Novels and Stories by
R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

THE SHADOW OF THE WOLF
THE CAT'S EYE
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THE MYSTERY OF 31 NEW INN
HELEN VARDON'S CONFESSION
THE RED THUMB MARK
THE EYE OF OSIRIS
THE SINGING BONE
THE SILENT WITNESS
JOHN THORNDYKE'S CASE-BOOK
THE GREAT PORTRAIT MYSTERY

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HELEN VARDON'S CONFESSION

BY

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ETC.

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BOOK III

CRIME

To every woman there comes a day (and that all too soon) when she receives the first hint that Time, the harvester, has not passed her by unnoticed. The waning of actual youth may have passed with but the faintest regret, if any; regret for the lost bud being merged in the triumph at the glory of the opening blossom. But the waning of womanhood is another matter. Old age has no compensations to offer for those delights that it steals away. At least, that is what I understand from those who know, for I must still speak on the subject from hearsay, having received from Father Time but the very faintest and most delicate hint on the subject.

I was sitting at my dressing-table brushing out my hair, which is of a docile habit, though a thought bulky, when amidst the black tress—blacker than it used to be when I was a girl—I noticed a single white hair. It was the first that I had seen, and I looked at it dubiously, picking it out from its fellows to see if it were all white, and noticing how like it was to a thread of glass. Should I pluck it out and pretend that it was never there? Or should I, more thriftily—for a hair is a hair after all, and enough of them will make a wig—should I die it and hush up its treason?

I smiled at the foolish thought. What a to-do about a single white hair! I have seen girls in their twenties with snow-white hair and looking as sweet as lavender. As to this one, I would think of it as a souvenir from the troubled past rather than a harbinger of approaching age; and with this I swept my brush over it and buried it even as I had buried those sorrows and those dreadful experiences which might have left me white-headed years before.

But that glassy thread, buried once more amid the black, left a legacy of suggestion. Those hideous days were long past now. I could look back on them unmoved—nay, with a certain serene interest. Suppose I should write the history of them? Why not? To write is not necessarily to publish. And if, perchance, no eye but mine shall see these lines until the little taper of my life has

burned down into its socket, then what matters it to me whether praise or blame, sympathy or condemnation, be my portion. Posterity has no gifts to offer that I need court its suffrages.

Chapter I — The Crack of Doom

THERE is no difficulty whatever in deciding upon the exact moment at which to open this history. Into some lives the fateful and significant creep by degrees, unnoticed till by the development of their consequences the mind is aroused and memory is set, like a sleuth-hound, to retrace the course of events and track the present to its origin in the past. Not so has it been with mine. Serene, eventless, its quiet years had slipped away unnumbered, from childhood to youth, from youth to womanhood, when, at the appointed moment, the voice of Destiny rang out, trumpet-tongued; and behold! in the twinkling of an eye all was changed.

"Happy," it has been said, "is the nation which has no history!" And surely the same may be said with equal truth of individuals. So, at any rate, experience teaches me; for the very moment wherein I may be said to have begun to have a history saw a life-long peace shattered into a chaos of misery and disaster.

How well I remember the day—yea, and the very moment—when the blow fell, like a thunderbolt crashing down out of a cloudless sky. I had been sitting in my little room upstairs, reading very studiously and pausing now and again to think over what I had read. The book was Lecky's "History of England in the Eighteenth Century," and the period on which I was engaged was that of Queen Anne. And here, coming presently upon a footnote containing a short quotation from "The Spectator," it occurred to me that I should like to look over the original letter. Accordingly, laying aside my book, I began to descend the stairs—very softly, because I knew that my father had a visitor—possibly a client—with him in his study. And when I came to the turn of the stair and saw that the study door was ajar, I stepped more lightly still, though I stole down quickly lest I should overhear what was being said.

The library, or book-room as we called it, was next to the study, and to reach it I had to pass the half-opened door, which I did swiftly on tip-toe, without hearing more than the vague murmur of conversation from within. "The Spectators" stood on a shelf close to the door; a goodly row clothed in rusty calf to which the worn gilt tooling imparted a certain sumptuousness that had always seemed very pleasant to my eye. My hand was on the third volume when I heard my father say:

"So that's how the matter stands."

I plucked the volume from the shelf, and, tucking it under my arm, stole out of the book-room, intending to dart up the stairs before there should be time for anything more to be said; but I had hardly crossed the threshold, and was, in fact, exactly opposite the study door, when a voice said very distinctly, though not at all loudly:

"Do you realise, Vardon, that this renders you liable to seven years' penal servitude?"

At those terrible words I stopped as though I had been, in a moment, turned into stone: stopped with my lips parted, my very breathing arrested, clutching at the book under my arm, with so sign of life or movement save the tumultuous thumping of my heart. There was what seemed an interminable pause, and then my father replied:

"Hardly, I think, Otway. Technically, perhaps, it amounts to a misdemeanour——"

"Technically!" repeated Mr. Otway.

"Yes, technically. The absence of any intent to defraud modifies the position considerably. Still, for the purpose of argument, we may admit that it amounts to a misdemeanour."

"And," said Mr. Otway, "the maximum punishment of that misdemeanour is seven years' penal servitude. As to your plea of absence of fraudulent intent, you, as a lawyer of experience, must know well that judges are not apt to be very sympathetic with trustees who misappropriate property placed in their custody."

"Misappropriate!" my father exclaimed.

"Yes," replied Mr. Otway, "I say misappropriate. What other word could you apply? Here is a sum of money which has been placed in your custody. I come to you with authority to receive that money from you on

behalf of the trustees, and you tell me that you haven't got it. You are not only unable to produce it, but you are unable to give any date on which you could produce it. And meanwhile it seems that you have applied it to your own uses."

"I haven't spent it," my father objected. "The money is locked up for the present, but it isn't lost."

"What is the use of saying that?" demanded Mr. Otway. "You haven't got the money, and you can't give any satisfactory account of it. The plain English of it is that you have used this trust money for your own private purposes, and that when the trustors ask to have it restored to them, you are unable to produce it."

To this my father made no immediate reply; and in the silence that ensued I could hear my heart throbbing and the blood humming in the veins of my neck. At length my father asked:

"Well, Otway, what are you going to do?"

"Do!" repeated Mr. Otway. "What can I do. As a trustee, it is my duty to get this money from you. I have to protect the interests of those whom I represent. And if you have misapplied these funds—well, you must see for yourself that I have no choice."

"You mean that you'll prosecute?"

"What else can I do? I can't introduce personal considerations into the business of a trust; and even if I should decline to move in the matter, the trustors themselves would undoubtedly take action."

Here there followed a silence which seemed to me of endless duration; then Mr. Otway said, in a somewhat different tone:

"There is just one way for you out of this mess, Vardon,"

"Indeed!" said my father.

"Yes. I am going to make you a proposal, and I may as well put it quite bluntly. It is this. I am prepared to take over your liabilities, for the time being, on condition that I marry your daughter. If you agree, then on the day on which the marriage takes place, I pay into your bank the sum of five thousand pounds, you giving me an undertaking to repay the loan if and when you can."

"Have you any reason to suppose that my daughter wishes to marry you?" my father asked.

"Not the slightest," replied Mr. Otway; "but I think it probable that, if the case were put to her——"

"It is not going to be," my father interrupted. "I would rather go to gaol than connive at the sacrifice of my daughter's unhappiness."

"You might have thought of her happiness a little sooner, Vardon," Mr. Otway remarked. "We are not quite of an age, but she might easily find it more agreeable to be the wife of an elderly man than the daughter of a convict. At any rate, it would be only fair to give her the choice."

"It would be entirely unfair," my father retorted. "In effect, it would be asking her to make the sacrifice, and she might be fool enough to consent. And please bear in mind, Otway, that I am not a convict yet, and possibly may never be one. There are certain conceivable alternatives, you know."

"Oh," said Mr. Otway, "if you have resources that you have not mentioned, that is quite another matter. I understood that you had none. And as to sacrifice, there is no need to harp on that string so persistently. Your daughter might be happy enough as my wife."

"What infernal nonsense you are talking!" my father exclaimed, impatiently. "Do you suppose that Helen is a fool?"

"No, I certainly do not," Mr. Otway replied.

"Very well, then: what do you mean by her being happy as your wife? Here am I, standing over a mine——"

"Of your own laying," interrupted Mr. Otway.

"Quite so; of my own laying. And here you come with a lighted match and say to my daughter, in effect: 'My dear young lady, I am your devoted lover. Be my wife—consent this very instant or I fire this mine and blow you and your father to smithereens.' And then, you think, she would settle down with you and live happy ever after. By the Lord, Otway, you must be a devilish poor judge of character."

"I am quite willing to take the risk," said Mr. Otway.

"So you may be," my father retorted angrily, "but I'm not. I would rather see the poor girl in her grave than know that she was chained for life to a cold-blooded, blackmailing scoundrel——"

"Softly, Vardon!" Mr. Otway interrupted. "There is no need for that sort of language. And perhaps we had better shut the door."

Here, as I drew back hastily into the book-room, quick footsteps crossed the study floor and I heard the door close. The interruption brought me back to some sense of my position; though, to be sure, what I had overheard concerned me as much as it concerned anyone. Quickly slipping the book back on the shelf, I ran on tip-toe past the study door and up the stairs; and even then I was none too soon; for, as I halted on the threshold of my room, the study door opened again and the two men strode across the hall.

"You are taking a ridiculously wrong-headed view of the whole affair," I heard Mr. Otway declare.

"Possibly," my father replied, stiffly. "And if I do, I am prepared to take the consequences."

"Only the consequences won't fall on you alone," said Mr. Otway.

"Good afternoon," was the dry and final response. Then the hall door slammed, and I heard my father walk slowly back to the study.

Chapter II — *Atra Cura*

As the study door closed, I sank into my easy chair with a sudden feeling of faintness and bodily exhaustion. The momentary shock of horror and amazement had passed, giving place to a numb and chilly dread that made me feel sick and weak. Scraps of the astounding conversation that I had heard came back to me, incoherently and yet with hideous distinctness, like the whisperings of some malignant spirit. Disjointed words and phrases repeated themselves again and again, almost meaninglessly, but still with a vague undertone of menace.

And then, by degrees, as I sat gazing at the blurred pages of the book that still lay open on the reading-stand, my thoughts grew less chaotic; the words of that dreadful dialogue arranged themselves anew, and I began with more distinctness to gather their meaning.

"Seven years penal servitude!"

That was the dreadful refrain of this song of doom that was being chanted in my ear by the Spirit of Misfortune. And ruin—black, hideous ruin—for my father and me was the burden of that refrain; no mere loss, no paltry plunge into endurable poverty, but a descent into the bottomless pit of social degradation, from which there could be no hope of resurrection.

Nor was this the worst. For, gradually, as my thoughts began to arrange themselves into a coherent sequence, I realised that it was not the implied poverty and social disgrace that gave to that sentence its dreadful import. Poverty might be overcome, and disgrace could be endured; but when I thought of my father dragged away from me to be cast into gaol; when, in my mind's eye, I saw him clothed in the horrible livery of shame, wearing out his life within the prison walls and behind the fast-bolted prison doors; the thought and the imagined sight were unendurable. It was death—for him at least; for he was not a strong man. And for me?

Here, of a sudden, there came back to me the rather enigmatical speech of my father's, which I had heard without at the moment fully comprehending, but which I now recalled with a shock of alarm.

"Please bear in mind, Otway, that I am not a convict yet, and possibly may never be one. There are certain conceivable alternatives, you know."

The cryptic utterance had evidently puzzled Mr. Otway, who had clearly misunderstood it as referring to some unknown resources. To me, no such misunderstanding was possible. More than once my father had discussed with me the ethics of suicide, on which subject he held somewhat unorthodox opinions; and I now recalled with terrible distinctness the very definite statement that he had made on the occasion of our last talk. "For my part," he had said, "if I should ever find myself in such a position that the continuance of life was less desirable than its termination, I should not hesitate to take the appropriate measures for exchanging the less desirable state for the more desirable."

In the face of such a statement, made, as I felt sure, in all sincerity and with sober judgment, how could I entertain

any doubt as to the interpretation of that reference to "certain conceivable alternatives." To a man of culture and some position and none too robust in health, what would be the aspect of life with its immediate future occupied by a criminal prosecution ending in an inevitable conviction and a term of penal servitude? Could the continuance of such a life be conceived as desirable? Assuredly not.

And then imagination began to torture me by filling in with hideous ingenuity the dreadful details. Now it was a pistol shot, heard in the night, and a group of terrified servants huddled together in the corridor. But no; that was not like my poor father. Such crude and bloody methods appertain rather to the terror-stricken fugitive than to one who is executing a considered and orderly retreat. Then I saw myself, in the grey of the morning, tapping at his bedroom door: tapping—tapping—and at last opening the door, or perhaps bursting it open. I saw the dim room—— Oh! How horribly plain and vivid it was! With the cold light of the dawn glimmering through the blind, the curtained bed, the half-seen figure, still and silent in the shadow. Horrible! Horrible!

And then, in an instant, the scene changed. I saw a man in our hall. A man in uniform; a railway porter or inspector. I heard him tell, in a hushed, embarrassed voice, of a strange and dreadful accident down on the line. . . . And yet again this awful phantasmagoria shifted the scene and showed me a new picture: a search party, prowling with lantern around a chalk pit; and anon a group of four men, treading softly and carrying something on a hurdle.

"Dear God!" I gasped, with my hands pressed to my forehead, "must it be—this awful thing! Is there no other way?"

And with that there fell on me a great calm. A chilly calm, bringing no comfort, and yet, in a manner, a relief. For, perhaps, after all, there *was* another way. It was true that my father had rejected Mr. Otway's proposal, and such was my habit of implicit obedience that, with his definite rejection of it, the alternative had, for me, ceased to exist. But now, with the horror of this dreadful menace upon me, I recalled the words that had been spoken, and

asked myself if that avenue of escape were really closed. As to my father, I had no doubt ; he would never consent ; and even to raise the question might only be to precipitate the catastrophe. But with regard to Mr. Otway The manner in which my father had met and rejected his proposal seemed to close the subject finally. He had called him a blackmailing scoundrel and used other injurious expressions, which might make it difficult or, at least, uncomfortable to re-open the question. Still that was a small matter. When one is walking to the gallows, one does not boggle at an uncomfortable shoe.

As to my own inclinations, they were beside the mark. My father's life and good name must be saved if it were possible ; and it seemed that it might be possible—at a price. Whether it were possible or not depended on Mr. Otway.

I recalled what I knew of this man who had thus in a moment become the arbiter of my father's fate and mine. My acquaintance with him was but slight, though I had met him pretty frequently and had sometimes wondered what his profession was, if he had any. I had assumed, from his evident acquaintance with legal matters, that he was a lawyer. But he was not in ordinary practice ; and his business, whatever it was, seemed to involve a good deal of travelling. That was all I knew about him. As to his appearance, he was a huge, unwieldy man of a somewhat Jewish cast of face, some years older, I should think, than my father ; pleasant spoken and genial in a somewhat heavy fashion, but quite uninteresting. Hitherto I had neither liked nor disliked him. Now, it need hardly be said, I regarded him with decided aversion ; for if he were not, as my father had said, " a blackmailing scoundrel, he had, at any rate, taken the meanest, the most ungenerous advantage of my father's difficulties, to say nothing of the callous, cynical indifference that he had shown in regard to me and my wishes and interests.

It may seem a little odd that I found myself attaching no blame to my father. Yet so it was. To me he appeared merely as the victim of circumstances. No doubt he had done something indiscreet—perhaps incorrect. But discretion and correctness are not qualities that appeal strongly to a woman : whereas generosity—and my father

was generous almost to a fault—makes the most powerful appeal to feminine sympathies. As to his honesty and good faith, I never doubted them for an instant; besides, he had plainly said that no fraudulent intent could be ascribed to him. What he had done I had not the least idea. Nor did I particularly care. It was not the act, but its consequences with which I was concerned.

My meditations were interrupted at length by an apologetic tap at the door, followed by the appearance of our housemaid.

"If you please, Miss Helen, shall I take Mr. Vardon's tea to the study, or is he going to have it with you?"

The question brought me back from the region of tragedy and disaster in which my thoughts had been straying, to the homely commonplaces of everyday life.

"I'll just run down and ask him, Jessie," I answered; "and you needn't wait. I'll come and tell you what he says."

I ran quickly down the stairs, but at the study door I paused with a sudden revival of those terrors that had so lately assailed me. Suppose he should open the subject and have something dreadful to tell me? Or suppose that, even now, already——

At the half-formed thought, I raised a trembling hand, and, tapping lightly at the door, opened it and entered. He was sitting at the table with a small pile of sealed and stamped letters before him, and, as I stood, steadying my hand on the door knob, he looked up with his customary smile of friendly welcome.

"Hail! O Dame of the azure hosen," said he, swinging round on his revolving chair, "and how fares it with our liege lady, Queen Anne?"

"She is quite well, thank you," I replied.

"The Lord be praised!" he rejoined. "I seemed to have heard some rumour of her untimely decease. A mere canard, it would seem; a fiction of these confounded newspaper men. Or perchance I have been misled by the jocose and boisterous Lecky."

The whimsical playfulness of speech, habitual as it was to him, impressed me—perhaps for that very reason—with a vague uneasiness. It was not what I had expected after that terrible conversation. The anti-climax to my own

tragic thoughts was too sudden; the descent to the ordinary too uncomfortably steep. I perched myself on his knee, as I often did, despite my rather excessive size and passed my hand over his thin, grey hair.

"Do you know," I said, clinging desperately to the common-place, "that you are going bald? I can see the skin of your head quite plainly."

"And why not?" he demanded. "Did you think my hair grew out of my cranium? But you won't see it long. I've heard of an infallible hair-restorer."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! Guaranteed to grow a crop of ringlets on a bladder of lard. We'll get a bottle and try it on the carpet broom; and if the result is satisfactory—well, we'll just put Esau in his place in the second row."

"You are a very frivolous old person, Mr. Pater," said I. "Do you know that?"

"I hope so," he replied. "And again I say, why not? When a man is too old to play the fool, it is time to carry him to the bone-yard. Am I going to have any tea?"

"Of course you are. Will you have it here alone or shall we have tea together?"

"What a question!" he exclaimed. "Am I in my dotage? Should I drink tea in musty solitude when I might bask in the smiles of a lovely maiden? Avaunt! No, I'll tell you what we'll do, Jimmy. I'll just telephone down to the office and see if there is any silly nonsense there that may distract me from serious pursuits, and, if there isn't, we'll have tea in the workroom and then we'll polish off that coal-scuttle."

"Finish it! But there's quite a lot to do."

"Then we'll do the lot."

"But why this hurry? There's no particular reason for getting it finished to-night, is there?"

"I don't know that there is; but we've had the thing hanging about long enough. Better get it finished and start on something else. Now you trot off and see about tea while I ring up Jackson."

As he turned to the telephone, I hurried away to give instructions to the maid and to set the workshop in order so that we might start without delay on our evening's task,

concerning which a few words of explanation would seem to be called for.

My father was by nature designed to be a craftsman. He was never so happy as when he was making something or in some way working with his hands ; and remarkably skilful hands they were, with an inborn capacity for the dexterous manipulation of every kind of material, tool or appliance. And to his natural skill he had added a vast amount of knowledge of methods and processes. He was an excellent woodworker, an admirable mechanic, and a quite passable potter. Our house abounded in the products of his industry ; stools, cupboards, clocks, fenders, earthenware jars ; even our bicycles had been built, or, at least, " assembled " by him, and a bronze knocker on our door had been finished by him from castings made in our workshop. If his powers of design had been equal to his manual skill, he would have been a first-class art craftsman. Unfortunately they were not. Left to himself, his tendency was to aim at a neat trade finish, at smooth surfaces and mechanical precision. But he knew his limitations, and had been at great pains to have me instructed in the arts of design ; and, as I apparently had some natural aptitude in that direction, I was able to help him by making sketches and working drawings and by criticising the work as it progressed. But my duties did not stop at that. In our happy, united life, I was his apprentice, his journeyman, his assistant—or foreman, as he pleased to call me—and his constant companion, in the house, in the workshop, and in our walks abroad.

