aunt longer than is necessary. I should think if we got married, say in three weeks——"

"Impossible!" Lena laughed. "Oh, your desire to save Aunt Alice anxiety is quite touching. But, seriously, Philip, what you suggest is out of the question."

Philip smiled mysteriously. He seemed to have heard something of this kind before.

"Well, go and consult your aunt," he said, "whilst I smoke a cigarette in the dining-room. I should never forgive myself if I stood between the dear old lady and her beloved roses."

CHAPTER XLII.

BY THE ALCOVE.

"How history seems to repeat itself," Philip remarked, as he stood on the terrace in the moonlight. "It is just a year ago this very night since my misfortunes began under this roof. And everything looks just the same, the same flowers, the same moon, the same company in the house, the same eternal scramble for bridge tables after dinner. I used to look upon bridge as a craze at one time, now it seems to be a malignant disease permeating all classes of Society. I am so glad you never learnt to play, Lena."

"I hate it," Lena said vehemently. "Directly those people sit down to play all friendship seems to end."

A few of the guests were in the billiard-room, one or two others had gathered round the big table in the hall. It was getting on towards ten o'clock now, and Philip was beginning to think of the mysterious post-card. As he and Lena stood on the terrace they could hear fragments and bits of gossip coming from the hall. One portly dame in a high-pitched voice was repeating the latest scandal.

"Positively a disgraceful thing," she said "Upon my word, I don't know what Society is coming to. They tell me that after all the woman is no better than a mere adventuress. That story about her husband being a rich Virginian was a tissue of lies from start to finish. As a matter of fact, she never had any money except a thousand or two that she stole from poor Archie Gordon."

"Do you know whom they are talking about?" Lena whispered.

"I think I can give a pretty good guess," Philip replied. "What a voice that woman has got. One can hear her half across the park."

"So there is an end of her," the piping scream went on. "They say that she is most disgracefully in debt, and that there are two or three warrants out for her arrest. I met her only this morning looking positively dowdy. She had the audacity to speak to me, but, of course, I didn't see her. Everything is gone from her flat, and my maid tells me that she is hiding in some low street in the East End. And yet she came very nearly to making a good marriage. It has been a providential escape for us."

"Oh, I don't see it," another voice said. "If she had made a good match, these things would never have come out, and we should have all gone quite gladly to her house and kissed her as if she had been our dearest friend. Do we ever get through a season without a dozen scandals of this kind? Look at the houses in Park Lane to which Society has flocked eagerly, and think of the history of those houses afterwards. For my part, I always

found Mrs. Marsh very amusing. I am sorry she has come to grief."

"I think you had better go in now," Philip said. "I suppose we shall hear the last of Mrs. Marsh some of these days. If I have any sort of adventure presently, I shall come and tell you."

Lena turned obediently in the direction of the house and Philip strolled towards the alcove. It was not quite ten o'clock yet, but the evening was fresh and inviting, and Philip was not inclined for the company of his fellow-men. It seemed to him that somebody was moving in the shrubs behind the alcove; then the bushes parted and a tall figure in black appeared.

"Good gracious!" Philip cried. "It is Mrs. Marsh."

The woman did not speak for a moment; she looked white and haggard in the moonlight. She pressed her hand to her side as if suffering from some severe pain. Philip could see that her lips were parted and that her breath was coming fast between them.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Are you in any pain? If so, and I can get something for you——"

"No, no," the woman gasped; "I shall be all right in a moment. I have been running fast, and my heart is not what it should be. All day long I have been avoiding arrest, which I have managed to do more by good fortune than anything else. I contrived to reach here, though even so far from London as this I am being watched. I came to see

you. I should have sent a note in to you, only my luck seems to have saved me that trouble."

Badly as this woman had treated him, Philip had still a feeling of sympathy for her. A year ago and this feeling would have been a stranger to him, but everything was different now. Eleanor Marsh had fallen low, so different to the brilliant creature who, only a week before, had been queening it in Society. She was plainly, quite shabbily, dressed, her hair was tumbled and untidy, her face looked haggard now without the aid of art to tone the wrinkles.