As our maid, Jessie, laid the tea-tray on a vacant corner of the work-bench, I examined our latest joint-production, a bronze coal-scuttle, the design of which was based on a Roman helmet that I had seen in the British Museum. There was a good deal more than an ordinary evening's work to be done before it could be finished. A portion of the embossed ornament on the foot required touching up, the foot itself had to be brazed to the body and the handle had to be rivetted to the lugs, to say nothing of the " pickling," scouring, and oxidizing. It was a colossal evening's work.

But it was not the magnitude of the task that troubled me, for I shared my father's love of manual work. What had instantly impressed me with a vague discomfort was

the urgency of my father's desire to get this piece of work finished and done with. That was not like him at all. Not only had he the genuine craftsman's inexhaustible patience, but he had a habit of keeping an apparently finished work on hand, that he might tinker at it lovingly, smooth and polish it, and bring it to a state of even greater completeness and finish.

Why, then, this strange urgency and impatience? And, as I asked myself the question, all my fears came crowding back on me. Again there came that dreadful sinking at the heart, that strangling terror of the storm-cloud that hung over us, unseen but ready to burst and overwhelm us in ruin at any moment.

But I had little time for these gloomy and disquieting thoughts. The tinkling of the telephone bell in the study told me that my father had finished his talk with his managing clerk, and a few moments later he strode into the workshop and began taking off his coat.

"Where's your apron, Jimmy?" he asked (the pet name "Jimmy" had been evolved out of an ancient fiction that my name was Jemima).

"There's no hurry, Pater, dear," said I. "Let a person have her tea in peace. And do sit down like a Christian man."

He obediently perched himself on a stool as I handed him his tea, but in less than a minute he was on his feet again, prowling, cup in hand, around the end of the bench where the work lay.

"Wonder if I'd better anneal it a bit,' he mused, picking up the bronze foot and examining the unfinished space. "Mustn't make it too soft. Think I will, though. We can hammer it up a little on the stake after it's brazed on. That will harden it enough."

He laid the foot down, but only that he might apply a match to the great gas blowpipe; and I watched him with a sinking heart as he stood with his teacup in one hand, while with the other he held the foot, gripped in a pair of tongs, in the roaring purple flame. What did it mean, this strange, restless haste to finish what was, after all, but a work of pleasure? Did it portend some change that he saw more clearly than I? Was he, impelled by the craftsman's instinct, turning in this fashion a page of the

book of life? Or was it—— Oh! dreadful thought!—was it that he was deliberately writing "Finis" before closing the volume?

But whatever was in his secret mind, he chatted cheerfully as he worked, and submitted to be fed with scraps of bread and butter and to have cups of tea administered at intervals; yet still I noted that the chasing hammer flew at unwonted speed, and the depth of the punch-marks on the work that rested on the sand-bag told of an unusual weight in the blows.

"What a pity it is," he remarked," that social prejudices prevent a middle-class man from earning a livelihood with his hands. Now, here I am, a third-rate solicitor perforce, whereas, if I followed my bent, I should be a first-rate coppersmith. Shouldn't I?"

"Quite first-rate," I replied.

"Or even a silversmith," he continued, "if I could have my mate, Jim, to do the art with a capital A while I did the work with a capital W. Hm?"

He looked up at me with a twinkle, and I took the opportunity to pop a piece of bread and butter into his mouth, which occasioned a pause in the conversation. I had entertained faint—very faint—hopes that he might say something to me about his difficulties. Not that I was inquisitive on the subject; but, in view of a resolution that was slowly forming in my mind, I should have liked to have some idea what his position really was. It seemed pretty plain, however, that he did not intend to take me into his confidence; notwithstanding which I decided in a tentative way to give him an opening.

"Wasn't that Mr. Otway who was with you this afternoon?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "How did you know?"

"I heard his voice in the hall as you let him out," I answered, with something of a gulp at the implied untruth.

The chasing hammer was arrested for a moment in mid-air, and, as my father's eye fixed itself reflectively on the punch that he held, I could see that he was trying to remember what Mr. Otway had said in the hall.

"Yes," he replied, after a brief pause, "it was Mr. Oway. I should hardly have thought you would have known his voice. Queer fellow, Otway. No brains to

speak of, but yet an excellent man of business in his way."

"What does he do—by way of profession, I mean?"

"The Lord knows. He was originally a solicitor, but he hasn't practised for years. Now he is what is called a financier, which is a little vague, but apparently profitable. And I think he does something in the way of precious stones."

"Do you mean that he deals in them?"

"Yes, occasionally; at least, so I have heard. I know that he is something of a connoisseur in stones, and that he had a collection, which he sold some time ago. I have also heard—and I believe it is a fact—that his name was originally Levy, and that he is one of the Chosen. But why he changed his name I have no notion, unless it was an undesirable one to present to the financial world."

I was half disposed to pursue my enquiries further, but as he finished speaking, he once more began to ply the hammer with such furious energy that I became quite uneasy.

"You mustn't exert yourself so much, Pater," I remarked. "Remember what Dr. Sharpe said."

"Bah!" he replied. "Sharpe is an old woman. My heart is sound enough. At any rate, it will last as long as the rest of me. An old fellow like me cannot expect to go in for sprinting or high jumping, but there's no need for him to live in splints and cotton wool."

"Nor to endanger his health by perfectly unnecessary exertion. Why on earth are you in such a fever to get this thing finished?"

"I'm not in a fever, my dear," he answered; "I'm only tired of seeing this thing lying about unfinished. You see, as it stands, it is only so many pounds of old bronze, whereas a couple of hours' work turns it into a valuable piece of furniture, fit to take a dignified place in the catalogue when we are sold up. Just consider how finely it would read: 'Handsome bronze scuttle, in form of Roman helmet, the work of the late owner and his charming and talented daughter, capable of serving either as a convenient receptacle for coal or as a becoming head-dress for a person with a suitable cranium.' Don't you think that would sound rather alluring?"

"Very," I replied; "but as we are not going to be sold up——"

The rest of my sentence was drowned in the din of the beaten metal as my father returned to his hammering, and I only watched in mute discomfort until this part of the work was done and the great brazing jet was once more set a-roaring.

The work progressed apace, for my father was not only skilful and neat, but could be very quick on occasion ; and as I watched the completion of stage after stage, I was conscious of a growing uneasiness, a vague fear of seeing the work actually finished ; as if this mere toy—for it was little more—held some deep and tragic symbolism. I felt like one looking on at the slow wasting of one of those waxen effigies which the sorceresses of old prepared with magical rites for the destruction of some victim, whose life should slowly wane and flicker away with the wasting of the wax.

And meanwhile, above the roar of the blowpipe flame, my father's voice sounded, now in a cheerful stave of song, and now in lively jest or playful badinage. But yet he did not deceive me. Behind all this show of high spirits was a sombre background that was never quite hidden. For the eye of love is very keen and can see plainly, despite quip or joke or jovial carol, when " Black Care rides behind the horseman."

What a miserable affair it was, this pitiful acting of two poor, leaden-hearted mortals, each hiding from each the desperate resolve with smiles and jests that were more bitter than tears ! For I, too, had now my secret, and must needs preserve it with such a show of gaiety as I could muster by sheer effort of will. The resolution of which I have spoken was growing—growing, even as the toy that we were making was growing towards completion, and as I seemed to see, as if symbolized by it, the sands of destiny trickling out before my eyes. So I, too, had my part to play in this harrowing comedy.

Works which have consumed much time in the doing have a way of coming to an end with disconcerting suddenness. When I mixed the acid for the " pickle " in the great earthenware pan, it seemed that a great deal still remained to be done, in spite of my father's feverish energy and swift dexterity. And then, but a few minutes later, as it appeared to me, behold the finished piece standing on the bench, its embossed ornament telling boldly against the

sulphur-browned background, and my father stretching himself and wiping the blackened oil from his hands; and it was borne in on me that, with the final touch, his interest in the thing had fallen dead.

"Nunc dimittis!" he murmured. "It's finished at last. 'Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.' And that reminds me, Jim; don't the shops keep open late to-night?"

"Some of them do," I replied.

"Good," said he. "Tell Jessie to bring up the supper while I'm washing. I've got to make a business call to-night, and I want to get some things, so we won't make it a ceremonious meal. Not that I want to put you on short allowance, for I expect you are hungry after your Titanic labours. You mustn't take any notice of me."

As he hurried away, I rang the bell, and, when I had given the necessary instructions, I went up to my bedroom to remove the traces of the evening's work and make myself presentable.

At the supper table my father preserved the same quiet gaiety of manner—his usual manner, in fact; for he was always cheerful and companionable—though, on this occasion, the speed with which he disposed of his food gave little opportunity for conversation. After a very hurried meal, he rose, and, pushing back his chair, glanced at his watch.

"You mustn't mind my running away," said he. "Time, tide and the shopkeeper wait for no man."

He moved away toward the door, but before he reached it he paused and then came back and stood beside my chair.

"You need'nt sit up for me," he said. "I may possibly be rather late. So I'd better say 'good-night' now." He took my head in his hands, and, looking earnestly into my eyes, murmured: "Dear little Jim; best and most loyal of apprentices." Then he kissed me very tenderly and passed his hands over my hair.

"Good-night, sweetheart," said he. "Don't sit up reading, but go to bed early like a sensible girlie—if you will pardon my dropping into Weggish poetry without notice."

He turned away and walked quickly to the door, where he stood for a moment to wave his hand. I heard him

go to the study, and sat stiffly in my chair listening. In a few moments he came out and stepped quietly across the hall; there was a brief pause, and then the outer door closed.

He was gone.

At the sound of the closing door, I sprang to my feet with all my terrors revived. Whither had he gone? It was unusual for him to leave his home at night. What was it that had taken him abroad on this night of all others? And what was it that he wanted to buy? And wanted so urgently that he could not wait until the morrow? And why had he wished me "good-night" with such tender earnestness? A foolish question, this, for he was a loving father, and never sought to veil his affection. But to-night I was unstrung; haunted by nameless fears that gave a dreadful significance to every passing incident. And as the chill of mortal terror crept round my heart, the resolution that had been growing—growing, came to its final completion.

It had to be. Horrible, loathsome as, even then, I felt it to be, it was the only alternative to that other nameless and unthinkable. The sacrifice must be made by us both for both our sakes—if it were not too late already!

Too late? Even as the dreadful thought smote like a hammer on my heart, I ran from the room and sped up the stairs on the wings of terror. With trembling fingers I took my hat and cloak from the wardrobe and hurried downstairs, putting them on as I went. At the dining-room door I called out a hasty message to the maid, and then, snatching up my gloves from the hall table, I opened the door and ran out into darkness.

Chapter III — *The Covenant*

As I sped swiftly along the quiet roads on the outskirts of the town the confusion and sense of helplessness began to subside under the influence of action and a definite purpose; by degrees my thoughts clarified, and I found myself shaping out, with surprising deliberation and judgment, the course that I intended to pursue. Mr. Otway's house was about a mile distant from ours, somewhat farther out of town,

though on a frequented road ; a short distance and quickly covered by my flying feet. Yet, short as it was, and traversed with a phantom of terror in close pursuit, it gave me time to collect my faculties, so that, when I opened the gate and walked up the little drive, I had already to a large extent recovered my self-possession, though I was still trembling with the fear of what might be happening elsewhere at this very moment.

The door was opened by a small frail-looking woman of about fifty, who did not look quite like an ordinary servant, and whose appearance instantly impressed me disagreeably. She stood with her face slightly averted, looking at me out of the corners of her eyes, and holding the door open as she asked, with a slight Scotch accent :

" Who would you be wanting ? "

" I wish to see Mr. Otway, if he is at home ? " I replied.

" If ye'll come in and give me your name, I'll tell him," said she ; and with this she showed me into a small room that opened out of the hall, where, when I had told her my name, she left me. In less than a minute Mr. Otway entered, and having carefully closed the door, shook hands gravely and offered me a chair.

" This is quite an unexpected pleasure, Miss Vardon," said he. " Oddly enough, I was just thinking about you. I called on your father only this afternoon."

" I know," said I. " It was about that that I came to see you."

" Your father, then," said Mr. Otway, " has mentioned to you the subject of our not entirely pleasant interview ? "

" No, he has not," I replied. " Nothing has passed between us on the subject, and he is not aware that I have come here. The fact is, I overheard a part of your conversation and made it my business to hear as much of the rest as I could."

" Ha ! Indeed ! " He gave me a quick glance, half enquiring, half suspicious, and added : " Perhaps, Miss Vardon, you had better tell me what you heard."

" There is no need for me to repeat it in detail," said I ; " but, from what I heard, I gathered that my father had rendered himself liable to a prosecution. Is that correct ? "

"Yes," said Mr. Otway, "that is unfortunately—most unfortunately—the case."

"And that the proceedings will be taken by you, and that you have the power to stay them if you choose?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, Miss Vardon. That hardly states the position fairly. Do you know nothing of the circumstances at all? Has your father not told you anything about this unfortunate affair?"

"He has not spoken a word to me on the subject, and he has no idea that I know anything about it."

"H'm," Mr. Otway grunted, reflectively. "Yes. Well, Miss Vardon, if you wish to talk the matter over with me, perhaps I had better just let you know how the land lies, although, really, your father is the proper person to tell you."

"I think you had better tell me, if you don't mind," said I.

"Very well, Miss Vardon," he agreed. "Then the position is this: A sum of money—five thousand pounds, to be exact—was handed to your father by the trustees of a certain estate, to be invested by him on behalf of the trust; and the manner of its disposal—into which we need not enter—was quite clearly specified. But your father, instead of disposing of the money as directed, chose to make over the whole of it as a loan to a friend of his who was in temporary difficulties; a manufacturer, as I understand, who had suffered an unexpected loss and was on the verge of bankruptcy. There was no proper security, nor even, as I understand, any satisfactory arrangement as to the payment of interest. The whole affair was most improper; a gross violation of trust. In effect, your father converted this money and made use of it for his own purposes."

"Is the money lost?" I enquired.

Mr. Otway shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say? It may be recoverable some day, or it may not. But that is very little to the point. The position is that it is now demanded of your father and that he can't produce it."

"And so you are going to prosecute him?"

"Oh, please don't put it that way, Miss Vardon. I am a quite involuntary agent. My position is that I am instructed to get this money from your father and dispose of it in a particular way. But I can't get it; and when I

report that fact, I shall, of course, be urged—in fact, compelled—to take criminal proceedings. I shall have no choice. It isn't my money, you know."

"But why criminal proceedings?" I asked. "It seems to me that a civil action to recover the money would be the natural course."

Again Mr. Otway shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see that it makes much difference," said he. "The money has been made away with. Even if the trustees took no criminal action, there is the Public Prosecutor and there is the Incorporated Law Society. A prosecution is inevitable."

"And supposing my father is convicted?"

"It is hardly necessary to suppose," said Mr. Otway. "He will be. There is no defence. As to the sentence, I don't imagine that the maximum punishment of seven years penal servitude is likely to be inflicted. Still, your father is a solicitor, and the law is, quite properly, very severe in the case of solicitors who misappropriate their clients' property. He is almost certain to get a term of imprisonment."

To this I made no reply. There was nothing to say. It was only too clear that every avenue of escape was closed—save one; and realizing more fully every moment where that one led, I could not bring myself to make the fateful move. So, for a while, we sat in a hideous silence through which the ticking of a clock penetrated noisily and seemed to keep pace with the thumping of my heart.

As I sat, bracing myself for the effort that had to be made, my eyes travelled, half unconsciously, over the person of my companion. His appearance was not prepossessing. Huge, unwieldy and shapeless, although by no means grossly fat, his great size carried no dignity; nor did his very marked and prominent features impart to his face anything of distinction or nobility. He was of a distinctly oriental type, with black and rather curly hair, oiled and combed over a slightly bald head, a large aquiline nose, a wide mouth, rather full and fleshy, and very dark eyes, under which were baggy folds of skin creased by innumerable tiny wrinkles. As I looked at him with growing distaste, I found myself comparing him to a gigantic spider.

Suddenly it was borne in on me—perhaps by the measured ticking of the clock—that time was passing: time which might be infinitely precious. To delay further were mere cowardice. Nevertheless, when I spoke, it was in a voice so husky that I had to stop and begin again.

"You spoke, Mr. Otway—I heard you mention to my father that—that on certain conditions, you would—would be prepared to abandon your intention of prosecuting—or, at least——"

I could get no farther. Fear and shame and loathing of this thing that I was going to do, overpowered me utterly. It was only by the most strenuous effort that I choked down the sob that was rising in my throat. But I had said enough, for Mr. Otway now came to my assistance.

"I told your father that I was prepared to take over his liabilities, for the time being, at least, on condition that you became my wife. He refused, as perhaps you know; refused very definitely, I may say."

"And rather rudely, I am afraid."

"He was not at any great pains to wrap his refusal up delicately. But we may let that pass. Is it in respect of this proposal of mine that you have done me the very great honour of calling on me, Miss Vardon?"

I felt myself turn scarlet, but nevertheless I answered, resolutely:

"Yes. I came to ask if my father's very blunt refusal had closed the matter finally, or whether you were prepared to—to re-open it."

"We won't talk about re-opening it. It was never closed, by me. The proposal that I made to your father I now make to you; and if you should see your way to accepting it, I believe you would never have occasion to regret your decision."

He spoke in a dry, commercial tone, as if he were trying to sell me something at a rather high price; as, in fact, he was. And meanwhile I found myself wondering dimly why on earth he wanted to marry me.

"May I ask," he continued, after a pause, "if you are disposed to entertain my proposal?"

"I would do anything to save my father," I replied.

"That," said he, "is what I thought, judging from my previous knowledge of you; and it was the knowledge of

your devotion to your father that encouraged me to make the proposal. For it seemed to me that a young lady of your attractions who could so completely devote herself to an elderly father might find it possible to devote herself to an elderly husband."

His reasoning did not impress me as very sound, seeing that it took no account of the respective personalities of the father and the proposed husband. But I made no reply, and, after a further pause, he asked :

"Am I to understand that you—that you regard my proposal favourably ? "

"I can't say that," I replied. "But I came here to-night prepared to accept your conditions, and I am ready to accept them now. But, of course, you understand that I do so under compulsion and not of my own free choice."

"I quite realise that," said he ; "but I take it that you will carry out fairly any covenant into which you may enter."

"Certainly I shall," was my reply.

"Then may I take it that you are willing to marry me, on the conditions that I named ? "

"Yes, Mr. Otway. I consent to marry you on those conditions and on certain others that I will propose."

"Let us hear the other conditions," said he.

"The first is that you give me a promise in writing that, in consideration of my consent to marry you, you will do what is necessary to get my father out of his present difficulties."

"That is quite fair, though it is rather unnecessary. I shouldn't want a convict for a father-in-law, you know. But, anyhow, I agree, as soon as the marriage is over, to pay into your father's bank a cheque for five thousand pounds, or, if he prefers it, to give him a full discharge for that amount. And I will give you an undertaking in writing to that effect before you leave here to-night. Will that do ? "

"It will do quite well," I answered. "But I wish you also to add to that undertaking a proviso to the effect that, if at any time before the marriage takes place, any circumstances shall arise by which your pecuniary help shall become unnecessary, then this agreement between you and me shall not take effect, and you shall have no claim of any kind on me."

Mr. Otway looked at me in some surprise, and, indeed, I was somewhat surprised myself at the completeness with which my judgment and self-possession had revived as soon as it came to making terms; though I had considered the matter very carefully on my way to Mr. Otway's house.