"What is it you want?" Philip asked. "Tell me what I can do to help you."

Eleanor laughed drearily; she had lost every spark of her old audacity. Philip could see how her hands trembled.

"There is only one way to help nine people out of ten," she said, "and that is with money. Our friends give us sympathy, they are profoundly sorry for us in the hour of our misfortune, but directly you hint at the one thing which the unlucky most need, they draw back coldly and decline. It is not considered a right thing to borrow money, and yet that is the only practical way in which our cursed anxieties can be relieved. At the present moment I am penniless. I humiliated myself two days ago as I never expected to humiliate myself for the sake of a hundred pounds. You don't know what it is to ask assistance of such a senseless cad as young Blair, but I did it, and I have been biting my nails to the quick over it ever since. That money was to enable me to get out of the country. By

sheer evil fortune a creditor caught me whilst I had the cash in my hand, and I had to part with it all, or I should have found myself in gaol. That is why I came to see you to-night. I have been standing in the bushes watching you and Miss Grey for the last quarter of an hour or more."

"We will leave Miss Grey out of the question," Philip said coldly. "I would much rather we did not discuss her."

"Oh, I did not mean to be offensive," Eleanor Marsh said, with strange humility. "Although I have failed myself, I should be glad to know that the child is happy; if only you drop your superior manner, a very pleasant life ought to lie before her. Mind you, I treated her badly and I treated you badly. It was a vile conspiracy that I got up with the aid of that rascal, Cleave. And for some time it looked like being successful. But Fortune was against me, as she is against all my tribe sooner or later, and I failed just when I had the whole world in my grasp. I admit all my crimes. I might even go so far as to say I am sorry, but I am keeping you here against your will, though I think it will pay you to listen to all that I have to say. I want you to give me five hundred pounds—I won't say lend me that sum, because you will never see it again. If you will send me a cheque for that amount to-morrow to an address which I will give you, you will never be troubled with me any more. I am going to leave England and start afresh on the other side of the water. They tell me that I can't be arrested for debt if I am once across the Channel. Now,

will you do this thing for me? I am beaten and cast down, and I throw myself on your mercy."

Philip hesitated just for a moment. He looked again at the miserable creature standing before him in an attitude of supplication.

"Very well," he said, "I will do this thing for you, even if it is only a penance for my own past folly. If you will give me the address you mention, I will post you the money to-morrow in bank notes, which will be much better for your purpose than a cheque."

"From the bottom of my heart I thank you," Eleanor cried. "You are going to be repaid for this kindness quicker than you know. If you had refused me, as I expected——"

Eleanor Marsh stopped and pulled Philip into the shadow. At the same moment a figure appeared by the alcove.

"Jasper Cleave," Eleanor whispered. "You will soon know what he is doing here. If you keep out of sight a little longer, you are likely to learn all about the missing diamonds."

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"As he swayed in the direction of Cleve, he caught the latter by the throat."

A Fatal Dose

Chapter XVIII

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CHAPTER XLIII.

FOUND.

PHILIP forgot everything in the interest that he felt in Cleave's movements. Hitherto he had not troubled to find out whence had come the mysterious postcard, but it occurred to him now that perhaps Eleanor Marsh might be enabled to tell him. And yet, if she had sent the card she would hardly have trusted to luck to run against Philip that night in this fortunate fashion. Perhaps Fiona Dear had something to do with it.

"Do you know why he is here?" Philip asked.

"I have already given you a hint," Eleanor replied. "Mind you, I was not certain that Jasper Cleave would put in an appearance this evening, but I had a very strong suspicion of it. If you had refused to help me, I should have waited to confirm my suspicions, and perhaps, in the long run, I should have been more in pocket by so doing. Still, you have been very good to me; you have treated me a great deal better than I had any right to expect, and you will not find me ungrateful. Cleave is down here after your diamonds."