"You are a true lawyer's daughter, Miss Vardon," said he, with a somewhat wry smile. "You are not going to give yourself away gratis. No play, no pay, h'm? However, you are quite right. You agree to marry me for a certain consideration. If you don't receive the consideration, you don't marry me. Very well. That is a perfectly business-like proposition, and I agree to it. You think that perhaps your father may be able to meet his liabilities, after all?"

I do not think anything of the kind. The proviso was introduced by me in view of a very different contingency. I was making this sacrifice to save my father's life. If I failed in that, the sacrifice would be useless. But I did not think it necessary to mention this to Mr. Otway. I therefore replied that, as I knew very little about my father's affairs, I thought it wise to provide even against the improbable.

"Quite so, Miss Vardon, quite so," he agreed. "One should always make provision for the unexpected. Well, I have said that I accept your first two conditions. What is the next one?"

"I want you to write my father a letter which shall relieve him of all present anxieties, and I want you to give me that letter so that it may be delivered to-night."

At this Mr. Otway's countenance fell somewhat. He pursed up his lips disapprovingly, and, after some moments of reflection, said gravely:

"That, you know, Miss Vardon, really anticipates the fulfilment of the contract on my side. Such a letter would commit me to a withdrawal of my demand for immediate payment of this money."

"But," said I, "you have my promise, which I am willing to give you in writing, if you wish me to."

"Well," he replied, dubiously, "that would seem to meet the difficulty, not that I am suspecting you of trying to evade fufilment. But, you see, your father has refused his consent and will probably continue to refuse. so that

one would rather not raise the question. By the way, I suppose you are over twenty-one ? "

"I was twenty-three last birthday."

"Then, of course, his consent is not necessary. Still, one doesn't want a fuss ; and if you delivered this letter to him, he would be in possession of the facts, and then there would be trouble.

"I was not proposing to deliver it to him. I should drop it in the letter-box and let him think that you had sent or left it. He would know nothing of my visit to you or of the arrangement we have come to."

"I see. That alters the position somewhat. But is it really necessary ? I can understand your wish to relieve his anxiety ; but still, it need be only a day or two. Do you really think it is essential ? "

"I do, Mr. Otway. I think it absolutely essential. If I had not, I should not have come here to-night. My father is in a desperate position, and one never knows what a desperate man may do."

Mr. Otway gave me a quick glance, and I could see that he was considerably startled. The possibility at which I had hinted would have consequences for him as well as for me, and I saw that he fully realized this. But he did not answer hastily. Perhaps he saw more in my suggestion than I did myself. At any rate, he pondered for some seconds before he finally replied :

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Vardon. I'm sure I shall be very glad to put an end to his suspense. Yes, I'll write the letter and give it to you. Are there any more conditions ? "

"No ; that is all. So if you will write the letter and the agreement and draft out what you want me to say, we shall have finished. And please make as much haste as you can. It is rather late, and I am anxious to get home before my father if possible."

My anxiety apparently communicated itself to Mr. Otway, for he immediately swung his chair round to his desk, and, taking one or two sheets of paper from the rack, began to write rapidly. In two or three minutes he turned, and, handing me what he had written, together with a blank sheet of paper and a pen and ink-bottle, took a fresh sheet himself, and, without a word, began once more to

write. The draft which he had handed me was simply and concisely worded as follows : —

"I, Helen Vardon, of Stonebury, Maidstone, in the county of Kent, spinster, hereby promise to marry Lewis Otway, of the Beeches, Maidstone, in the county of Kent, attorney-at-law, within fourteen days from this present date, in consideration of his assuming the present liabilities of my father, William Henry Vardon, in respect of the estate of James Collis-Hardy deceased, this promise to be subject to the conditions set forth in a letter written to me by the said Lewis Otway and dated the 21st of April, 1908.

"(signed) HELEN VARDON.

"Maidstone, Kent.
"21st April, 1908."

I read the draft through carefully, noting that it was not only quite simple and lucid, but that it embodied the terms of our agreement with scrupulous fairness and took over my father's liabilities without any limit as to time ; then I dipped the pen in the ink and made a fair copy on the blank sheet which I signed, and laid on the corner of the desk.

By the time I had finished my copy, Mr. Otway had completed the first of the documents, which he now handed to me ; and as I read it, he took up the paper that I had written, and, having glanced through it, placed it in a drawer and began once more to write. The paper that he had given to me was in the form of a letter, and read thus :—

"Dear Miss Vardon,

"At your request I put on record the terms of the arrangement which has been made between us to-day, and which are :

"1. That in consideration of my taking over your father's liabilities in respect of the Collis-Hardy Estate, you agree to marry me within fourteen days of this present date.

"2. That on the completion of the marriage ceremony, or at such time thereafter as you may decide upon, I shall pay into your father's bank the sum of five thousand pounds, or, if he prefers it, give him a full discharge of all liabilities in respect of the Collis-Hardy Estate aforesaid.

"3. Provided that if at any time prior to the said marriage your father shall discharge the said liabilities, or

any circumstances shall arise by which the said payment or discharge by me shall become unnecessary, then the agreement between you and me which is herein recorded shall become void, and neither of us, the contracting parties, shall have any claim upon the other.

"I am, dear Miss Vardon,

"Your obedient servant,

"LEWIS OTWAY.

"Maidstone, Kent.

"21st April, 1908."

Mr Otway glanced up from his desk as I folded the paper and bestowed it in my purse, and asked:

"Will that do? I think it covers the terms of our arrangement."

"Thank you," I answered; "it will do quite well."

He made no rejoinder, but went on with the letter that he was writing; and meanwhile I sat and watched him, with a strong distaste of his appearance, dimly wondering at this strange interview and at my own curious self-possession and mental alertness. But behind these hazy reflections was a background of haunting terror that had never quite faded even when I was putting the utmost strain upon my wits; terror lest all this bargaining should be useless after all; lest I should arrive home to find that my help had come too late.

These disquieting thoughts were presently interrupted by Mr. Otway, who, laying down his pen and swinging round in his revolving chair, took up the letter that he had just written.

"This is what I have said to your father, Miss Vardon. I think it will make his mind quite easy for the present, which is all we want.

"'Dear Vardon,

"'Since my talk with you this afternoon, I have been thinking over matters and considering whether it is not possible to give you more time. On looking into the affairs of the trust more closely, I think it can be done; in fact, I am sure it can, with some careful management on my part. So you may take it from me that the demand, which I felt compelled to make, is withdrawn for the time being. When you are in a position to surrender the money, you had better

notify me ; and in the meantime you have my assurance that no further demand will be made without reasonable notice.

" ' I hope this will relieve your natural anxiety, concerning which I have been a little uncomfortable since I left you.

" ' Yours sincerely,

" ' LEWIS OTWAY.

" ' The Beeches.

" ' 21st April, 1908.' "

He handed me the letter when he had finished reading, and I glanced through it quickly before returning it to him.

" I think that ought to relieve him of all anxiety," said he.

" Yes," I answered. " It will do admirably. And if you will kindly seal it and let me have it, I will go at once and drop it in the letter-box. It is most important that it should be in his hands as soon as possible."

" Quite so," he agreed ; " and I won't detain you further excepting to point out that, by giving you this letter, I am putting myself entirely in your hands. You will observe that this amounts to a surrender of my claim on your father for the time being. He will, of course, keep the letter, and could produce it in answer to any sudden demand for the restitution of the money. So I am really carrying out my part of the agreement in advance."

" Yes, I see that," I replied, " and I thank you most sincerely ; but," I added, rising and holding out my hand for the letter, " you have my solemn promise to carry out my part. If you were better acquainted with me, you would consider that enough."

" But I do, Miss Vardon," he rejoined, hastily ; " I do. If I did not trust you implicitly, I should not have written this letter. However, I mustn't delay you. I will make all the necessary arrangements and let you know when everything is ready. Will next Thursday be too soon ? "

At the mention of an actual date, and one so near, too, something like a complete realisation of what I was doing flashed into my mind and set my heart thumping painfully. But it had to be, so why haggle for terms ? Nor, indeed, since it must be, was there any use in trying to put off the evil day. The urgent need of the moment was to get this

letter into my father's hands, if it were not already too late.

"I must leave the arrangement of the affair to you, Mr. Otway," I murmured, shakily. "Do as you think best. And now I must really go."

He shook my hand in a drily, courteous fashion and let me out, accompanying me down the drive to the outer gate, which he opened for me with a ceremonious bow. I wished him a hurried "good-night," and, as soon as I was outside the gate, ran off in the direction of home, holding the precious letter in the little pocket of my cloak.

Chapter IV — *The Eleventh Hour*

As I drew near the neighbourhood of our house my fears grew so that I was compelled by sheer breathlessness and the trembling of my limbs to slacken my pace. I was sick with terror. In my mind, pictures, vague and nebulous but unspeakably dreadful, rose like the visions of a nightmare. I clutched the precious order of release in my pocket and set my teeth, trying not to think of what I might find at my journey's end.

At last I came in sight of the house. It was all dark save two of the upper windows—those of the servants' bedrooms. The servants, then, were going to bed as usual, for ours was an early household. This seemed re-assuring, but only to a slight degree; for even if——

I opened the gate softly—I do not know why, but somehow I instinctively avoided noise of any kind—and running up the garden path, let myself in quietly with my latch-key. With one quick and fearful glance around the darkened hall, I stole up to the hat-stand. Apparently my father had not yet come home, for his stick was not in the stand, and one of his hats was missing. I looked at the tall clock and noted that it was not yet half-past ten; I peered out through the open doorway, down the dark road, and listened awhile for the sound of footsteps; then, slipping the letter into the letter-box—which I could see contained no other missives—I lit one of the candles from the hall table, and, having peeped into the study, the book-room and the workshop, stole silently up the stairs.

First, I went to my father's bedroom, and, by the glimmer of gas that the maid had left burning, and the light of my candle, inspected it narrowly. I looked over the trifles on the mantelpiece and on the dressing-table, and even opened the little medicine-cupboard to run my eye over the collection of bottles and boxes, pausing from time to time that I might listen for footsteps, strange or familiar, as Fate might decree. But pry as I would, there was nothing unusual, nothing on which the most eager suspicion might fasten. All the details of that room were familiar to me, for it had been my daily task since my girlhood to look them over and see that my father's orderly arrangements were not disturbed by the servants ; and everything was in its place, and nothing new or strange or sinister had made its appearance.

When I had finished my inspection, I stole softly along the corridor to my own bedroom, which was at the head of the stairs, and, turning up the gas, but leaving the door ajar, began slowly to undress, listening intently the while for any sounds that might confirm or dispel my fears. The house was very quiet and still ; so quiet that the tinkle of the water, as I poured it out from the ewer, struck with disturbing harshness on my ear, and even the ticking of the little clock and my own slippered footfalls seemed an impertinent intrusion into that expectant silence.

It was a few minutes past eleven when the sound of a latch-key and the gentle closing of the hall door sent the blood tingling to my very finger-tips. No footsteps had been audible on the garden path, but this, in itself, was characteristic ; for my father and I were alike in that we both disliked noise and habitually moved about softly, avoiding the slamming of doors or the production in any way of jarring sounds.

I crept on tip-toe to the door and listened. A stick was carefully put down in the hall-stand, and then I thought—but was not quite sure—that I heard my father unlock the letter-box. A few seconds later I caught a faint creak, which I recognised as proceeding from the study door, and, after a short interval, the creak was repeated and the door closed. Then the hall gas was turned out and soft footfalls began to ascend the stairs.

" Is that you, Pater, dear ? " I asked.

"Is it I, indeed, O! wicked and disobedient child and likewise minx!" was the welcome answer. "Didn't I tell you to go to bed?"

"Yes, you did; and I am going. But I thought I would like to see you safely home from your roysterings."

"*Mures ratti!*" he exclaimed, as he came into the light from my open door. "It is poor old Queen Anne who has been keeping you out of your little nest. I know you."

Here he gave a gentle tug at one of the tails into which I had plaited my hair, and, having kissed me on the tip of my nose, continued:

"And you look as tired as the proverbial dog—which is the only kind of dog that ever does get tired. Now go to bed and sleep like a young dormouse. Good-night, Jimmy, dear."

With the aid of the convenient tail, he drew my face to his and kissed me again; then he went off along the corridor singing very softly, but just audibly to me:

"Her father he makes cabbage nets
And in the streets does cry 'em;
Her mother she sells laces long——"

Here a rapid diminuendo indicated the closing of the door, and the silence that had been so agreeably broken once again settled down upon the house. Still, I stood at the open door, looking out into the darkness. Had my father seen the letter? He had seemed very cheerful. But then, he would have seemed very cheerful if he had been walking to the scaffold or the stake. That was his nature. Yet his gaiety had appeared to me more genuine than that which he had exhibited earlier in the evening. However, there was no need to speculate; the question could easily be set at rest. Taking the match-box from my candlestick, I stole silently down the stairs, steadying myself by the hand-rail, and groped my way across the hall until I reached the door. Then I struck a match, and by its light, peered through the wire grating into the letter-box.

It was empty. The letter had been taken out.

I blew out the match, and, having dropped it into the salver on the table, crept back up the stairs to my room. Closing the door silently, I made my final preparations, turned out the light and crept into bed, feeling in the sudden

ecstasy of relief that I could now shake off all care and bury the anxieties and alarms of this dreadful day in slumber.

My father was saved! No haunting fear of imminent tragedy, no dread of impending ruin and disgrace, remained to murder sleep or mingle it with frightful visions. My father was saved. At the eleventh hour I had made my bid for his life and liberty; and the eleventh hour had not been too late.

But it was long—very long before sleep came to shut out for a time the realities of life. The blessed feeling of escape from this appalling peril, the sense of restored security, was presently followed by the chill of reaction. For the end was not yet. I had bid for my father's life and had bought it in; but the price remained to be paid. And only now, when I could consider it undisturbed by terror for my father's safety, did I begin to realise fully how bitter a price it was. Not that I would have gone back on my bargain, for I had made it with my eyes open; and would have made it over again if the need had been. But it was a terrible price. I had sold my birth-right—my precious woman's birth-right to choose my own mate—for a mess of pottage. It was a price that I should have to pay, and go on paying as long as life lasted.

Hour after hour did I lie, gazing wide-eyed into the darkness, letting my thoughts flit hither and thither, now into the quiet, untroubled past, now into the dim and desolate future, whence they would come hurrying back affrighted. But always, whithersoever they wandered, behind them rose, now vague and remote, now horribly distinct, that unwieldy figure with the impassive oriental face; even, as to the eyes of the fisherman in the Arabian tale, the smoke from the magic jar shaped itself into the menacing form of the gigantic Jinn.

I tried to consider dispassionately the character of Mr. Otway. It was very difficult. For had he not come into our life like some malignant spirit, to dispel with a word and in the twinkling of an eye, all the peace and happiness of our quiet home? To snap off short my serene companionship with my father? To turn into dust and ashes all the vaguely-sweet dreams of my maidenhood? To shut out the warm and hazy sunshine from my future and fill the firmament with unrelieved, leaden greyness? Still, I

tried to consider him fairly. Callously, cynically, he had driven his Juggernaut car over my father and me, his eyes fixed upon his own desires and seeing nothing else. He was an absolute egoist. That was undeniable. For some reason, he wished to marry me ; and to achieve that wish he had been willing to put us both on the rack, and, with passionless composure, to turn the screw until we yielded. It was not a pleasant thing to think of.

On the other hand, he seemed, in his way, to be a just man. By no hair's breadth had he sought to modify the terms that he had first proposed ; indeed, in his letter to me he had treated the loan to my father as an almost unconditional gift, and the other details of our agreement he had expressed in writing fully and fairly, with no attempt at evasion. Nor was he niggardly. Five thousand pounds is a large sum to pay for the privilege of marrying an unwilling bride. Under other circumstances I might have appreciated the implied compliment. Now, I could only admit that, according to his lights, he seemed not ungenerous.

But when I considered him as the companion with whom I must share the remainder of my life—or, at least, that part of it which mattered—the thought was almost unendurable. To live, day after day and year after year, under the same roof with this huge, dull, uncomely man ; to sit at table with him, to walk abroad by his side, to spend interminable evenings alone with him : it was appalling. I could hardly bear to think of it. And yet the horrible reality would be upon me in the course of a few swiftly-passing days.

Nor was it a question of mere companionship—but from this aspect I hurriedly averted my thoughts in sheer cowardice. I dared not let myself think even for a moment of what marriage actually meant. Under normal conditions it may be permitted to the modesty of an unwedded girl to cast an occasional glance, half-shy and not wholly unpleasurable, at the more intimate relations of married life : but to me, if the thought would rise unbidden, it could call up nought but the quick flush of shame and loathing whereat I would bury my face in the pillow with a moan of shuddering disgust.

It was a relief to turn from the distressful present and the

unthinkable future to the past, or even to the future that might have been. For, like most other girls, I had had my day-dreams. The companionship with my father had been happy and full of interest; but it had never seemed final. I had looked on it as no more than the prologue to the real life, which lay, for the moment, hidden behind the near horizon of my maidenhood. And as to that reality, though it offered but a vague picture, yet it had a certain definiteness. To many modern girls, ambition seems to connect itself with the academy and the laboratory, with the platform and the forum. They appear to hanker after fame, or even mere notoriety, and would contend with men—who have nothing better to do—for the high places in politics, in science or in literature. I had read the impassioned demands of some of these women for political and economic equality with men, and had looked at them with a certain dim surprise to see them so eager to gather this Dead Sea fruit and turn their backs upon the Tree of Life, with its golden burden of love and blessed motherhood. Ambition of that kind had no message for me. So far my mind was perfectly clear. As to the terms in which I conceived the final realities, the blossom and fructification of a woman's life, I am less clear. A home of my own like the pleasant, peaceful home that my father had made; a man of my own, in whom I could feel pride and by whom I could be linked to the greater world outside; and a sweet brood of little people in whom my youth could be renewed and for whom I could even cherish wider ambitions: this was probably what my rambling thoughts would have pictured if they could have been gathered up and brought to a definite focus. But they never had been. The necessary refracting medium had been absent. For what the burning-glass is to the sunbeam, the actual love of some particular man is to the opening mind of a young girl, bringing the scattered rays of thought to a single bright spot in which the wished-for future becomes sharp and distinct. And this influence, in its completeness, had never come into my life. The undoubted liking that I had for the society of men was due, chiefly, to their larger interests and wider knowledge. Of experiences sentimental or romantic there had been none.

And yet the little god had not entirely forgotten me. Indeed, his winged shaft had missed me so narrowly that

I could hardly yet be certain that I had passed quite unscathed. That little episode—tame enough in all conscience—had occurred two years ago, when a Mr. Davenant had come from Oxford with a small party of fellow-undergraduates, to spend a more or less studious vacation in our neighbourhood. I had met him, in all, three times on the footing of a casual acquaintance, and we had talked "high philosophy" with the eager interest of the very young. That was all. He had been a bird of passage, alighting for a moment on the very outskirts of my life, only to soar away into the unknown and vanish for ever.

It seemed an insignificant affair. A score of other men had come and gone in the same way. But there was a difference—to me. Those other men, too, had talked "high philosophy," but I had forgotten utterly what it was that they had said. Not so had it been in the case of Mr. Davenant. Again and again had I found myself thinking over his talks with me, not, I suspect, for the sake of the matter—which, to speak the truth, was neither weighty nor brilliantly original—but rather because I had enjoyed talking to him. And sometimes I had been surprised to notice how clearly I remembered those talks, even to the very words that he had used and the tones of his pleasant, manly voice. Two years had passed since then—a long time in a girl's life; but still Mr. Davenant—his name, by the way, was Jasper, a pleasant-sounding name I had thought it—remained the one figure that had separated itself from the nebulous mass of humanity that had peopled my short existence. And to-night—on this night of misery and despair, when all that was worth living for seemed to be passing away, as I lay staring up into the darkness, the memory of him came back to me again. Once more I heard his voice—how strangely familiar it sounded!—framing those quaintly-abstruse sentences; I recalled the look in his eyes—clear, hazel eyes, they were, that sparkled with vivacity and the fresh interest of youth—and his smile, as he uttered some mild joke—a queer, humorous smile that drew his mouth just a little to one side and seemed to give an added piquancy to the jest by its own trifling oddity. I remembered it all, clearly, vividly, with the freshness of yesterday; the words of wisdom, the humorous turn of speech, the earnest, almost eager tone, the easy

manner, friendly yet deferential—all came back to me as it had done a hundred times before, though it was two years ago.