"What has he got to do with the robbery?" Philip asked.

"I will tell you presently, if there is time," Eleanor said. "It is a most extraordinary case, but do not speak too loudly, or that man will hear you. All you have to do is to follow his movements, and, doubtless, before long you will have cause to congratulate yourself upon an excellent night's work."

All this time Philip and Eleanor Marsh had been standing behind the belt of evergreens, watching Cleave's movements. He appeared to be doing something with a ball of twine, which he had in his hand, for he drove a peg in the ground close to the alcove and attached the end of the string to it. Thence he cautiously made his way across one of the lawns towards the forecourt, on which the windows of the Duchess's boudoir looked. The forecourt was full of flower beds, and in the centre stood the ruins of an ancient fountain, where no water had flowed for many years. As it was, the basin of the fountain had been transformed into a kind of well, which was now a tangle of green ferns. Cleave stood there for a minute or two; then he crossed to the boudoir windows and tried to fasten them. The casement gave to his touch and he slipped inside the room.

"How careless these servants are!" Philip muttered. "After the experience they have had you would think, they would be more careful in future, and here is the house left open to the first prowling thief who comes

along. I must go and see what that fellow is up to."

Eleanor Marsh laid a detaining hand on Philip's arm.

"Stay!" she whispered. "You don't suppose he has come here to pilfer costly trifles from the Duchess's boudoir. He is after bigger game."

Philip hesitated for a moment; he did not share the same opinion. But there was something in the suppressed excitement of his companion's manner which held him by her side. Apparently Eleanor was right, for a moment later Cleave reappeared and stood in the shadow of the house, as if immersed in deep thought. It was so still that the muttering of his voice carried clearly to the watchers. A second later, Cleave gave vent to an excited exclamation and moved rapidly across the grass to the fountain. Here he went down upon his knees and proceeded to search amongst the tangled fronds of fern. He stood up at the end of a few minutes with something in his hand.

"Don't you understand?" Eleanor whispered. "Can't you see what has happened? He has found——"

But Philip waited for no more. Without hesitation he dashed across the grass at Cleave. Taken by surprise, the villain turned to find himself face to face with Philip, who made a snatch at the flat cases which Cleave had in his hand. Cleave staggered back, his face white and set, and his teeth clenched; then drawing a tool from his pocket he struck Philip a murderous blow on the head. Fortunately, the weapon slipped sidewise, or the

consequences might have been fatal. The whole world seemed to reel and sway under Philip's feet; he had a glimmering notion only of what had happened; but he knew, too, that he was not going to be beaten like this, for as he swayed to and fro he caught Cleave by the throat and the two fell together. A desperate struggle followed, in which Cleave was rapidly gaining the upper hand; then it seemed to Philip that his antagonist's grip relaxed and he was free to assume a sitting position. As soon as his sight cleared, he made out the figure of Cleave lying motionless on the grass, with Eleanor Marsh standing over him. She held a large stone in her right hand, and as far as Philip could judge from a jagged wound behind Cleave's ear, she had wielded it with good effect.

It seemed almost impossible that such a struggle as this should have taken place within a few yards of the house. And as Philip stood there, panting and breathing hard, yet very little worse for the adventure, he could hear the sounds of music and the chatter of voices from the hall.

"We must get the fellow away," he said. "Further scandal must not be brought on this house. I shall tell the Duchess presently, but I don't want her guests to know what has been going on."

"We must get him away," Eleanor panted. "I hope I have not killed him."

"What is it you did?" Philip asked.

"Upon my word, I hardly know. I saw you both struggling on the grass and you were getting the worst of it. I believe he would have strangled

you if I hadn't come to your assistance. I must have picked up this stone from the rockery and struck him with it, though I have not the least recollection of having done so. But he can't lie there."

Cleave made no sign of life. He lay on the grass, with his hands thrown above his head, as if he were in a deep sleep, or beyond the reach of surgery. A little way in front lay two flat cases, the outsides of which were mildewed and mouldy, and these Eleanor indicated. She was never too upset to lose sight of the material side of things.

"Hadn't you better put those cases in your pocket?" she said coolly. "They are what you have been looking for for the last twelve months. Unless I am mistaken, they contain your diamonds."

Eager as he was to assist the wounded man, Philip could not restrain his curiosity. The fastenings of the cases had rusted into the material they were made of, so that there was some difficulty in forcing them. But they were opened at last, and there lay the diamonds, streaming and sparkling in the moonlight, as if they had been things of life. Philip swept the whole contents into his hands and crammed the stones into his pocket. Eleanor gave a little sigh of envy; the old Adam was strong in her still.

"You are a fortunate man," she said, "and everything has gone for you in a way you don't deserve. I tell you frankly, that if I could have laid my hand on those stones I should have done so. We shouldn't have been talking here to-night in that case, but I was not sure of my ground.

I had to try to make certain of a little money to get along with. You see, I discovered that Jasper Cleave was going to leave England at once, and I concluded that he would not do so without making one more attempt to get possession of the property for which he had risked so much."

"Well, we can hear about that presently," Philip said with some impatience. "Meanwhile, it doesn't seem to occur to you that there is a serious probability of your being detained in England after all. You understand what I mean?"

"I don't," Eleanor said, with sudden fear. "What is it? What have I done that I should be compelled——"

"Well, you have done something for which I ought to be infinitely obliged. But, at the same time, it may give rise to a long series of delicate questions. I don't say it isn't justifiable homicide, but there is a chance that between us we have given Jasper Cleave his *quietus*. It would be awkward for you to have to attend a legal investigation, especially as Mrs. Eleanor Marsh is so anxious to remain anonymous at present."

"I haven't thought of that," Eleanor said coolly. "Let us get away before any intruding servants come along. We can carry Cleave as far as the alcove. I daresay a dose of brandy will bring him to himself again."

Philip lost no time with further observations, though he could not help wondering what the Duchess's guests would say if they could see him at that moment. From the bottom of his heart he hoped that no one in the house would be

seized with a sudden desire for a stroll in the moonlight. But Fortune was on his side now, and the alcove was reached without discovery.

“Thank goodness, that is finished,” Philip panted. “Now, you must stay here while I fetch some brandy. If the worst comes to the worst I must take the Duchess into my confidence and have this fellow conveyed to one of the cottages.”

CHAPTER XLIV

A LUCKY GET OUT.

WITH as cool a manner as he could assume in the circumstances, Philip hurried off to the house. When he had crossed the threshold, he sauntered along conveying the suggestion that he had merely been loafing in the moonlight. As far as he could judge, no hint of the exciting events of the past hour had got abroad. The bridge players were still intent on their game, and the lady with the high-pitched voice was still retailing scandal in the hall. As Philip stood there, looking casually about him, Lena rose from behind a big volume of prints and came towards him.

"I have been waiting and watching for you," she whispered. "I began to think that something serious had happened. What is that black patch on your head, and why do you look so pale? Come away from the light a bit."

"I had forgotten all about that," Philip said. "Now I come to think of it, my head is very sore. I have been having an argument with Jasper Cleave, and he has given me a mark I am likely to carry for some time."

"Tell me about it," Lena said eagerly

"Really, I can't stop now," Philip said. "You shall know everything before you go to bed. The fact is, Cleave got altogether the worst of that argument, and is now lying insensible in the little alcove."

"You haven't killed him," Lena said in a terrified voice. "Oh, don't tell me you are going to get into trouble at the very moment when everything promises so well for our happiness. Let me come with you. I am used to nursing"

"Oh, no," Philip said. "There is really no occasion for that. Besides, Eleanor Marsh is there."

Lena gasped. She was too bewildered to understand.