He had been but a stranger—a mere passing stranger who had come and gone—who had sailed across the rim of my horizon and vanished. But even in that swift passage some virtue had exhaled from him by which it had been given to me to look beyond the present into a world hitherto invisible to me. He was my one little romance ; a very little one, but all that I had ; and, to me, he stood for all those things that might have been and now could never be. And so it happened that, on this night, when I seemed to be bidding farewell to my youth and all its dimly-cherished hopes, the memory of him lingered in my thoughts and was with me still when, at last, sleep—the sleep of utter weariness and exhaustion—closed my eyelids and shut out for a time the realities of that life on which I would have been well content never to look again.

Chapter V — *On the Brink*

Of the four days that followed, I do not, even now, like to think. The dreadful change that was coming into my life loomed up every moment more distinct, more threatening, more terrible. The hideous realities of what was about to happen to me refused to be ignored. They thrust themselves upon me and filled my thoughts every instant of the day and haunted my dreams at night. There were times when I turned a wistful eye upon that solution of the hopeless difficulties of life at which my father had hinted ; but alas ! even that was no solution as matters stood. Death, which would have released me from this bondage into which I had sold myself, would have left my father unemancipated ; and to attain it by my own act would have been a grossly dishonest evasion of the covenant into which I had entered with Mr. Otway. Expediency and honour both demanded that I should carry out the terms of my agreement.

But it was a terrible burden that I bore during those four days, and bore, of necessity, with a cheerful face and as little change as might be from my usual manner. That was

the most difficult part of all. To keep up the appearance of quiet gaiety, which was the tone of our house; to smile, to jest, to discuss projected work and to talk over the history which I was supposed still to be reading; and all the time to feel the day of doom creeping upon me, nearer and nearer with every beat of my aching heart. That was the hardest part. But it had to be done and done with thoroughness; for my father's watchful and sympathetic eye would have detected at once the smallest flutter of a signal of distress. And it was imperative that he should be kept in the dark.

And that, perhaps, was the bitterest drop in this bitter potion. For the first time in my life I had a secret from my father. I was systematically deceiving him. And the secret that I withheld from him and shared with a mere stranger—with an enemy, in fact—was one that concerned him profoundly. And yet that, too, had to be. It was of the essence of the transaction. For, if he had suspected, for one instant, what I proposed to do, he would certainly have interfered; and I knew him well enough to feel sure that his interference would not have taken the form of mere persuasion. He was a quiet man, suave and gentle in manner; even-tempered, patient, forebearing—up to a certain point; but when that point was passed, a change occurred which was apt to surprise those who knew him but slightly. Like a heavy body, he was difficult to move and difficult to stop when moved. If he had suspected Mr. Otway of putting unfair pressure on me—which he would certainly have done—then I would not have answered for the consequences to Mr. Otway.

But strive as I would to keep my secret, the intolerable strain of those days of misery must have made itself visible in some change in my appearance. Once or twice I caught my father looking at me narrowly with something of anxiety in his expression, and hastened to put on a little extra spurt of gaiety and to divert his attention from myself. Still, he was not entirely deceived by my assumed cheerfulness, though he made no remark until the very last evening, when, I suppose, my efforts to conceal the grief and wretchedness that were gnawing at my heart were less successful than usual. Then it was that he took me quite seriously to task.

"I wonder what is the matter with my little girl," he said, looking at me reflectively as we sat at the supper table. "She has been getting a little pale of late, and looks tired and worn. Is it too much Queen Anne and not enough sleep, think you?"

"I am feeling quite well," I replied.

"That is an evasion, my dear, and a tarradiddle to boot, I suspect. You are looking quite well. What is it, Jimmy?"

"I don't think it is anything, Pater, dear," I answered, not without a qualm of conscience at the direct untruth. "I haven't been sleeping so very well lately, but that is not due to my sitting up reading. Perhaps it's the weather."

"H'm!" he grunted; "perhaps it is—and perhaps it isn't. Are you sure there is nothing troubling you? No—what shall we say? Well, to put it bluntly, no young man, for instance, competing with the good Queen Anne for your attention?"

I laughed a little, bitterly. If only there had been!

But, alas! I was only too well secured against any troubles of that sort. So I was able to reply with a moderately clear conscience.

"No, of course there isn't. You know that perfectly well. How could there be when you keep me so securely in my little hutch?"

"That's true, Jimmy," he answered. "I certainly haven't noticed any buck rabbit sniffing around. But perhaps it is the hutch itself that is the trouble. It is a dull life for a girl, to be shut up with an old fellow like me. Coal-scuttles and such-like are all very well for an ancient fossil who has sucked all the juice out of life and must needs content himself with a modest nibble at the rind that's left. But it's not the sort of thing for a girl. Your orange is still unsucked, Jimmy, dear, and we mustn't leave it to get over-ripe."

"I've always been very happy with you, dear old Pater," I said; and a lump rose in my throat as I spoke. How happy I had been! And oh, how thankfully would I have gone on with that serene, peaceful life and never asked for anything different, if only it might have been so!

"I know you have, my dear," he rejoined; "always contented and cheerful and kind to your old father. But

still—well, we mustn't get too groovy. We must have a little change now and again. I have been rather preoccupied these last few days, but I shall be more free now. What do you say to a few fays in London ? It's quite a long time since we've been to town. Shall we take a week off and dissipate a little ? Just spread a thin wash of carmine —quite a thin and delicate one—over the metropolis, and incidentally see for ourselves if the population of the great world doesn't still contain a few presentable human males. What do you say ? "

I don't know what I said, or how I controlled the almost irresistible impulse to fling myself on his neck and sob my secret into his ear. It was terrible to listen to him making these plans for one of those blissful little holidays that we had enjoyed together from time to time, and to know that the morrow would see my own life spoiled irrevocably and his home made desolate. Some vague answer I murmured, and then managed to lead the conversation into a less distressing channel. But once or twice during the evening he reverted to the subject, and when, at a rather early hour, I wished him " good-night," he said, as he held my hands and looked me over-critically :

" Yes ; the blossom is undoubtedly a little faded. We must see to it, Jimmy. Think over my proposal and consider whether there is any particular kind of jaunt that you would like ; whether, for instance, you would rather go to the sea than to London."

" Very well, Pater, dear," I replied ; " I'll think about it," and with this only too easily fulfilled promise I turned away and went upstairs.

It was my last night at home ; the last night of my girlhood and of freedom. Virtually and to all intents, I had said farewell to my father for ever ; for though, hereafter, we should meet, I should be his daughter, in the old sense —no more. I should be the chattel of another man, and that man no friend of his.

For long after I went to my room I sat thinking these thoughts and gazing with scared, bewildered eyes into the dark future on whose threshold I already stood. What that future held for me, beyond the certainty of misery and degradation, who could tell ? I dared not try to pierce that dread obscurity. From what might lie beyond that

threshold my thoughts shrank back, appalled. The whole thing seemed like some hideous dream from which I should presently awaken, trembling, but with a sigh of relief. And yet it was not. Unbelievable as was this awful thing that had descended upon me in a moment, it was yet but too real for any hope of awakening.

And what of my father? For him, too, the old pleasant life was at an end. The quiet gaiety, the serene happiness of his home was gone for ever. Henceforth he would be a lonely man, mourning the loss of his companion and cherishing a bitter resentment against the man who had stolen her away. But what would he feel about this shipwreck of my life—for so he would certainly regard it? What portion of the wretchedness and degradation into which I had sold myself would have to be borne by him? It was a question which I had hardly asked myself before; but now, when I thought of his devotion to me, of his sympathy with me and his self-forgetfulness, a sudden misgiving crept into my mind. Was it worth while, after all? If my father and I were both to be made wretched for life, what good had I done by this sacrifice?

I thought of him as he had been this evening and for the last day or two. All his light-heartedness had come back. He was quite himself again. Since I had delivered Mr. Otway's letter, all signs of care had vanished. That letter had apparently put him entirely at his ease; naturally enough, since it had put an end to his immediate difficulties, and since he knew nothing of the price at which it had been purchased. And though I knew better, yet his ease and confidence were not without their effect on me. Under the clear sky and in the sunshine, it was hard to believe that the thunderbolt was still ready to fall. And so it was that, more than once on that night, I found myself asking if it were possible that I had done the wrong thing? Had been too precipitate.

But it was of no use to think of that now. The bargain had been made, and payment accepted in advance. Nor if it had been possible for me to go back on a promise voluntarily given—which it obviously was not—could Mr. Otway have been held to his. The original situation would have been created afresh.

Before undressing, I sat down at my little bureau and

wrote a letter to my father in case there should be no time on the morrow. For the arrangements—which Mr. Otway had communicated to me in a letter addressed in a feminine handwriting—were necessarily of a somewhat clandestine character. Mr. Otway had obtained a special license and had given notice to the clergyman of a small church on the outskirts of the town, and on the by-road leading to the church I was to meet him on Thursday morning as near as possible to eleven o'clock. There was not likely to be any difficulty in carrying out my part of the arrangement, but nevertheless, it was as well to leave nothing to be done on the morrow.

The letter that I wrote to my father was quite short. There was no need for a long one, since the facts to be communicated were of the simplest and I should probably see him in the course of the day. What I wrote was as follows:

"My dearest Father,

"I am writing to tell you that I am about to do a thing of which I fear you will disapprove. I am going to marry Mr. Otway; and by the time you get this, the marriage will have taken place.

"You will understand why I have done this when I tell you that I accidentally became aware of your difficulties and of the claim which he had on you, and you will understand, too, why I have kept my intention secret from you. It was the only way out for us; and you are not to think that I have done it for you only. I was equally concerned, and have acted in my own interests as well as yours.

"Please, dearest, try to forgive me for taking this step without your sanction. You would never have consented, and yet it had to be.

"Your loving daughter,

"HELEN."

I sealed the letter, and, having addressed it, placed it in my bureau in readiness for the morning. Then I made various little arrangements of my possessions, tidying up my bureau and wardrobe, tearing up letters that had been answered and packing a small trunk with necessary articles of dress, to be sent for on the morrow; and all this I did with a curious stony calm and the sense of setting my affairs

in order as if preparing to bid farewell to life. And this calm—a calm like that which persons of character often exhibit in the face of unavoidable death, or on the eve of a dangerous operation, continued even after I went to bed, so that, in contrast to the perturbed nights that I had passed since my interview with Mr. Otway, I presently fell into a sound sleep and slept late into the morning.

Chapter VI — *A Meeting and a Parting*

It turned out to be easier than I had expected to keep my appointment with Mr. Otway, for my father had business that took him abroad early, and, when I came down to breakfast, he had already left the house; which was a profound relief to me, since it saved me the added misery of a last farewell and the necessity of further deception.

It was half-past ten when, after placing my letter in the salver on the hall table, I set forth from the house. The most direct way to the church was across the town, but the fear of meeting my father or any of my acquaintances led me to take the roads that led out from the environs towards the country, and thus skirt the circumference of the town. I walked at a good pace, unconsciously threading my way through the rather complicated maze of by-roads, and still pervaded by the curious, half-dreamy calm that had possessed me on the preceding evening.

As I approached the vicinity of the little church—which was a kind of mission-chapel, in charge of a supernumerary curate—I glanced at my watch and saw that it was five minutes to eleven; and almost at the same moment, on turning a corner, I came in sight of a figure the very first glance at which so completely shattered my self-possession that I felt ready to sink down upon the pavement. There was no mistaking it, though the back was towards me; a huge, ponderous figure that walked away from me with the peculiar gait of the heavy and unathletic man; a silent, deliberate gait that recalls the action of the hind legs of an elephant.

I followed him breathlessly up the rather sordid-looking street, noting that, from time to time, a thin cloud of blue

smoke floated over his shoulder. At length, at the corner of an intersecting road, he turned and saw me ; upon which he flung away a cigar, and, retracing his steps towards me, saluted me with a flourish of his hat and held out his hand.

"This is good of you, Miss Vardon," he said, "to be so punctual. I hardly hoped that you would be able to be here so—er—so punctually."

I took his hand limply, but made no reply. The shock of the sudden encounter was slowly passing off and giving place to a sort of benumbed indifference mingled with vague curiosity. I felt as if I had been drugged or were walking abroad in a hypnotic trance, half conscious and waiting with dull expectancy to see what would happen next. I walked at Mr. Otway's side up the mean little street with a feeling somewhat like that with which one would walk in a dream beside some historical or mythical personage, accepting the incongruous situation from mere mental inertia.

Mr. Otway, too, seemed subdued by the strangeness of the position, or perhaps he was embarrassed by my silence. At any rate, although he occasionally cleared his throat as if about to make a remark, he did not actually speak again until we turned a corner, when there appeared, embedded in a row of mean houses, a small brick building which, in general shape and design, resembled a large dog-kennel.

"That," said he, "is the church, Miss Vardon—or perhaps I should say, Helen. It is a little difficult to—ah—get used to these—these intimacies, I may say, at so short a notice. No doubt you find it so ?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I am sure you do. Naturally. My own name, you may remember, is Lewis. My Christian name, I mean," he added, shying slightly at the word "Christian."

"I remember," said I.

"Quite so. I had no doubt you would. Ahem." He cleared his throat once or twice in an embarrassed manner, and then, as we crossed over towards the church, he continued : "I think we shall find the doors open. The law, I believe, requires it. And we shall find my housekeeper, Mrs. Gregg, inside. She will be one of the witnesses, you know The other will be the sexton."

The outer door was on the latch, as he had said, and, when he had admitted me, he closed and relatched it. From

the dark vestibule, I stepped into the bare, comfortless building, from the white-washed wall of which a great, emblazoned text grinned at me, as if in derision, with the words: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the House of the Lord.'"

Near the door, on one of the deal benches, the little, frail-looking woman whom I had seen at Mr. Otway's house was seated, conversing with a very bald and rather seedy elderly man; but, as we entered, the man hurried away towards the vestry and the woman rose and came forward a few paces to meet us.

"This is Miss Vardon, Mrs. Gregg," said Mr. Otway, introducing me in a heavy, embarrassed manner.

Mrs. Gregg stared at me with undisguised curiosity and something of hostility in her expression, as she replied:

"Ah've seen her before."

"Yes," said Mr. Otway, "I believe you have. Yes. To be sure. Of course. And I—er—hope—in fact, I may say that I—ah——"

What he was going to say I have no idea, and I suspect that he was not very clear himself; but at this moment the man—who was apparently the sexton—emerged from the vestry in company with a young clergyman, vested already in his surplice and carrying a book in his hand.

Apparently everything had been explained and arranged beforehand by Mr. Otway, for, as we advanced up the nave, the curate took his place before the communion table and opened his book. I noticed that he gave me one quick and intense look, full of surprise and curiosity, and thereafter seemed, as far as possible, to avoid even glancing in my direction.

The ceremony began abruptly and without preamble. With dim surprise, I became aware that the clergyman was speaking, or rather reading aloud, in a rapid and indistinct undertone. I listened with but slight attention, and failed, for the most part, to distinguish the words which, I think, was what the curate intended; his half-apologetic mumble being, I believe, designed to mitigate the effect of those coarsely-phrased impertinences with which the service is besprinkled, and which have survived so inappropriately into this age of decent and reticent speech. I tried to fix my thoughts on the ceremony in which I was taking part,

but found them constantly wandering away to my father, busying themselves with his present whereabouts and occupation. Was he still at his office? Or had he perchance called in at our house, as he sometimes did, and already seen my letter?

I was brought back to the happenings of the moment by a question addressed to me by name in more distinct tones, and followed by the murmured instruction: "Say I will." I obeyed the gently-spoken command, and then, with my right hand enveloped in a large and flabby grasp, I heard Mr. Otway repeat after the curate the solemn form of words that should mean so much and that was, as now spoken, so empty a mockery; of which the phrase "to have and to hold from this day forward" seemed to separate itself as the only part truly applicable.

Still passive, and conscious only of a certain, dull discomfort and surprise at the incongruity of the whole affair, I permitted our hands to be separated and re-joined, and obediently repeated the form of words as the curate dictated.

"I, Helen Vardon, take thee, Lewis Otway, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

It was amazing! These burning words, so charged with love, with utter devotion and self-abandonment I was actually addressing to a mere stranger, to a man who, even now, was but a name attached to an unfamiliar, ungracious personality; upon whose corpse, if he had fallen dead at my feet in the very moment of my speaking, I could have looked with no emotion but relief.

It was an astounding situation. The wonder, the incredibility of it filled my mind to the exclusion of all else until, as Mr. Otway began once more to speak at the curate's dictation, and I became aware that a ring had been slipped on my finger, I realised dimly that the ceremony was complete and that the irrevocable change had occurred.

But even then my thoughts quickly flitted away from this significant scene to others that seemed more deeply to concern me. As I knelt at Mr. Otway's side and the monotonous mumble recommenced, I began once more to

wonder where my father was and what he was doing. Had he come in and seen my letter, or had the maid noticed it and taken it to the office? And would he be angry or only grieved? Would he think that I had acted rightly? Or would he condemn my action as ill-considered or even unnecessary? And lastly, was it just barely possible that I had done the wrong thing? Had I sacrificed myself—and him—without sufficient cause?

Thus my thoughts wandered to and fro to the mumbled accompaniment of the interminable prayers and exhortations that rolled past me in an unheeded stream. At last the ceremony came to an end. Rising from our knees, we trooped after the curate to the vestry, where, as I signed the familiar name in the register, the first clear realization of my changed condition came upon me. But even then the vivid flash of perception was but transient. Hardly had I shaken hands with the clergyman and passed out into the street, when my thoughts sped away once more to my home—my real home—and my father.

For some time after leaving the church Mr. Otway and I walked in silence. He hemmed once or twice and seemed on the point of speaking, but either he could find nothing appropriate to say or he found some difficulty in opening the subject of his thoughts. And meanwhile I pursued my own reflections. At length, however, after one or two preliminary hems, he managed to make a beginning.

"I am afraid, Helen, you may think that I have put rather unfair pressure on you to marry me."

I roused myself to consider what he had said, and replied, after a slight pause:

"Whatever I may think, I am not complaining. I don't forget that I accepted your proposal of my own free will; and I intend to try to carry out honestly my part of the bargain."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Helen," he said eagerly. "I was afraid you might feel resentful—might think I had driven a rather hard bargain."

"Perhaps I do," I replied. "But that doesn't affect the terms of the bargain. My feelings towards you were no part of the agreement."

"No; that's true," he agreed hastily; but he was visibly crestfallen, and walked by my side for some time without

speaking. My thoughts began to wander again ; and then, suddenly, there occurred to me a question that I had already asked myself over and over again without finding any answer. Now, moved by a fresh impulse of curiosity, I put it into words.

"Would you mind telling me, Mr. Otway, why you wished to marry me ? "

He looked at me in some surprise and a little confusion.

"Why, my dear Helen," he replied hesitatingly, "there is nothing remarkable about it, is there ? I wished to marry you for the same reason that any other man would ; because you are a handsome girl—a beautiful girl, I may say—and clever and bright, and, as far as I could judge from your manner to your father, a good, affectionate girl. I have admired you ever since I first met you, a year and a half ago."