"I am afraid I don't follow you," she said faintly. "You have had an altercation with Jasper Cleave, and Mrs. Marsh has turned up, too. What does it all mean, Philip? And what are those people after? It is dangerous for you to go there alone, and if you take my advice you will not hesitate——"

"If I take your advice, my dear child, I shall spoil everything," Philip replied. "In point of fact, Mrs. Marsh is on my side, for it would not pay her to be otherwise. She knows that if she plays me false she will lose the money which she needs to get her out of the country. I may tell you that she has been the means of recovering our lost diamonds, which are now in my pocket. But I am wasting valuable time. I will tell you everything later, but I came for brandy for Cleave. When I

have got rid of him, I will come back and tell you the whole story."

"I shall be glad to hear it," Lena said. "But, surely, I can do something in the way of help."

"Yes; you can stay here and keep the coast clear for me," Philip said. "Remain where you are whilst I slip into the dining-room and get a decanter of brandy. I am desperately anxious to get these people away and avoid all gossip and scandal. In one way and another, I have treated the Duchess badly enough. Now don't detain me longer, my dear child, but let me go about my work at once."

Lena nodded obediently and Philip went off in search of the cordial he needed. He came out presently and edged away in the direction of the porch. Lena's eyes followed him wistfully; she would have given much to accompany him, but she felt sure that such a request would be met with a refusal.

Meanwhile, in the darkness of the alcove, Jasper Cleave slowly recovered consciousness. He began to have a dim idea of what had happened; his confused senses gradually became more luminous. Then he recognised the figure of Eleanor Marsh.

"What does all this mean?" he muttered. "What are you doing here? I never expected to see you again."

"That is where I have the advantage over you," Eleanor said. "If I had not found you here, I should have been greatly disappointed. As it is——"

"As it is, I should like to know what has happened," Cleave growled. "I remember stooping by the side of the fountain and getting my hand upon——"

The speaker paused as if conscious that he had been about to say too much.

"Oh, you needn't be so secret," Eleanor laughed. "I know what you were going to say. You remember getting your hand upon those two cases of diamonds which have been securely hidden there all this time. You thought you were very fortunate to find them, and you began to have visions of a good time on the other side of the world. But there is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, as you have found to your cost to-night. As so frequently happens in this cross-grained world of ours, the very man you least expected and least desired to see, turned up and spoilt your game. The owner of the jewels stood behind you just when your defective memory played into your hands, and you were foolish enough to try to murder him."

"It's a lie," Cleave said hoarsely; "I didn't."

"Oh, yes, you did, because I saw you. You hit him a murderous blow on the top of the head with a blunt instrument which you took from your pocket, and if the aim had been truer there would have been an end of Philip Hardy by this time. Oh, you need not sit there mumbling denials, because I saw the whole thing myself."

"What are you doing here?" Cleave asked feebly.

"My good man, I am on the same errand as

yourself. I came in search of the thing that I always need more than anything else in this world, and that is money. But I have been more fortunate than you, because I am more moderate in my demands. In other days, I don't mind telling you that I should have stood by and shared the plunder, but my nerves are not what they used to be; my needs are very pressing, and 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' Besides, I can't trust you, and that is why I have been more or less loyal to Philip Hardy."

"How nice it is to hear you talk like that!" Cleave sneered. "Eleanor Marsh turned honest!"

"No more honest than I used to be," the woman said coolly. "When I stood there and saw Hardy in danger I had to interfere, not so much for his sake as for my own. You would have strangled him if I hadn't come along. I took up a fragment of rock and hit you on the head. And that is how you came to lose your senses. Philip Hardy and I dragged you here without anybody knowing that something like a tragedy was being enacted in these grounds, and meanwhile he has gone to the house to get you some brandy. My story is finished, my part played, and the curtain may be rung down. I am not in the least ashamed of what I have done, and would be ready to do it again, if necessary."

Cleave struggled to his feet and staggered towards the entrance to the alcove.