I suppose I looked surprised—I certainly felt so, seeing that he had made no effort to cultivate our acquaintance—for he continued :

"Yes, Helen, I admired you ; but as I had nothing to offer in the way of personal attractions, and I did not suppose that my means would be a sufficient set-off for my—ah—personal disadvantages, I kept my admiration to myself. In fact, I suppose, if it had not been for this lucky chance—lucky for me, I mean—a little unfortunate perhaps for you—though not so unfortunate as it might—er—at least I venture to hope that things may turn out——"

He paused awkwardly, as if expecting me to help him. But I made no comment. My momentary curiosity was satisfied. I had heard his explanation, and a very insufficient one it seemed to be. So the sentence remained unfinished, and, in the silence that ensued, my thoughts went back once more to my father.

When would he get my letter ? And what would be his feelings when he realized that his daughter—his companion and playmate, his beloved apprentice—was lost to him for ever ? And what would be his attitude to Mr. Otway ? Deeply resentful, beyond a doubt. His scornful rejection of the proposal had shown that clearly enough. Yes, he would be angry—furiously angry ; for quiet and gentle as his manners were, he was a passionate man. He could even be violent, as I knew from one or two experiences. And

our doctor, Dr. Sharpe, knew it, too, and had warned him to be careful, had cautioned him not only to avoid over-exertion, but excessive excitement of any kind. The doctor's words came back to me now with a qualm of uneasiness. I had not thought of that before. His distress, his grief, his anger against the man who had exacted this price from me—all that I had thought of and fretted over. But the actual physical shock that my letter would inflict on him, utterly unprepared as he was—that I had somehow overlooked. And yet it was palpable enough. He would come home expecting to find me waiting for him as usual; and then, without an instant's warning, in the very twinkling of an eye, he would learn that I had been spirited away out of his life for ever. It would be a terrible blow.

The more I thought of it the more uneasy I became. Supposing he should become seriously ill on receiving my letter. It was quite possible; it was even very probable. And if he should have got my letter already! If he should be, at this very moment, lying, prostrated by the shock, with none but the servants to tend him! As I thought of this dreadful possibility, my anxiety grew, moment by moment; and I was beginning to consider how soon I could contrive to escape to him, to satisfy myself that all was well, when the voice of Mr. Otway broke in on my thoughts. I did not at first gather clearly what he was saying until, by an effort, I detached my attention from the agitating subject of my reflections.

"Of course," he was saying as I endeavoured to catch up the thread of his remarks, "it answered my purpose as a solitary bachelor; but it won't do now. We shall have to get quite a different class of house. And we shall want some other servants. I shall keep Mrs. Gregg, if you don't object, as she has been with me so long and knows my ways, but we shall want a couple of maids in addition, I suppose."

"Is Mrs. Gregg your only servant?" I asked, rather absently.

"Yes," he replied; "that is to say, the only resident servant. She has a girl to help her in the mornings with the housework and to mind the place when she goes out shopping. That is how she was able to attend at the church this morning."

As he was speaking, we turned into the quiet, countrified road in which he lived, and a few more steps brought us to the house. Mrs. Gregg, who had apparently hurried on in advance by a different route, was standing at the open door talking to a girl of about sixteen, and, as we ascended the steps, she addressed Mr. Otway.

"I've got to see to some things in the town. D'ye want Lizzie to stay or will ye open the door yourself if anyone comes?"

"Oh, she needn't stay, Mrs. Gregg," was the reply. "I shan't be going out. But don't be any longer than you can help.

On this Mrs. Gregg dismissed the girl, and followed her out, shutting the door after her. Mr. Otway hung his hat on a peg in the hall, and placing his umbrella in the stand, remarked apologetically:

"Mrs. Gregg's manner is not all that might be desired in a servant; but she is a capable woman and absolutely trustworthy. She comes from the North, you know, where manners run a little more blunt than with us. Shall I show you your room?"

Without waiting for a reply, he preceded me up the stairs to the first floor, where he ushered me into a bedroom and stood by the door with an embarrassed and rather deprecating air, casting a glance of obvious disparagement over its somewhat meagre appointments.

"It's a poor place to bring you to, Helen," he remarked, "but that can be mended. It was good enough for a bachelor. You'll find the wardrobe and chest of drawers empty when you send for your things. Mine are in the dressing-room—that little room to the right. And now I'll leave you in possession for the present."

With this he went out, closing the door behind him, and I heard his soft, heavy tread descending the stairs.

For some time after he had gone I stood looking about me in absolute dismay. The room was mean almost to sordidness—surprisingly mean for the habitation of an admittedly wealthy man. But it was not that which filled me with consternation. Delicately as I had been brought up, the mere surroundings of life were of no great consideration to me. What appalled me utterly was the feeling, now brought home to me with overwhelming force,

that I was no more my own ; that I had surrendered myself to the possession of another person, a strange man, towards whom I felt a growing repugnance. This was not my room : it was our room. No longer had I any rights of privacy or of personal reticence. I was his, " to have and to hold from this day forward," with no power of escape or protest against the most repulsive familarities. I had voluntarily surrendered, not only my liberty, but even the appearance of security from the most outrageous intrusions.

Of course I had known all this before. But in the hurry and rush, the alarms and agitations of the events that had forced me to my hasty decision, perception had been partly obscured. I had known what I was doing, but had only dimly realized. It had needed the sight of that mean room, with its significant contents and the presence of that man who stood at my side as joint occupier, to light up the vague perception into realization of the most horrid vividness.

Presently I began, with the dull curiosity of a prisoner introduced to a new cell, to explore the room, opening the empty wardrobe and pulling out the ill-fitting drawers of the plain pine chest. Then I peeped into the dressing-room —a bare little closet, furnished with a wash-stand, a dressing-table and a chest of drawers—and even stepped in to glance over the half-blind down into the garden and street beyond. I was about to turn away when I noticed a man approaching the house at a rapid pace ; and in an instant my heart leaped with mingled joy and alarm.

It was my father.

I watched him nervously as he strode towards the house, and my fears rose with each step that he took. Every movement was expressive of excitement and anger ; the swift stride, the forward-thrust chin, the very set of the shoulders ; the way in which he grasped his stick by the middle, as if aiming a blow, was full of menace. As he drew nearer I shrank behind the curtain, but still watched him ; watched him with growing alarm, for now I could see that his eyes were wild under the frowning brows, his mouth was set and his face was of a strange, blotchy, purple colour. He looked as if he had been drinking, but I knew he had not.

As he reached the gate, he wrenched it open violently, and, entering, slammed it behind him ; a thing I had never

before known him to do. He strode up the path, without a glance upwards, and disappeared from my sight, and a moment later there came a wild jangling of the bell, followed by a thundering knock at the door.

I hesitated, undecided what I should do. Should I go down and meet him with appeasing words, or should I wait until the first explosion of his wrath had subsided? I crept out of the bedroom to the landing and stood with my hand on the baluster rail, listening. I heard Mr. Otway walk along the hall, softly and rather slowly. I heard him open the door, and then my father's voice rose, loud and fierce.

"Where is my daughter, Otway? Is she here?"

"Yes," Mr. Otway replied; "she is upstairs. We have just returned from the church."

"Do you mean to say," my father demanded, "that the marriage has actually taken place."

"Yes," Mr. Otway answered. "We were married half an hour ago."

"What!" roared my father. "After my letter! Did you tell her about that letter? You didn't, you damned scoundrel! You've tricked her! You've swindled her!"

"As to your letter, Mr. Vardon," I heard Mr. Otway reply, "I haven's seen it myself, yet. The morning's correspondence is still——"

Here a door closed, and his voice became inaudible. They had gone into one of the rooms. I staggered back into the bedroom and sank on to a chair, trembling from head to foot. In the name of God, what did my father mean? Tricked! Swindled! Could it be true? Was it actually possible that I had been lured into the arms of this ungainly lout by a false pretence? It was incredible. And yet——

As the first shock of this amazing statement began to pass off, a storm of anger and indignation arose in my breast; and I was on the point of rising to go down and confront Mr. Otway, when the house shook to a heavy concussion. I sprang from the chair, and flying on the wings of terror down the stairs, opened the first door that I came to.

Years have rolled by since that unforgettable moment, but even now, as I write, the tableau that met my eyes as I opened the door rises before me vivid and distinct as the dreadful reality. I saw it even then but for a single instant,

as I darted into the room ; but it has remained with me and will remain till my dying day.

My father lay motionless on the floor near the fire-place ; his face an awful, livid grey, his eyes staring fixedly at the ceiling ; and from a small wound on the right side of his forehead a few drops of dark blood trickled down his temple. Beside him, and stooping over him, stood Mr. Otway, with ashen face and dropped jaw, the very picture of horror and mortal fear ; and in Mr. Otway's right hand was grasped my father's stick, a stout Malacca, with a heavily-loaded silver knob.

I flew past him and sank on my knees by my father's side ; and in that moment I knew that my father was dead. I had never seen a dead person before. But it was unmistakable. I spoke to him ; I called to him in an agonised whisper ; I patted his head and touched his face. But all the while I knew that he was dead ; that he was gone from me for ever. Even as I looked at him, the livid grey of his face faded to a dead white ; the staring eyes relaxed and seemed to sink into their sockets ; and the mouth slowly fell open. It was death. I knew it. Dazed, stricken, almost bereft of consciousness and the power of thought, I knew it, with the dull certainty of despair.

As I had entered the room, Mr. Otway had started up with a look of terror, and when I sank at my father's side, I had heard him move away softly towards the writing-table. He was now back and once more stooping over my father's body. I felt that he was there, although my eyes were fixed on that pallid face that gave back no answering glance. Presently he spoke, in a hushed, awe-stricken whisper.

"This is terrible, Helen ! Can't we do anything ? "

I looked up at him with a sudden flush of loathing and detestation ; and as I looked, I noticed that he no longer held the stick. I rose slowly to my feet and faced him.

"No," I answered. "He is dead. He is dead. Mr. Otway, you have killed my father."

As I faced him, he shrank away from me, staring at me as if I had been some horrid apparition. His face, blanched to a horrible white and shiny with sweat, was dreadful to look upon ; the face of abject, mortal terror.

"Helen ! " he gasped. "Helen ! For God's sake don't

look at me like that! It was not I who killed him. I swear to God it was not. He fainted. I was trying to take the stick from him—I had to, or he would have killed me—and his head struck the mantelpiece. Then he fainted and fell. I am telling you the truth, Helen. I am, before God!"

To this I made no reply. Whether I believed him or not, I cannot say. Stunned as I was by this frightful thing that had befallen, I could only look at him with utter loathing as the cause of it all.

"Helen!" he continued, imploringly, "say you believe me! I swear I never touched him. And don't look at me like that! Helen! Why do you look at me in that awful way?"

He clasped his hands, and, casting a fearful glance at my poor father's corpse, moaned: "My God! my God! but this is horrible! Horrible! Do you think he is really dead? Don't you think—can't we do anything? If a doctor were here—if we only had someone to send—— Shall I go and fetch a doctor, Helen?"

"Yes," I answered, "you had better."

"I will," he said. "But you do believe me, don't you? I swear——"

"You had better go at once, Mr. Otway," I interrupted.

He gave me one pitiful glance of appeal, and then, with a despairing moan, turned and left the room. I heard him hurry along the hall and a moment later the outer door closed.

Once more I sank on my knees beside my father, and, taking the passive hand in mine, looked into the pallid face, dimly surprised to find something new and unfamiliar creeping into it. I did not weep. The blow was too crushing, too overwhelming to call forth common emotion. Nor did I think coherently; but knelt, looking dumbly into the face that was my father's, and yet was not, wrapped in a sort of dreadful trance, conscious only of bitter pain and a sense of unutterable loss.

After a time—I do not know how long—I became aware of sounds of movement in the house, and presently soft footsteps approached the room. The door, which Mr. Otway had left ajar, opened with a faint creak, and the

voice of Mrs. Gregg ejaculated: "Sakes! What's this?"

She stole on tip-toe into the room until she stood beside me, looking down with a scared expression as my father's corpse.

"Why!" she exclaimed, "the man's dead! Who is he?"

"He is my father, Mrs. Gregg," I replied.

She stood for some time in silence, apparently considering the import of my answer. Then she walked round and looked down curiously at the wound on the forehead.

"Where is Mr. Otway?" she asked.

"He has gone to fetch a doctor," I answered.

"A doctor!" she repeated. "And what might be the good of a doctor when the man is dead? D'ye know how it happened?"

Before I had time to reply to her question, there came the sound of a latch-key inserted into the hall door. She turned quickly and made as if she would leave the room, but, as she reached the threshold, Mr. Otway entered, followed by the doctor, and she fell back to let them pass. I rose to my feet, and the doctor—a hard-faced, middle-aged man whom I knew by sight—knelt down in my place. He lifted the limp hand and laid his finger on the wrist; he raised the eyelid and touched the glazing eyeball; then drawing out his stethoscope he listened for some time at the chest over the region of the heart. And meanwhile we all stood watching him in a profound silence through which the ticking of the clock broke noisily, as it had done on that fateful night when I had sat in this very room unconsciously preparing the elements of this tragedy.

At length the doctor rose, and, folding his stethoscope, deliberately slipped it into his pocket and turned to Mr. Otway.

"I am sorry to say that it is as you feared," said he. "He is quite dead. From what you have told me, I should say it was a case of heart failure from over-excitement. Have there been any previous attacks?"

"No," I answered. "But I think Dr. Sharpe considered that his heart was weak."

"Ah! He did, did he? Well, I had better call on Dr.

Sharpe and hear what he knows about the case." He walked round, and, stooping down, examined the wound attentively. Then, without looking at Mr. Otway, he asked: "You say he struck his head against the corner of the mantelpiece? This corner, I suppose?"

He touched the right hand corner of the marble shelf, and, as Mr. Otway assented, I saw him place his shoulder against it as if to measure its height.

"Was that when he was in the act of falling?" he asked, with his eyes fixed on the wound.

"Yes," replied Mr. Otway. "At least, I think so—I should say yes, certainly—that is, to the best of my belief. Of course, Dr. Bury, you will understand that I am a little confused in my recollection. The—ah—the circumstances were very agitating and—ah—confusing. Is the point of any importance?"

"Well, you see," the doctor replied a little drily, "when a man dies suddenly and only one person is present—as I understand was the case in this instance—every point is of importance."

"Yes, of course. It would be, naturally."

Mr. Otway spoke these words in a low, husky voice, and, as I looked at him, I saw that he had turned as pale as death and that his face had again broken out into a greasy sweat. Nor was I the only observer. Mrs. Gregg, who had been standing in the corner by the door, quietly attentive to all that passed, was now watching her employer narrowly and with a very curious expression. There was a brief interval of silence, and then Mr. Otway having cleared his throat once or twice, asked, in the same husky, unsteady voice:

"I suppose, when you have talked the matter over with Dr. Sharpe, you will be able to certify the death in the usual way?"

"In the usual way?" Dr. Bury repeated. "Yes: in the way that is usual in cases of sudden death. Of course, I shan't be able to give an ordinary certificate. I shall write to the coroner, giving him the facts, and he will decide whether an inquest is necessary or whether he can issue a certificate on my statement."

"I see," said Mr. Otway. "You will report the facts

—and, I suppose, you will state what your own views on the case are ? "

" I shall make any comments that seem to be called for, but, of course, the facts are what the coroner wants."

" And would you consider that, in a case like this, an inquiry is necessary ? "

" I don't know that I should," was the reply ; " but it doesn't rest with me. Would you like me to help you to move him ? You can't leave him lying here, and you can hardly have him carried to his own house by daylight."

" No," Mr. Otway agreed, " we could not. If you will kindly help me to carry him to the drawing-room, we can lay him on the sofa."

The two men raised my poor father, and, while I supported his head, they carried him to the drawing-room and laid him on the sofa, when Dr. Bury, having taken an embroidered cover from a table and spread it over him, drew down the blinds.

" Perhaps," said he, " you had better leave him here until we know what the coroner intends to do. In case he should decide——"

Here he glanced a little uncomfortably at me, and I realised that he would rather speak of the grim details unembarrassed by my presence. Accordingly, I stole from the room and returned to the one from which we had just come. The door was open as we had left it, and, as I came opposite to it, treading softly, as was my habit, I saw Mrs. Gregg standing by the roll-top table with my father's stick in her hand, apparently testing the weight of the heavy lead loading that the silver knob concealed. She started as she suddenly became aware of my presence, but, quickly recovering her self-possession, asked :

" Will this be your father's stick ? "

I answered that it was, whereupon she remarked, as she stood it in the corner behind the writing-table, whence, I suppose, she had taken it :

" I thought 'twas a stranger to me. A fine stick it is, too, and a trusty companion 'twould be on a dark night and a lonely road."

To this I made no reply ; and when she had glanced at

the clock and peered curiously into my father's hat, which stood on the table, she turned abruptly and left the room.

Chapter VII — *The Terms of Release*

WHEN Mrs. Gregg had gone, I shut the door, and, sinking on to the chair by the writing-table, tried to collect my thoughts. But though I was vaguely conscious that this dreadful disaster vitally affected my position, and must in some way affect my actions, overwhelming grief and a sense of irreparable loss rendered coherent thought impossible. My father was dead. That was all I could think of. My one perfect friend, who had absorbed all my affection and given me all of his, had gone out of my life. Henceforward I was alone in the world.

Presently I heard Dr. Bury leave the house, and then the door opened and Mr. Otway came into the room, looking like a man who had risen prematurely after a severe illness. He dropped limply on a chair, and sat, with his hands on his knees, looking at me with a pitiable expression of misery and consternation.

"This is a terrible affair, Helen," he said in a broken voice. "Terrible! Terrible!"

I made no reply, but looked at him, half-curiously and resentfully. In the extremity of my grief, I had no pity to spare for him who was the cause of this dreadful calamity.

"Won't you speak to me, Helen?" he said, imploringly. "Won't you try to give me some comfort? Think of the awful position I am in."

At his miserable egotism, my grief blazed up into sudden wrath.

"You!" I exclaimed, scornfully. "And what of me? You have robbed me of my father—of all that matters to me in life—and now you ask me to comfort you!"

He stretched out his hands to me with a gesture of entreaty.

"Don't say that, Helen!" he implored. "Don't say I robbed you of him. It was an accident that no one could

foresee. And after all, you know, Helen," he added, persuasively, " if you have lost a father, you have gained a devoted husband."

At these words I gazed at him in utter amazement ; and quite suddenly the confusion of my thoughts began to clear up. I began to realise that some action was called for, though what that action was I could not clearly see at the moment. But what I did see quite clearly was that the thing he was suggesting was utterly unthinkable.

" Do you suppose, Mr. Otway," I demanded, " that I could possibly live with you as your wife after what has happened ? "

" But you are my wife, Helen," he protested.

" I agreed to marry you, Mr. Otway, in order to save my father. My father has not been saved."

" That was, no doubt, your motive, Helen," he answered. " I don't deny that. But, actually, you agreed to be my wife on certain specific conditions, which I carried out—or, at least, was prepared——"

He hesitated with sudden embarrassment ; and the embarrassment, with the statement, in the midst of which he had broken off, gave me my cue.

" Mr. Otway," I said, " you had a letter from my father. What was in that letter ? "

At this question his self-possession broke down completely.

" I have had no letter," he stammered ; " at least, that is to say, I haven't seen—he spoke of a letter, but—but the fact is, in my excitement this morning I forgot to look at my correspondence. If there was a letter, it must be in the box still."

" Let us go and see if it is there," said I. My confusion of mind was fast clearing up, and as my wits returned, I found myself shaping a definite course of action. I rose and accompanied him to the hall door and stood by while he unlocked the letter-box. As he opened the trap, I perceived that the box contained a single letter ; and even in that agitating moment, the significance of the fact struck me. It was strange, indeed, that the morning's delivery should bring to a man of business no more than a single letter.

He picked the missive out, and, having glanced at it,

handed it to me. I looked at it, and, perceiving that it was in my father's handwriting, tore open the envelope and drew out the letter, which I read aloud. It ran thus :—

" Stonebury, Maidstone.
" 25th April, 1908.