"What are you going to do?" Eleanor Marsh asked.

"Going to put as much ground as possible between

Hardy and myself," Cleave said curtly. "I know that chap perhaps better than you do. He will give me into custody without the slightest hesitation. He is a hard man."

"Oh, no, he won't," Eleanor Marsh laughed. "He has got his diamonds back now, and is not disposed to make further fuss about it. Besides he is going to marry Miss Grey, and he is too proud to prosecute the man who was once on friendly terms with the girl whom he is going to make his wife. Hardy is not ungenerous, and if you need money as sorely as you appear to need it, I should not be at all surprised if he assisted you. If you take my advice, you will stand your ground and try to make terms."

"Perhaps you are right," Cleave muttered. "At any rate, I could not go very far in my present condition. I'll just wait on events, though, upon my word, I could sit down and curse my luck. For twelve solid months I have been cudgelling my brains trying to think where I had put those cursed stones. Two days ago I had a kind of dream in which the diamonds were mixed up in the most inexplicable way. I dreamt that I was here trying to work out the clue with the aid of a ball of string which ran from the alcove to that old fountain. Nonsense it seemed, though I determined to try it. And believe me or not, but directly I pegged that string down to-night, I recollected in a flash exactly what I had done with those stones the night the Duchess's footman set about me after I came out of the boudoir with the cases in my hand. Before I came here I con-

sulted Fiona Dear as to my luck, and she advised me to try it."

"Don't mention that woman's name to me," Eleanor cried. "I never want to hear of her again. I date all my misfortunes from the night she came here—but we won't go into that now. Here comes Mr. Hardy with the brandy."

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CHAPTER XLV.

SUNSHINE.

PHILIP came into the alcove and closed the door carefully behind him. On the little rustic table in the middle of the room he placed the decanter and a glass. Then he proceeded to light a little taper by means of which it was just possible to see what was going on. Philip gave a sigh of relief as he saw Cleave sitting there white and shaky, but otherwise little the worse for his adventure. It was good to know that there was no chance of anything like an open scandal in connection with the night's work.

"I am glad to see you are recovering," Philip said. "Meanwhile, you had better have a liberal dose of this brandy."

Cleave grasped the glass eagerly and tilted a generous measure of the potent spirit down his throat. Gradually the colour came back to his cheeks and lips again. He stood up and protested that he was well enough now to look after himself.

"I am not going to make any apologies," he said. "Neither am I going to ask any favours at your hand. I came precious near to getting those

stones to-night, and it is a bitter regret to me that I failed. If somebody had not played me false——”

“I don't know that anybody played you false,” Philip said coldly; “but I had a note, written anonymously, conveying the impression that you were coming down here this evening——”

“So it was you!” Cleave cried, turning furiously on Eleanor Marsh. “You betrayed me!”

“Nothing of the kind, you fool,” Eleanor said contemptuously. “Surely you can guess who it was. Did you not tell me just now that you had consulted Fiona Dear before coming here, and did not Fiona Dear get a thousand pounds for recovering Mr. Hardy's necklace from that scoundrel, Monkwell? It was she, of course, who wrote the letter, as a parting shot at you before she left the country. It was a mere accident that I was here to-night. I came down on the desperate chance of getting some money out of Mr. Hardy, and the desperate chance succeeded. If you had only behaved yourself I daresay Mr. Hardy would have helped you, too.”

“I am not indisposed to do so,” Philip said, “provided Cleave promises to leave the country for ever. I will pay his passage to any port he likes to name, and see that two hundred pounds awaits him at the other end, on one condition. I am curious to know how this conspiracy has been worked, though I fancy I have a pretty shrewd idea of the outline of the plan.”

“Then I will tell you,” Cleave said eagerly. “And, by the way, I might as well say that I accept your offer to pay my passage out to San

Francisco and cable me two hundred pounds to the Union Bank, and I will give you my word never to show my face in England again. I am sick of the old country."