" Dear Otway,

" You will, no doubt, be glad to learn that our little difficulty is at an end. The unexpected has happened. My friend has been able to raise the wherewith to repay the loan that I made to him, and has sent a cheque for the full amount. I have paid it into my bank, but, as a measure of security, in view of the magnitude of the sum, I am waiting until the cheque is cleared before sending you mine. However, you may expect to receive payment in full in the course of three clear days from this date.

" With many thanks for your forbearance,
" I am, yours very truly,
W. H. VARDON."

As I finished reading, I looked Mr. Otway sternly in the face.

" You realize," I said, " that this letter makes our agreement void ? "

He did not reply immediately, but stood with his eyes averted from me and his fingers working nervously.

" Do you realize that ? " I demanded.

" Well, in a way, yes," he replied, hesitatingly. " If it had reached me sooner—that is to say, if I had seen it——"

" If you had seen it ! " I interrupted, angrily. " What has that to do with the question ? The letter was delivered to you, as the post-mark shows, before you left the house. It came by the first post. If you chose to leave it unopened, that is your affair. When you met me this morning, the agreement was already at an end."

He glanced nervously along the hall towards the kitchen stairs.

" We needn't stand here," he said. " Let us go into the study and talk this affair over quietly."

He led the way back to the room we had left, and, having shut the door, turned to me deprecatingly.

" It's an unfortunate business, Helen," he said. " Very unfortunate. Of course, I ought to have looked over the

morning's post, but, in my natural excitement, I overlooked it ; and now I don't see that there is anything for us to do but make the best of it."

I looked at him in amazement. "But," I exclaimed, "you don't seem to realize that our agreement was at an end before the marriage took place."

"No, I don't," he replied. "You see this letter is only a notification—a conditional promise to pay. It doesn't discharge the debt."

At this my patience gave out completely. "Let us have no evasions or quibbles, Mr. Otway," I said. "Our agreement was at an end before the marriage took place, and I have no doubt that you knew it. You obtained my consent by fraud."

"I don't admit that," said he. "But even if it were so, what would you propose ? "

"I propose to have the marriage annulled," I replied.

He shook his head. "That is impossible, Helen," he said. "The marriage is not voidable. An action for nullity can be sustained only on certain conditions, none of which exist in our case."

"But," I exclaimed, "my consent was obtained on a fraudulent pretence ! Surely that is a sufficient ground for claiming to have the marriage annulled ! "

"I deny the fraud," he replied, doggedly. "But in any case it is not material. The marriage was perfectly regular, you are of full adult age, you gave your consent without compulsion, and there are none of those impediments which the law recognises. I assure you, Helen, that our marriage is not voidable—that it cannot be annulled by ordinary process."

Little as I trusted to his truth or honour, I suspected that what he was now saying was true. But yet the position was unthinkable.

"Do you mean to tell me," I demanded, "that the law would uphold a marriage between a woman and the murderer of her father ? "

He winced as if I had struck him a blow, and his face grew sensibly paler.

"For the love of God, Helen," he entreated, "don't talk like that ! You don't believe it. I can see you don't. You know I did not kill your father."

"I know nothing," I replied, "but this: that when I came into the room my father was lying dead with a wound on his forehead and that you were standing over him with a formidable weapon in your hand."

I thought he would have fainted. He sank into a chair with a gasp that was almost a sob, and the sweat streamed down his pallid face. He was a pitiable spectacle; but yet I felt no pity for him. I was bent only on escaping from the net in which he had caught me.

"I swear I never touched him, Helen," he protested, breathlessly. "I swear it. But you know I did not. You are only saying this to torture me. You don't believe it. I know you don't."

"It is of little importance what I believe, Mr. Otway," I replied, coldly. "The decision will not rest with me. You will be judged by others on the facts which I have stated."

He made no immediate reply. He seemed absolutely paralysed by terror, and sat, breathing quickly and staring at me, as if he expected me to kill him then and there. At length he spoke in a husky, indistinct voice.

"Helen. What is it you want of me?"

"I want this marriage set aside," I answered.

"But," he protested, "I have told you that is impossible. It cannot be annulled in the ordinary sense. Be reasonable, Helen. Let us talk the matter over and see if we can't come to terms."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," he said, persuasively, "I should like to meet your wishes if I can. I am not unreasonable. I can see that, as things are, you would not wish to live with me as my wife. We can't get the marriage annulled, but we can arrange a separation—a temporary separation, say, without prejudice to any future arrangements—by mutual consent. What do you say to that?"

"If the marriage cannot be set aside, I suppose a separation would be the next best thing. Do I understand that you are willing to agree to a separation?"

"Yes," he replied; "on certain conditions I am willing to agree to a separation—a temporary separation, you know."

"What are your conditions?" I asked.

He cleared his throat once or twice, as if in doubt how best to put the matter. Then, avoiding my eye, he began, hesitatingly, but with an obsequiously persuasive manner.

"The exact circumstances of your father's most lamentable death, Helen, are known to you and to me and to no one else. As I have told you, and I am convinced that you believe, the heart attack which killed him came as we were struggling for possession of his stick. It was due to the excitement and the violent exertion. Perhaps the blow on the head from the corner of the mantelpiece may have had something to do with it, for the fainting attack came on almost directly afterwards. He relaxed his hold on the stick and fell, leaving it in my hands. There was no violence on my part. I never struck him or did anything that could in any way make me responsible for his death. That is the truth, Helen, and I am convinced that you believe it, in spite of what you have said."

"I have only your word that it is the truth," said I.

"Exactly," he agreed. "But you believe me. You know what your father's state of health was, and you know that he was liable, on occasions, to be—er—somewhat violent. So you believe me. But others, who have not the knowledge that you have—ah—might—ah—might not believe me."

"I haven't said that I do," I interposed. "However, we will let that pass. Go on, please."

He paused to wipe his face with his handkerchief, and then proceeded:

"You said just now that when you entered the room you saw me standing over your father with a weapon in my hand."

"So I did."

"I know you did, Helen. You saw me holding your father's loaded stick. It is quite true. But—it would—ah—greatly simplify matters if—well, if that circumstance were not communicated to—ah—to anyone else."

"You mean to say," said I, "that you want me to suppress the fact that I saw you standing over my father's dead body holding a loaded stick?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'suppress,' Helen," he

replied, passing his handkerchief once more over his haggard face. "I only ask you to refrain—in the interests of justice and—ah—of common humanity—from mentioning a circumstance that—ah—mentioned, might mislead the hearers, and might, conceivably, lead them to quite erroneous conclusions. It is a reasonable thing to ask. No doubt you blame me; you look upon me as the cause of this dreadful trouble—which, in a certain sense, I admit I am. But you would not be vindictive, Helen, or unjust. You would not wish to see me placed in the dock—perhaps even convicted—think of that, Helen! Convicted and sentenced when I am absolutely innocent! My God! It would be an awful thing! You wouldn't wish to have such a frightful miscarriage of justice as that on your conscience, I am sure."

"It wouldn't be on my conscience," I replied, coldly. "The verdict would not be mine; and besides, I have only your word that you are innocent. You have made the statement to me, and you could make it to others, who would take it for what it is worth."

He clasped his hands passionately and leaned forward towards me with an imploring gesture.

"Helen!" he exclaimed. "Don't be so hard, so cold! Have you no pity for me? Think of my awful position—an innocent man, but yet with appearances so horribly against me. And the whole issue is in your hands. You were not present when—when it happened. You have only to say so and to refrain from making any unnecessary additions to that statement, and no miscarriage of justice can occur. I am not asking you to say anything that is not true; I am only asking you to keep irrelevant and misleading matter out of the inquiry. Do this, Helen, and I promise to execute a deed surrendering all claims on you—at least for a time."

I made no immediate answer. Mr. Otway was perfectly right on one point. I did not believe that he had killed my father. I think I only half believed it, even, at the awful moment of the discovery; for the alarming appearance that my father had presented as he strode up the garden path, with his wild eyes and his strange, blotchy colour, had made me fear a catastrophe; and when the catastrophe had almost immediately followed, it was

natural that my mind should refer it to a cause already considered rather than to one totally unexpected. Moreover, Mr. Otway's account of the tragedy was intrinsically probable; it fitted the facts that were known to me; whereas the supposition that he had killed my father was wildly improbable.

It is not to be supposed, however, that, in my present agitated state, I reasoned the matter out consciously in this methodical fashion. But unconsciously, and perhaps vaguely, my mind had worked along these lines to a conclusion; and that conclusion was that Mr. Otway's account of what had happened was substantially correct. Nevertheless, I was not prepared to admit this at the moment; indeed, my whole desire was to be rid of the man's irksome presence—to be alone with my grief.

"I can't give you an answer now, Mr. Otway," I said. "I am not in a condition to discuss anything. I want to go home and be quiet."

He acquiesced with surprising readiness, no doubt encouraged by my tacit abandonment of the accusation.

"Of course you do," he agreed. "It has been a fearful shock for you. Go home and keep yourself quiet. I shall hear from Dr. Bury, in the course of the day, what the coroner intends to do, and I will call and let you know. And I will bring a draft of the deed for you to look at. The sooner we arrive at a settlement, the better. And, Helen, let me beg you not to say anything to anyone about —anything that might complicate matters. You understand what I mean."

I nodded wearily and moved towards the door. I was still wearing my outdoor clothes, so I had no preparations to make. Mr. Otway opened the door for me and I passed out into the hall; but before leaving the house, I turned back into the darkened drawing-room, and, raising the cover from my father's face, kissed his already cold cheek.

"Good-bye, dearest! Good-bye!" I whispered, passionately; and then, feeling the tears rushing to my eyes, I kissed him again, and, replacing the cover, hurried from the room. Mr Otway was standing at the hall door to let me out, and timidly offered his hand; but I walked quickly past him, and, running down the steps, made my way out

through the gate that had admitted me to my ruin and my father to his death.

Chapter VIII *"Whom God Hath Joined——"*

Our states of mind in certain unforeseen circumstances are sometimes surprising, even, to ourselves. As I walked away from Mr. Otway's house, I think I was dimly surprised at my own self-possession. The worst had happened. The calamity which I had feared, and which I had made such sacrifices to avert, had befallen; and yet I was comparatively calm. My heart ached, it is true, with a grief such as I had never known before; with a sense of irreparable loss and a feeling of utter loneliness and desolation; but yet, under it all was a certain indefinable peace.

Looking back with more natural knowledge and experience, this state of mind is not difficult to understand. My father's sudden death was a crushing calamity; but, in the very moment of its happening, the incubus of my relation to Mr. Otway was lifted. For, though I was not at the time conscious of the fact, I now see clearly that, even as I passed out of the house of the man whom the law regarded as my husband, my mind was made up that I had done with Mr. Otway.

Moreover, my new trouble was in other ways more easy to bear than the misery of the last few days. My marriage had seemed, in a manner, to put an end to my life. It had offered nothing but an unending vista of wretchedness, an unending submission to a state of things that was intolerable even to think of. But this new catastrophe was sudden and final. The blow had fallen, once for all; shattering, indeed, my present, but calling upon me instantly to make provision for the future. And in action, the necessity of which forced itself upon me even before I reached home, I found, if not relief from my sorrow, at least some temporary distraction.

As I let myself in with my latch-key, our housemaid met me in the hall to announce that lunch had been waiting for some time, and to ask me if I knew at what time my father would come in.

"My father is dead, Jessie," I replied. "He died suddenly at Mr. Otway's house about an hour ago. I can't tell you any more just now."

I walked past her and ascended the stairs to my room, leaving her standing in the hall as if petrified; but, before I reached the landing, I heard her rush away towards the kitchen, making the house resound with her hysterical shrieks and lamentations. It was very dreadful and distressing, but yet it had a steadying effect on me, reminding me of my isolated position and of the need for firmness and self-control. In a few minutes I came down, and disregarding Jessie's sobs and tears, sat out the simple formalities of lunch as a matter of discipline and example, and even compelled myself to take a certain amount of food.

As I sat at my silent and solitary meal, my thoughts were busy with the many things that had to be done. Not willingly, indeed; for I longed to be quiet and nurse my grief—to forget everything but my sorrow and my great bereavement. But that was impossible. I was practically alone in the world, for I had no near relatives, and all that had to be done must be done, or at least directed, by me. There was my father's funeral to be arranged, the business to be transferred or wound up, the property to be realised—and there was Mr. Otway.

Naturally enough, my thoughts constantly came back to him. As to his moral claim on me, it was null and void. Whether he had, as I suspected, seen my father's latter and deliberately left it unopened, or whether he had simply neglected to look for it, made no difference. It had been delivered to him, and thereupon our agreement had ceased to exist. But if he had no moral claim, he had, apparently, a legal hold on me which would have to be considered. If he could be induced to surrender that, the position would be greatly simplified. And he was ready to surrender it on a certain condition.

To Mr. Otway's proposal my thoughts came back again and again. The condition that he had made was not an unreasonable one, or, at least, it did not appear so to me. My father had died when they were alone together: they had admittedly been quarrelling; my father bore the mark of a heavy blow; and Mr. Otway had been found standing over the body with a loaded stick in his hand. The

appearances suggested that he had killed my father. And yet I was convinced that he had not. Profoundly loathing him as the cause of all my misfortunes, I still felt that he was, in this respect, an innocent man ; and common justice demanded that he should not be made to suffer for a crime that he had not committed.

Now what was my position in the affair ? Practically I held the scales of justice. The one absolutely damning fact was in my sole possession ; and I alone, in all probability, would appreciate the misleading appearances which that fact created. That was my dilemma. I could make known the fact itself to those who should judge him, but could I make them understand how little it was worth ? It seemed very doubtful. *I* had trembled for my father's safety and had seen him come in at the gate, already in a dangerous condition. *They* had not. They might easily fail to weigh his state of health against that one, apparently, sinister fact of the loaded stick. In short, it came to this : that if I mentioned what I had seen, Mr. Otway ran a serious risk of being punished for a crime which he had not committed, whereas if I refrained from mentioning it, justice would take its proper course.

That, I think, is, in effect, how I argued. Neither the logician nor the jurist will commend me. But women have their own ways of looking at things, and one of those ways is somewhat to confuse conviction with knowledge. A thing firmly believed is apt to present itself as a thing known. I had come to the conclusion that Mr. Otway was innocent of my father's death, and having done so, had unconsciously treated his innocence as a fact that was within my knowledge.

After lunch, I telephoned to the office, asking Mr. Jackson, my father's managing clerk, to come and see me ; and while I was waiting for him, I took down from the study shelves a treatise of the Law of Husband and Wife, and turned over those of its unsavoury pages which dealt with suits for nullity. Apparently Mr. Otway was right. So far as I could make out, the circumstances of our marriage afforded no grounds for such a suit. I was married irrevocably. My complete freedom was gone beyond recall ; I should have to be content with such incomplete freedom as is conferred by a deed of separation.

I had just returned the book to the shelf when Mr. Jackson arrived and entered the room looking very flurried and uncomfortable.

"What a dreadful thing this is, Miss Vardon!" he exclaimed. "Shocking! Shocking! So unexpected! I need not say how much we all sympathize with you."

"It is very kind of you," I said, offering him a chair.

"Not at all," he rejoined. "It is a terrible misfortune for all of us. Would it distress you very much to tell me how it happened?"

"It was for that purpose that I sent for you, Mr. Jackson; to tell you exactly what has happened and to ask your advice"; and here I gave him a brief account of the events of the morning.

At the mention of my marriage he looked profoundly surprised, but also, I thought, distinctly relieved; but he did not make any comment until I had finished the whole tragic story, when he remarked:

"I am very glad to hear that you are married, Miss Vardon—or rather, I should say, Mrs. Otway—to a man of such very substantial means, if I am rightly informed."

"Why are you glad?" I asked.

"Because," he replied, "it disposes of rather a difficulty. Your father was a man of great abilities and an excellent lawyer, but he was somewhat inattentive to the financial side of his profession. I am afraid you would have been left rather badly provided for."

"I am sorry to hear that," said I, "because I am not proposing to live with Mr. Otway. I have asked him to agree to a separation."

Mr Jackson raised his eyebrows. "May I ask why?" he enquired.

"I don't want to go into details just now," I answered, "but I may say that the marriage was an affair of accommodation; I supposed my father to be in a position of embarrassment, and I made the arrangement with Mr. Otway without his knowledge. It turns out that I was mistaken. He was not embarrassed. When the marriage took place, I was under a misapprehension and I was misled by Mr. Otway. Accordingly, I have asked to have a separation deed drawn up."

"Does he agree to the separation?"

"He has not yet, but I think he will; so I shall have to consider my resources, after all."

"But," Mr Jackson objected, "he will have to make you an allowance."

"That," I said, "is impossible. If I repudiate the marriage, I could not, of course, allow him to support me."

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Jackson. "He is legally bound to. You are his wife. While the marriage stands, you can't marry anybody else. Besides, he is not likely to raise any objection. He is a lawyer, you know."

"I am not thinking of him: I am thinking of myself. I wish to be under no obligations to Mr. Otway, and I shall not accept any assistance from him."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," Mr. Jackson said, gloomily; "because I am afraid you will be rather badly off. The business is a very personal one, and is worth practically nothing to sell. If I were a qualified solicitor, I might be able to carry it on. But I'm not; and I doubt if anyone would care to buy the good-will at any price. Still, I'll see what can be done. As to your father's will, I happen to know that you are the residuary legatee—practically the sole legatee—but what that amounts to, I shouldn't like to say. Mighty little, I fear. However, it's of no use to worry you with these matters now. If you will authorize me to look into your father's affairs, I will let you know exactly how things stand; and if I could be of service to you in any way, I hope you'll let me know. There's the funeral, for instance——"

He paused suddenly, and ran an uncomfortable eye along the rows of law books on the shelves.

"You are very kind, Mr. Jackson," I said, "and your help will be invaluable. As my father's friend, I should like you to take charge of the funeral arrangements, if you would be so good."

The rest of our conversation was concerned with the various things which had to be done during the next day or two, and it left with a feeling of the warmest gratitude to this quiet and rather dry man of business, whose sympathy took such a practical and acceptable form.

It was past six o'clock when the red-eyed Jessie came to the study to announce that Mr. Otway was waiting in the drawing-room; and there I found him wandering restlessly

round by the walls and making a show of examining the pictures. He was still very pale and looked haggard and weary, but yet he held out his hand to me with a certain confidence.

"I think, Helen," said he, "that you will be a little relieved at my news. I have seen Dr. Bury, and he tells me that the coroner will be satisfied with his evidence and Dr. Sharpe's."

"Do you mean that there is to be no inquest?" I demanded, with sudden suspicion.

"No, no," he replied. "Of course, there will be an inquest. But the coroner thinks that the circumstances do not call for a *post-mortem*. I thought you would be glad to know that. The—er—body will remain where it is until the jury have viewed it, and then it can be brought here for the—ah—the funeral."

I nodded but made no comment on this statement, and he continued after a brief pause:

"I suppose, Helen, you would like me to act for you in regard to the funeral arrangements."

"Thank you, Mr. Otway," I replied, "but Mr. Jackson has very kindly undertaken that for me."

He looked somewhat crestfallen at this, and said, deprecatingly:

"I am sorry you did not leave the arrangements to me. It would have looked better." Which it undeniably would—from his point of view.

As I made no rejoinder, there followed a slightly uncomfortable pause, during which he was evidently bracing himself up for what was the real object of his visit. At length he began nervously:

"Have you been able to give any more consideration to my proposal, Helen."

"Yes," I answered; "I have thought about it a good deal. Perhaps we had better go into the study, which is more out of the way of the servants than this."

We crossed the hall, and, when we had entered the study and closed the door, I resumed:

"I may as well say, Mr. Otway, that I am prepared to accept your statement. On reflection, I believe that your account of what happened is true."