"It shall be done," Philip said briefly. "Go on."

"Well, it was a put up conspiracy between Eleanor Marsh and myself. I returned from abroad penniless and destitute, and Eleanor got to know of it through a telegram which I had sent to Monkwell asking for assistance, and which fell into her hands. She took me into her flat, provided me with every thing I needed, even down to my old wardrobe which I had pawned before I set out on my travels, and then she let me know that in return there were certain things she wanted me to do. She had found some letters which Miss Grey had written to me, and which, I give you my word of honour, I thought had been destroyed long ago. I can see you don't like Miss Grey's name being dragged into this narrative, but it can't be helped. I assure you the letters were quite innocent and might have been read by anybody. But they were enough to serve Mrs. Marsh's purpose, which was to create a rupture between yourself and the girl you were going to marry. It was not difficult for Mrs. Marsh to arrange for me to appear under the same roof as Miss Grey, and I lost no time in making use of those letters as a lever. You already know the trick we played upon Fiona Dear and how Eleanor took her place. The other comedy, I mean the price Miss Grey was to pay for her letters before I parted with them——"

"We will leave that out," Philip said sternly, his face hard and grave. "You will oblige me by going on with your story as if that incident had never happened."

"There is really very little more to tell," Cleave proceeded. "As far as I am concerned, the thing is finished. I suppose all you want to know is how Eleanor managed to extract those two cases of diamonds from the Duchess's safe?"

"That is a small matter," Eleanor said. "As you know, her Grace kept the key of her safe on a long chain round her neck. Under pretence of getting some money I had deposited with her from the safe, I managed to detach the key from the chain and leave it where Jasper Cleave could find it. It was a simple matter to restore the key to the chain again. It only wanted a little courage and audacity, no more than a clever conjurer displays when he deceives his audience. And that is how the Duchess came to say that the key was never out of her possession for a moment. I think you are very fortunate, Mr. Hardy. The mere fact of recovering those stones lost in consequence of that extraordinary lapse of memory on the part of Jasper Cleave, is in itself an instance of your amazing luck. But I must not detain you longer. If we start from here now, we shall reach the junction before twelve and catch the midnight express to town. We are neither of us likely to see you again——"

The speaker turned away and vanished into the night, followed by Cleave. Philip could see that the woman still held her head high. It was quite

evident her spirit was not so broken as she had said. Presently, a mass of foliage hid the adventuress from sight, and Philip returned slowly and thoughtfully to the house. He managed to restore the glass and decanter to the dining-room without being observed; then, as he emerged into the hall again, he found Lena waiting for him. The anxious look on her face gave way to a smile as she saw the expression in Philip's eyes.

"Come into the garden," he whispered. "We shall not be missed by the others, and I have much to tell you. Don't be afraid, for everything has gone quite smoothly, and we shall never see those people again. Let us walk towards the lake."

In the stillness of the night and under the brilliant light of the moon, Philip told Lena the whole of the extraordinary story. She listened patiently to all he had to say, and had few questions to ask. She was too happy for that, too full of joy that this man had come back to her with a love that he had not felt before. Lena slipped her hand under his arm, her head reclining on his shoulder. There was nobody to see them there, nobody to listen but the shining stars.

"You are quite content now?" Philip asked. "There is nothing you want to make your happiness complete, not even these?"

As Philip spoke he drew from his pocket the handful of flashing stones. Lena glanced at them a moment, then very gently bade Philip put them in his pocket again.

"Not to-night," she whispered. "I daresay

I shall admire them in time and be proud to call them my own, but to-night they seem to touch the wrong note. They have been the cause of most of the trouble between us. If you will put them away I shall be glad. Let us talk about ourselves."

For an hour they walked up and down, and then, as it was getting late, they made their way back to the house. Here Philip paused a moment, and, bending down, kissed Lena's lips.

"There is nothing more you want?" he asked.

"I have your love," Lena said; "what more can woman want?"

THE END.

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