"Thank God for that!" he ejaculated. "I felt sure

you believed me, Helen ; but it is an unspeakable relief to hear you say so. And I am sure you will agree with me that the—the apparently incriminating circumstance need not be mentioned."

"I might even agree to that," I replied ; "but there must be a clear understanding. I am not going to say anything that is not strictly true."

"Oh, certainly not!" he agreed. "All that I ask is that you refrain from volunteering a perfectly unnecessary and misleading statement. Will you promise to do that?"

"I am not sure that I have any right to make such a promise, Mr. Otway ; but still, on the conditions that you mentioned, I am prepared to do so."

His relief was really pathetic. Its intensity made me understand what torments of terror he had been suffering. He flung out his hands as if he would have embraced me, but drew back, as I said, coldly :

"You are prepared on your side, Mr. Otway, to carry out your part? You agree to execute a deed of separation, as I asked?"

"If you insist," he replied. "It's a hard bargain, but if you hold me to it, I have no choice. Would not a short, informal separation do?"

"No, Mr. Otway," I replied firmly, "it would not. I am acting somewhat against my conscience in agreeing to suppress this fact, and I want full compensation for doing so. I must have a legally-valid deed of separation."

"Very well, Helen," said he ; "if it must be, it must. I hope that, later, you will take a kinder view of our relations, but meanwhile I will do exactly as you wish. I have drafted out a deed, in a simple form, with as little legal verbiage as possible. If its terms satisfy you, I will copy it out and sign it."

He handed me a sheet of paper on which the deed was drafted, and I read it through carefully. Like the other documents that he had drawn up, it was lucid, simple and concise, and set forth quite fairly the conditions to which he had agreed, with one exception. It determined automatically at the end of three months.

"I can't agree to that," I said. "There must be no specified time ; it is to be just a separation."

"But," he exclaimed, "you don't propose that the separation should last for ever, do you?"

That was precisely what I did propose, but I thought it politic not to express myself too definitely.

"It is impossible," I replied, "to say what may happen in the future; but if you make the separation determinable by mutual consent, that will provide for all eventualities."

He agreed, with a somewhat wry smile, that this was so, and then asked how soon I should like to have the deed executed.

"As it must be signed before I give my evidence," I replied, "it had better be done now. If you will make two copies, I will go and fetch the maids to witness the signatures."

"Dear me, Helen!" he exclaimed. "What an extraordinarily business-like young lady you are! But I suppose you are right; only I would suggest that you do not acquaint the witnesses with the nature of the document. We don't want to take the world into our confidence, especially just now."

This was reasonable enough, though it would obviously be impossible to keep the world in the dark as to our position, particularly after what I had said to Mr. Jackson. However, I agreed to maintain a discreet reticence, and when he had made the two copies—which I carefully read through—I went out and called Jessie and the cook.

"I want you," said I, "to witness my signature and Mr. Otway's to a couple of documents. You have just to see us sign our names and then sign your own underneath."

The two women came into the study with an air of mystery and awe, gazing furtively from me to Mr. Otway. The two documents lay on the table, each with a sheet of blotting paper spread over it, exposing only the blank spaces which were to receive the signatures, on each of which a red wafer seal had been stuck. Mr. Otway signed first, and then, indicating to the cook the place where she was to write her name, placed the pen in her hand.

"That's right," said he, when she had painfully and with protruded tongue, executed the signature of "Ivy Stokes." "Now you will do the same with the other paper as soon as Mrs. Otway has signed."

The cook gazed curiously at me as I signed the second document, and then, in the same strained and laborious fashion, traced the scrawling characters over the name that I had lightly pencilled in for her guidance. Having watched with feverish interest while I marked the next space, she drew back and made way for Jessie, who, by watching her colleague, had learned what was required of her.

When the formalities were completed and the two maids dismissed—to discuss these strange proceedings, doubtless, in the kitchen—Mr. Otway handed me the copy, bearing his signature, and, taking the other, rose to depart.

"Before I go, Helen," he said, "there is one matter to settle. In the document I thought it best to say nothing about an allowance——"

"You were quite right," I interrupted. "Of course, I should not ask for, or accept, any allowance under the circumstances."

"You won't need one at present," said he. "We know there are five thousand pounds lying to your father's credit at his bank——"

"That money was not his," I said, "and it is not mine. As soon as the will is proved it will be paid to you on behalf of your clients."

"But that is quite unnecessary, Helen," said he. "The use, for an unspecified time, of that sum of money was the consideration in respect of which you agreed to marry me. As the marriage has taken place, it is only fair and reasonable that you should receive the consideration. In effect, that five thousand is yours by the terms of our agreement."

I was on the point of replying that our agreement was null and void, and that I had no intention of carrying out its conditions; but prudence whispered that I had better keep my intentions to myself, at least as to my ultimate conduct. Besides which, Mr. Otway's statement was not entirely correct, as I proceeded to point out.

"The use of this money," I said, "was to relieve my father, who was assumed to be insolvent. But it appears that he was not insolvent; and it is my intention that all his debts shall be paid, in so far as there are funds to meet them. It is certainly what he would have wished."

"But," Mr. Otway protested, "supposing the payment

of these debts should consume all the available assets? How are you going to live?"

"I suppose I shall do as other women do when they have no independent means. I shall work for my living. But it is premature to discuss that until I have had Mr. Jackson's report. I don't suppose I shall be absolutely penniless."

He shook his head gloomily. "You are Quixotic, Helen, and wrong-headed, too. There is no reason why you should work for your living. As a married woman, you are entitled to maintenance, and I am willing, and even anxious, to maintain you. But I won't press the matter now. If you want money, you know that you can have it, not as a favour but as a right. And now there is just one other matter that I want to speak about. In the deed of separation I said nothing about our relations other than was actually necessary. I made no stipulation as to your keeping me informed of your whereabouts; but I ask you now, if you should be leaving Maidstone, to let me have your address and to allow me to keep up communication with you. It is a reasonable request, Helen, and I am sure you will not hesitate to accede to it."

I did hesitate, however, for some time. In truth, I was not at all willing to agree to this proposal. My wish was to sponge Mr. Otway, once and for all, out of my life and to make a fresh start. Still, the request was a reasonable one, and could, I suspected, have been enforced as a demand; and, in the end, though very reluctantly, I yielded.

"Thank you, Helen," said he, holding out his hand; "then I won't worry you any more just now. It is understood that I am not to lose sight of you, and that if you should want help, pecuniary or other, you will let me know. And I may rely on you to say no more at the inquest than is actually necessary?"

I gave him the required assurance on this point, and, having somewhat frigidly shaken his hand, accompanied him to the hall door and let him out.

As I stood in the open doorway, watching him walk away up the street in his heavy, elephantine fashion, a man entered at the gate, and, approaching with a defferential and rather uncomfortable air, took off his hat and offered me a small, blue envelope, which bore the superscription "Mrs.

Lewis Otway." I took it from him, and, closing the door, went back to the study, where I opened the envelope and extracted the little slip of blue paper that it enclosed; which turned out, as I had expected, to be the subpœna to the inquest. I glanced through the peremptory phrases of the summons, and, laying the slip of paper on the table, went up to my own room to be quiet and think upon all that lay before me.

But thought—orderly, useful thought—was impossible. Everything around me spoke of the life that had been so tragically broken off, rather than of the future that loomed so vague and empty before me. The open book on the reading-stand, the hastily scribbled notes upon the writing-block, the unanswered letters and a little pile of rough drawings on the table, all seemed to call to me to take up afresh the thread that had been dropped; seemed to interpose the unfinished past before the uncommenced future. Restlessly I wandered down to the workshop—where the coal scuttle still stood on the bench, a mute but eloquent memorial of that tragic final evening—only to gather a fresh sense of loss and desolation. And so, for the rest of the day, I haunted the house like some unquiet spirit, watched with pity, not unmixed with fear, by the awe-stricken servants, tearless and outwardly calm, but inwardly torn by grief and a sense of bereavement that seemed to intensify moment by moment.

And yet, when, in the silence of the night, the tears came at last, and my sorrow, no longer mute, voiced itself in sobs and moans of pain, still, under the feeling of utter bereavement and desolation, was a half-felt sense of peace, of respite, and reprieve.

Chapter IX

Testimony and Counsel

Those who are apt to refer in contemptuous terms to the artificiality of the plots of the novelist must have failed to observe the orderly way in which events arrange themselves in real life; how the circumstances of the vital and essential happenings of our lives may, if attentively considered, be separated out in a coherent group of causes and effects as

closely knit and inevitably connected as the parts of the story-teller's plot.

The reflection is suggested to me by the distressing experiences of the inquest on my father's death. Clearly enough, indeed, did I realise at the time that this would never have been but for those fateful words so calamitously overheard by me, and for my ill-considered, though well-meant, efforts to avert the apparently impending catastrophe. But I realised not at all—as, indeed, how should I ?—that this day of sorrow, of shame and humiliation, was not only the harvest of the irrevocable past but the seed-time of an even more momentous future.

As I approached the school-house in which the inquest was to be held, I observed Mr. Otway pacing slowly up and down the little court-yard. He was pale and haggard, and though he preserved his usual ponderously reposeful manner, it was not difficult to see that he was in a state of intense, nervous excitement and suppressed anxiety.

He was evidently waiting for me, and turned to meet me as I entered the gate.

" I thought we had better go in together, Helen," he said, as we exchanged a formal greeting. " They know that we are married, and, of course, they don't know that our—ah—our arrangements are in—ah—in suspense. And it would perhaps be as well if no reference were made to—ah—to those—ahem—temporary modifications which—ah—in short, to our provisional agreement."

He looked at me deprecatingly and I nodded. There would be quite enough painful detail to be dragged into the light of day without this sordid addition. Besides, any reference to the deed of separation would start enquiries which neither of us desired, as was plainly evident to Mr. Otway ; for he continued in a husky undertone, as we approached the schoolroom door :

" And you will fulfil your part of our covenant faithfully, Helen, I am sure."

" Most undoubtedly I shall," I replied. " But you will remember that our covenant does not include false evidence. I shall say as little as is possible, but if I am asked a direct question I must answer it, and answer it truthfully."

" Of course you must," he agreed : " but it is often

possible to ward off an inconvenient question which may lead to others still more inconvenient."

"You make take it," I said, "that I shall carry out my part of our bargain in the spirit as well as in the letter."

With this assurance he appeared to be satisfied, and we now moved slowly towards the door of the school-house. While we had been talking, a party of men—the coroner and his jury—had filed past us and entered; and when we followed a minute later, we found them already in their places and the proceedings about to begin. We seated ourselves on the two chairs placed for us, which were next to those of the two medical witnesses, and as I glanced round the Court, I observed Mr. Jackson sitting near the coroner, and by his side a gentleman whose face I seemed to recognise, but to whom I could not give a name. Some dim recollection connected the quiet, strong, intellectual face with my father and the happy past, but not until near the close of the inquiry was I able to bring my memory to a clear focus.

The attitude of the coroner and jury alike—they were all local men and most of them known to me—made my difficult task as easy as was possible. They were all anxious to spare me to the utmost and to make the best of what the coroner described as "a grievous and terrible calamity." Moreover, they restrained in the most delicate manner their evident curiosity as to the relations of Mr. Otway and myself. But, of course, the facts had to be given, and very distressing and humiliating it was to me to have to confess to what must have looked like a mere sordid intrigue with the uncouth creature at my side.

As the only person present when the death occurred, Mr. Otway was necessarily the first witness; and a very nervous, hesitating witness he was; and very fortunate was it for him that he had so sympathetic a court. As he stammered out his evidence I noted, again and again, the searching, grey eye of the strange gentleman fixed upon him, not indeed with any obvious distrust, but with the most concentrated attention.

"Do we understand," asked the coroner, "that Mr. Vardon was angry and excited when he arrived at your house?"

"Yes, furiously angry."

"Do you know why he was angry and excited?"

Yes, the witness did know. And as he proceeded to relate, in husky, uncertain tones, the circumstances of the secret marriage, more than one of the jurymen glanced from him to me with hardly-concealed astonishment; and I felt my face burning and my eyes filling with humiliation.

"Was there any reason for this secrecy?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. The deceased had already refused his consent to the marriage."

"But that is hardly a reason for secrecy in the case of an adult. Could he have prevented the marriage from taking place?"

"No. But it seemed better to—ah—to avoid discussion and unpleasantness."

The coroner looked dissatisfied. He considered a few moments, and then asked: "Do you know why the deceased objected to the marriage?"

"I think he considered that the—ah—the inequality of age was undesirable," Mr. Otway replied.

Still the coroner looked dissatisfied, and as he paused to reflect, and the jurymen looked at him expectantly, Mr. Otway furtively wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. Evidently, he was profoundly disturbed, as well he might be; for if this line of inquiry were pursued much farther, it must evitably lay bare the real nature of the transaction.

At length the coroner turned to the jury. "Well, gentlemen," said he, "I suppose the question is not very material. It is clear that the deceased was extremely excited and angry. The ultimate cause of his anger is, perhaps, not very relevant to the subject of our inquiry."

To this the foreman of the jury readily agreed, and I could almost see the sigh of relief with which Mr. Otway hailed the passing of this perilous incident—a relief in which I participated to no small extent.

The narrative was now resumed, and as it proceeded, Mr. Otway's voice became more and more husky and his speech more hesitating. He had a difficult course to steer, and his nerves were at their utmost tension. He had to tell a consistent story without telling the whole truth, and he had to bear in mind that my evidence was yet to be given.

It was a position that might have shattered the nerve of a much bolder man than Mr. Otway.

"You tell us that the deceased was violent and threatening in his manner. Do you mean that he was physically violent?"

"Yes—at least he threatened to use physical violence."

"He did not actually assault you?"

"Not actually. The blow that he aimed—at least that he was about to aim—ah—did not—er—did not take effect."

The coroner's brows puckered into a puzzled frown. "This is not quite clear," said he. "Did he or did he not aim a blow at you?"

"He did—at least, that is to say, he appeared——" —here Mr. Otway mopped his streaming forehead—"well, I think he actually raised his—ah—his—ah—his clenched fist——"

"Did you have to restrain him?"

"No," replied Mr. Otway, with rather unnecessary emphasis. "No, I did not. I stepped back, and—ah—the incident—ah—passed. In fact, it was at this moment that the fatal attack occurred."

"Tell us exactly what happened then."

"He suddenly turned very pale," said Mr. Otway, speaking now with more fluency as he got back to the narration of the actual events, "and seemed to stand unsteadily. Then he staggered backwards and fell, striking his head on the corner of the mantelpiece."

"Did he appear to have fainted before he struck his head?"

"I should say, yes, but—ah—I would not—ah—I was very agitated and alarmed—and—ah——"

"Naturally. But you would say that the fainting attack preceded the blow on the head."

"There was no blow," Mr. Otway exclaimed quickly; and then, perceiving his mistake, he added, hastily, "that is to say, you are referring to his striking the corner of the mantelpiece?"

"That is what you were telling us about."

"Yes. I should say that he struck—or rather that he fainted and staggered and that he struck his head in falling."

Once more the coroner paused and seemed to reflect; and

in the intense silence and stillness that enveloped the court, my eye travelled from the huge, ungainly figure of the witness to the face of the tall stranger by Mr. Jackson's side. And a very striking face it was: a handsome, symmetrical face, but strangely—almost unhumanly—reposeful and impassive. Yet, though it was as immobile as a mask of stone, it conveyed an impression of intense attention—almost of watchfulness; and the clear, grey eyes never moved from the face of the witness. To me there was something a little uncanny and disturbing in that immovable mask and that steady, unrelaxing gaze. I found myself hoping that those searching grey eyes would not be fixed on me in that relentless observation when my turn came to give my evidence. And even as this thought flitted through my mind, I remembered who this stranger was. He was a Dr. Thorndyke, an old, though not very intimate, friend of my father's, a famous criminal lawyer and a great authority on medical jurisprudence. I had met him only once, when he had dined, many years ago, at our house; but I had often heard my father speak of him in terms of the highest admiration.

When the coroner resumed his interrogation, it seemed that the crisis was past, so far as Mr. Otway was concerned, for his first question was: "What did you do when the deceased fell down?"

"For a moment or two," was the reply, "I was too bewildered to do anything. Then his daughter—my wife—came into the room, and, as he appeared to be dying or dead, I went off to fetch a doctor."

This virtually concluded his evidence, and the next name called was my own, which, in its new form—Helen Otway—I heard with a start of surprise and something like disgust. As I rose to approach the table, I caught an instantaneous glance—a terrified, imploring glance—from Mr. Otway; and as my eye lighted immediately afterwards on Dr. Thorndyke's face, I felt that this momentary look, too, had been noted by that inexorably attentive grey eye. But I was relieved to observe that he did not look at me, but, as I gave my evidence, fixed a steady, introspective gaze upon a spot upon the opposite wall.

My task turned out to be easier than I had hoped, though perhaps it might have been less easy if I had had more time

to reflect on the significance of the questions. The coroner began by expressing the sympathy of the court with my bereavement and apologizing for imposing on me the painful duty of attending the inquiry. Then he asked: "You have heard the evidence of Mr. Otway with reference to your marriage and your father's attitude in regard to it. Do you confirm what he has said?"

"I do," I replied.

"You were not present at the interview of Mr. Otway with the deceased?"

"No, I was not. When I entered the room my father was lying on the floor and appeared to be already dead."

"Had you seen your father since the solemnization of the marriage?"

"I saw him from the window as he entered Mr. Otway's garden."

"Did you notice anything unusual in his appearance?"

"Yes; his appearance alarmed me very much. He seemed excessively excited, and his face was deeply flushed and of a strange, purplish colour."

"Had you any special reason to be alarmed?"

"Yes. I knew that his doctor had warned him to avoid all excitement and exertion on account of the weak state of his heart."

"You did not hear what passed between your father and Mr. Otway?"

"I heard my father ask where I was, and I heard Mr. Otway tell him that the marriage had taken place."

"Did you hear anything more?"

"My father then called Mr. Otway a scoundrel, and was still speaking loudly and angrily when the study door closed and I heard no more."

"What made you go to the study?"

"I heard and felt the shock when my father fell."

"Would you mind telling us again in what condition you found your father?"

"He appeared to be dead. His face was at first a livid grey, but it faded to marble whiteness as I looked at him. There was a small wound on the right side of his forehead and a drop of blood had run down on to his cheek and on his temple."

The coroner glanced at the jurymen. "I think, gentle-

men," he said, "that is all we need ask Mrs. Otway?" And when the foreman had acquiesced, and he had thanked me for "the very clear and lucid manner" in which I had given my evidence, I was permitted to resume my seat.

"I can never thank you enough, Helen," whispered Mr. Otway, as I sat down. "You managed admirably—admirably."

To this I made no reply; for now that the ordeal was over I began to be assailed by certain doubts as to whether I had been quite candid. I had told all that was really material to the inquiry; but—however, at this point Dr. Sharpe approached the table and picked up the Testament.

His evidence practically settled the verdict. He testified that my father had suffered for some years from a dilated heart and arterial degeneration. "I warned him frequently to avoid excitement and undue exertion, for he was inclined to be careless and take liberties with himself."

"You considered his state of health precarious?"

"I thought he might fall down dead at any moment."

"You have heard the evidence of the two previous witnesses. Does that evidence contain any suggestion to you as to the cause of death?"

"It suggests to me that the deceased hurried to Mr. Otway's house in a towering rage, and that, during the interview, he worked himself up into a fury. I should say that the combined exertion and excitement brought on a fatal attack of syncope."

"You think that death was caused by heart failure?"

"I have no doubt of it."

Dr. Bury's evidence was much to the same effect, though less positive.

"The deceased had apparently been dead about half an hour when I arrived. The cause of death was not obvious, but the appearances were consistent with the account given by Mr. Otway. There was a small, contused wound at the junction of the forehead and right temple, apparently caused by the violent impact of some hard and blunt body. Judging by the small amount of bleeding, the wound had been sustained immediately before death. A single drop of blood had trickled down on to the cheek, and one or two drops on to the temple."

"You have heard Mr. Otway's account of the way in

which that wound was occasioned. Do you consider that the appearances are in agreement with that account?"

"There is no disagreement. The appearance of the wound was consistent with its production in the manner described."

"Would you say that it was probably so produced?"

"That," replied Dr. Bury, "is a question for the jury. It might have been. I can't go beyond the appearances."

"No, of course you can't. And is that all that you have to tell us?"

"That is all," was the reply; and this virtually brought the inquiry to an end. After a brief summing-up by the coroner, the jury held an equally brief consultation and then unanimously returned a verdict of "Death from natural causes."

On the announcement of the verdict everyone rose, including myself and Mr. Otway, and the latter, turning to me, said in a low voice:

"I think I won't wait. I want to get home and be quiet; but I shall call on you to-morrow, if I may, to make—ah—any—ah—arrangements that—ah—in fact, to speak to you about the—ah—the funeral."

"Very well," I said, reluctantly—for, deeply as I loathed him, I could not exclude him even from that sacred ceremony without creating an open scandal. "You had better come early in the forenoon"; and with this I dismissed him with a stiff bow, and made my way to where Mr. Jackson and Dr. Thorndyke were standing. As I held out my hand to the latter and recalled to him our meeting years ago, Mr. Jackson said: "Dr. Thorndyke happened to be in Maidstone to-day and to call at our office, so I prevailed on him to come here and watch the proceedings on our behalf in case any complications should arise. But everything has gone off quite smoothly."

"Very smoothly indeed," Dr. Thorndyke agreed, with, as it seemed to me, a certain degree of emphasis.

"Both the coroner and the jury were most considerate," pursued Mr. Jackson.

"Most considerate," assented Dr. Thorndyke; and again I seemed to detect a note of emphasis, as also, I think, did Mr. Jackson, for he glanced quickly at our companion, though he made no remark.

"I wonder," said I, "if you two gentlemen would care to come and take a cup of tea with me?"

Mr. Jackson had an engagement at the office, and as Dr. Thorndyke appeared to hesitate, I added quickly: "I should be very glad if you could, though I don't wish to take up your time if you are busy."

"My time is my own for the next three hours," said Dr. Thorndyke, "and if I should really not be an inopportune visitor, I should like very much to have tea with you."

"Let us go, then," said I. "Mr. Jackson will accompany us as far as Gabriel's Hill, won't you?" And as my old friend assented with a prim, little bow, we set forth.

"I have offered no condolences, Mrs. Otway," said Dr. Thorndyke. "I knew your father, I saw you and him together, and I realize what this loss must mean to you. There is nothing to say except that you have my most real sympathy."

"Thank you," I said, and for a time we walked on in silence. And as we walked I found myself recalling, with a strong, speculative interest, that curious, subtle emphasis which Dr. Thorndyke had conveyed into his agreement with Mr. Jackson. At length, when we had dropped the latter near the Town Hall, I summoned up courage to raise the question.

"I have an impression, Dr. Thorndyke, which may be quite a mistaken one, that you were not completely satisfied with the way in which the inquest was conducted. Am I mistaken?"

"Well," he replied, slowly, "the coroner's methods were not what one would call rigorous."

"I suppose they were not. But in what respect are you disposed to find fault with them?"

"Principally," he replied, "in his failure to elicit a really conclusive verdict. The verdict of the jury was based upon Dr. Sharpe's opinion as to the cause of death. That opinion was probably correct, but it was based upon reasoning which was not sound. His position was this: If certain circumstances—excitement or exertion—should arise, there would be a great probability of their causing sudden death. But those circumstances had actually arisen and sudden death had actually followed. Therefore the death was due to the factors of the said circumstances. But

this conclusion is fallacious. It does not prove a fact: it merely indicates a probability."

"But are not all verdicts statements of probability?"

"Too often they are. But it is a coroner's business to bring the conclusions of his court, as far as possible, into the region of ascertained fact. The immediate cause of death can usually be demonstrated by scientific methods, and the inquiry can then be built up on a foundation of certainty. Opinion should never be accepted where knowledge is obtainable."

"Do you think, then, that the verdict was not a proper one?"

"I am not criticizing the verdict," he replied, "but the methods by which it was arrived at. I think that the cause of death should have been established beyond all doubt before any contributary circumstances were inquired into."

"But otherwise; apart from that one point?"

"I thought the examination of the witnesses rather easy-going. No doubt it elicited all the relevant facts. But that is impossible to decide on. One cannot judge of the relevancy of a fact until one has got the fact. I think, for instance, that most counsel would have pressed your husband a good deal more closely. The coroner appeared to decide that the matter was not relevant without being quite clear as to what matter he was dealing with."

This, I must confess, had been my own impression, but I had been so relieved at the easy manner in which the difficult passages had been allowed to pass that I had been little disposed to criticise the considerate and sympathetic coroner. Nor did it seem quite safe to pursue the present discussion much farther, for it was tending in a rather dangerous direction. My own reservations began to weigh on me somewhat—and Dr. Thorndyke was not quite the same type of listener as the coroner. Nevertheless, the conversation pleased me, though I could not but be struck by the oddity of this detached discussion of a matter which was of such vital moment to me. But that very oddity was itself an element of gratification; for a woman is naturally flattered when an intellectual man appears to credit her with the power of impartial judgment of her own conduct and affairs—that faculty not being one by which our sex is peculiarly distinguished.

But at this point, our discussion was brought naturally to an end by our arrival at my house—as I must now call it; and here a quick glance of surprised recognition on my companion's part gave me a new note of warning and prepared me for the inevitable question.

"You are living at your father's house, I see."

"*I* am, for the present. Mr. Otway remains in his own house."

"Yes. I suppose it will be more convenient to settle everything up here before joining your husband."

I was on the point of temporising by a vague assent; but my lips refused to frame the implied falsehood. It may have been my natural dislike of secrecy and concealment, it may be that my womanly pride resented the very idea of association with that unwieldy human spider. At any rate, an irresistible impulse drove me to say:

"I am not going to join my husband at all, Dr. Thorndyke. I am not going to live with Mr. Otway."

I did not look at Dr. Thorndyke as I made this statement, and he made no comment beyond a matter-of-fact "Indeed." But I had the feeling that, in the silence that followed, he was fitting this new fact into its place in some ordered scheme; that he was docketting it as an appendix to Mr. Otway's evidence.

Nothing more was said until we had entered the house and I had given instructions for tea to be brought to the study. But in that interval I was aware of a growing impulse to have done with this miserable secrecy—this sordid fencing and dodging, which must come, in the end, to downright lying—and tell this strong, wise man the whole wretched story. Besides, I wanted counsel and guidance: and who was so fit to give them as he?

Accordingly, when the tray had been laid on the study table, I re-opened the subject.

"I did not mention this matter in my evidence," I said. "It had no bearing on the inquiry."

"I am not clear," he replied, "that you were entitled to make any reservations. A witness's duty is to state the whole truth. The question of relevancy is for the court to consider."

"But unfortunately there were other reservations that had to be made. Dr. Thorndyke, I want to tell you the

whole story—in confidence—and to ask your advice."

"I counsel you to make no confidences," he said, gravely, "unless you really wish to consult me in my professional capacity."

"That is what I wish to do," I said.

"Very well," said he. "That places us in the secure relation of lawyer and client; and I need not say that your father's daughter is very welcome to any help or advice that I can give."

With this encouragement, I poured forth the story that I have told in these pages and in almost as much detail. But still I held back one fact. I said nothing of my having found Mr. Otway grasping my father's loaded stick. That single reservation had to be. Not only was I bound by a solemn promise; my silence on that point was the price of my release. The letter of the covenant, indeed, had reference only to my evidence at the inquest; but its spirit sealed my lips even in this my most intimate confidence.

And so, once again, a secret guarded from a friendly eye remained, like a seed dropped in a summer's drought, to germinate and bring forth its fruit in its season.

Chapter X

The Turning of the Page

DR. THORNDYKE listened to my recital of the history of the tragedy, not only with patience, but with close attention and apparently keen interest, interrupting me only at rare intervals to ask a question or elucidate some point that was not quite clear. When I had come to an end I was disposed to be apologetic, for I had told the story in the fullest detail, with only the single reservation that I have noted.

"I am afraid," I said, "that I have been rather victimizing you and trespassing on your very great patience."

"By no means," he replied. "Men and men's actions and motives are my merchandise. If I could listen to a story like yours without the deepest interest I should not be in my present profession. But, now that I have heard

it, I think I can guess the subject on which you wish to consult me. You would like to annul your marriage with Mr. Otway."

"Yes; if it is possible."

"It is very natural that you should wish to recover your freedom. I sympathize with you entirely, and I wish I could give you some encouragement. But I fear that you have no remedy."

"It seems rather hard," I said, "that I should be bound for life to this man whom I detest and who has done me such grievous injuries."

"It is very hard," he agreed, "and, humanly speaking, there ought to be some remedy. But the law provides none; nor is it really possible for the law to make provision for every imaginable contingency. Yours is a very exceptional case."

"Yes, I see that; but it seems unreasonable to compel two people to maintain a relationship which is not only unsuitable but quite unreal."

"It does," he admitted. "But the law takes a very unsentimental view of these matters. It regards marriage as an institution concerned with the establishment of families and the orderly devolution of property, and its interference is, in the main, limited to circumstances connected with that assumed function. Of the human aspects of marriage it takes little account. In a purely legal sense—which is what we are considering—your position is this: You were competent to contract a marriage and you did contract one, of your own free will, without any compulsion or misrepresentation that the law would recognise. The circumstances that appeared to exist before the marriage still appear to exist. No new facts have come to light which would affect the competence of either party. It is a case in which one of the parties has disregarded the old legal maxim, *Caveat emptor*—buyer beware! You bought, at a high price, something which turns out to be of no value. You agreed to marry Mr. Otway for a consideration—the release of your father from his embarrassments—which seemed to be valuable enough to justify the great sacrifice that you contemplated. But it turned out that your father needed no release; and the consideration thereupon ceased to have any value. As far

as the law is concerned, you have simply made a very bad bargain."

"Does the law attach no importance to fraud?" I demanded.

"But has there been fraud?" he objected. "No representations, true or false, were made to you by Mr. Otway. You acted on knowledge which you assumed that you possessed. You laid down the conditions; he accepted them. You demanded a certain consideration; he furnished the consideration demanded. Even with regard to the letter from your father, we may—and do—suspect that he knew that it was in the box, and probably guessed at its contents. But we have no proof. Moreover, if he did know that it was there—even if he had opened it and read it, he was under no obligation to communicate its contents to you. Your agreement made no such provision. It laid down specific conditions, and with these Mr. Otway had fully complied. On the plea of fraud, I am afraid you would have no case."

"Apparently not," I agreed. "You are most horribly convincing, Dr. Thorndyke."

"I am putting the case as a lawyer, and very much against my own feeling as a man. But my present office is rather like that of a Devil's Advocate in a theological council. I think that this marriage ought to be annulled, but I am sure that, in point of law, it is not voidable.

"But there is yet another aspect of the case, and you must forgive me if I put it rather bluntly. There are not many women to whom I should have spoken in as downright a fashion as I have to you, and I shall continue to pay you this rather unpleasant compliment. Mrs. Otway, even if, legally speaking, you had a case, you could not take it into court."

"Why not?" I asked, more than a little startled.

"Because of the incidents of the inquest. You have spoken of certain reservations in your evidence. But in the case of Mr. Otway there was more than reservation. There was deliberate mis-statement, and that, too, in respect of a question that was highly material to the inquiry. He was asked the reason of your father's resentment of this marriage, and he stated it to be the disparity of age. But that was not the reason, and he knew it was not. Your

father would have raised no obstacle if you had really wished to marry Mr. Otway. He resented the marriage because it had been brought about by means which he regarded as—morally speaking—fraudulent. Mr. Otway's evidence was false evidence, and it was deliberately given with the intention of misleading the jury."

"But it was a small point and of no importance. Besides, Mr. Otway's evidence is no concern of mine."

"Pardon me," Dr. Thorndyke objected, gravely, "the point was of very great importance. It would have started a train of entirely new issues. And Mr. Otway's evidence is very much your concern. You heard it given, you were asked if you confirmed it, and you did confirm it. Thereupon, Mr. Otway's evidence became your evidence.

"Now, if you were to embark on a suit for the annulment of your marriage, the plea of fraud, on which you would base your claim, would have to be supported by evidence which would conflict with that given by you at the inquest. Your position would be a very uncomfortable one, and it would be made more so by the fact that your evidence was in agreement with Mr. Otway's. When two witnesses agree in a departure from the actual facts known to them, a suspicion of collusion is apt to be raised; and collusion again suggests purpose and motive. I am afraid, Mrs. Otway, that the Devil's Advocate is making out a diabolically complete case. But that, you know, is his business. The conclusion is that a malignant fate has woven around you a mesh of circumstances from which there is no escape, and that the less you struggle the less irksome will be your bonds."

To this conclusion, unsatisfactory as it was, I assented with a readiness born not only of conviction but of a certain amount of alarm. I had heard my father speak with admiration of Dr. Thorndyke's amazing power of analysing evidence and extracting its essentials, and I now began to wonder how much of the actual truth he had extracted from the evidence at the inquest, elucidated by my narrative. His warning as to a possible suspicion of collusion with "a purpose and a motive" in the background, set me speculating as to whether he, himself, entertained such a suspicion; and his next question was by no means reassuring on this point.

"You spoke," said he, "of having decided not to live with Mr. Otway, and of having communicated your intention to him. Do I understand that he assents to a separation?"

"Yes. He sees that the position would be quite impossible."

"Is your arrangement with him merely a verbal one or has it been placed on a regular footing by a document of some kind?"

"Mr. Otway has executed a deed of separation, which I think is quite regular. But I had better let you see it."

With some trepidation, I produced the deed and nervously watched him as he read it through, which he did with an inscrutable expression, and—as it seemed to me—a horrible appearance of seeing through it to the rather questionable circumstances that had brought it into existence.

"Yes," he said, as he handed it back to me; "it is quite regular. You may congratulate yourself on finding Mr. Otway so compliant. It is more than one would have expected of him."

"He could hardly have done otherwise," I answered hastily. "We couldn't possibly have lived together after what had happened. Still, I am glad he took the reasonable view. It leaves me free to make my own arrangements for my future."

"And what arrangements do you propose—if your legal adviser is not too inquisitive."

"Not at all. I was going to ask you to advise me. I don't think there will be enough to support me, and, of course, I can't accept any help from Mr. Otway. I shall have to earn my living in some way."

"You could compel Mr. Otway to support you, but I appreciate your unwillingness to accept an allowance and thereby recognise the relationship. Have you any means of livelihood in your mind?"

I hesitated a little shyly. For I had; but my plan might sound rather an odd one, at least to a stranger.

"I thought," said I, at length, "of trying to get a living by doing what I have been accustomed to do as a hobby—by making simple jewellery and small, ornamental metal objects. I am afraid you will look on it as rather a wild scheme."

"No," he answered. "It is an unconventional scheme,

but not in any way a wild one. I think we often appreciate insufficiently the wisdom of the artist's choice of his profession. In choosing a means of livelihood we are choosing the way in which we shall spend the greater part of our lives. We have something to sell—the bulk of our waking lives; and we are apt to think too much of its selling price—its value to the purchaser—and not enough of its value to ourselves. A man, such as a navvy, a miner, a bank-clerk or a factory hand, barters for the means of subsistence so many hours a day spent in doing something that he does not want to do. He sells the best part of his life. But the artist or craftsman makes a much better bargain, for he contrives to obtain a subsistence by doing what he enjoys doing and what he would elect to do for his own satisfaction. He sells only the by-products of his life; the whole of that life he retains for his own use, to be spent as he would, in any case, wish to spend it. But there is an inevitable proviso; his acceptable occupation must really yield a subsistence. His wares must be of value to the purchaser, and he must be able to find a market. Do you think you could satisfy those conditions?"

"I think I could make the things pretty well, but, as to selling them, that is a different matter. I have to find that out. May I show you some of my work?"

"I should like very much to see some of it," he replied.

"I will fetch a few pieces. And meanwhile, that clock on the mantelpiece is partly my work. My father made the clock, itself; but I made the dial, the hands and the case."

Dr. Thorndyke rose, and, stepping over to the mantelpiece, looked at the work with keen interest. It was a little bracket-clock with a bronze dial, a silver circle for the figures, silver-gilt hands and a simple wooden case decorated with gesso. Leaving my visitor to inspect it, I went away and collected a few samples of my work in metal; a bronze candlestick, an enamelled silver belt-buckle, a gold pendant set with opals, and one or two silver spoons; all of which Dr. Thorndyke examined with that friendly interest—unmistakeable to the artist or craftsman—that evinces some knowledge of and liking for the thing examined.

"Well," he said, as he laid down the last of the spoons, "these things answer the first question. They are quite workmanlike, and they are attractive and tastefully

designed. The next question is the economic one. Could you sell them? and if so, would they realize a price that would furnish a reasonable livelihood? You would have to compete with commercial products made in large numbers by cheap processes. Your hammered, embossed and chased work would compete with work stamped from steel dies or with comparatively rough castings. Of course, your work is infinitely better value; but this is a commercial age, and buyers are bad judges. And then you would have to sell to dealers who would demand not less than fifty per cent. profit, which, I am afraid, would leave you a pitiable, small return for your labour and skill."

"Yes," I agreed. "That is all quite true. But still, I think I will try. The work would be interesting and pleasant, and, as you implied just now, an artist cannot expect to be paid as much for doing what he likes doing as another man receives for doing what he dislikes. Pleasant work is, to some extent at least, its own reward; and if my work doesn't yield enough to live on, I shall have to try something else. But I don't suppose I shall be absolutely without means when my father's estate has been wound up."

"Do you think of continuing to live here?" Dr. Thorndyke asked.

"No. As soon as everything is settled, I propose to go to London. It will be much easier—or, at least, less difficult—to dispose of my work there."

"Undoubtedly. And have you any definite arrangements in your mind—where and how you are going to live, for instance?"

"None whatever, at present."

"I ask because I happen to know of a place where you could put up, at least temporarily; where you would be comfortably lodged, well fed and cared for, and where you could pursue your labours under good working conditions and at small expense. There is only one drawback, but you may consider that a fatal one. It is in the immediate neighbourhood of Ratcliff Highway—or, as it has been renamed, St. George's Street."

"Is that a very dreadful place?"

"It is far from being an aristocratic locality. But let me describe the establishment. It is conducted by a Miss

Polton, who is the sister of my laboratory assistant—a most expert and talented mechanician. Miss Polton was at one time a nurse; but when her brother entered my employment, he was able to help her to set up in Wellclose Square, Ratcliff, a boarding-house for mercantile marine officers. At the same time, she, being like her brother, a highly-capable, ingenious person, got herself a hand-loom and took up weaving as a hobby. But since then times have changed. Sailing ships have to a great extent disappeared, and Miss Polton's clients with them, while the hobby of making excellent cloth has turned out quite a profitable one. So Miss Polton plies her shuttle industriously, and, in the place of the merchant seamen, has collected a little family of women who also work at handicrafts for their living. I believe they form quite a happy little community, and, of course, they are able to assist one another in disposing of their wares. So that is the position. I know that Miss Polton has room for another boarder, for it is quite a large house—Wellclose Square was once the abode of well-to-do shipowners and retired sea-captains—and I am sure she would welcome another novice to her community. The drawback, as I have said, is the neighbourhood, which is—to put it bluntly—just a trifle squalid."

"I don't see that the neighbourhood matters," said I; "and in every other respect it sounds like the very thing I want."

"I think you would be quite well-advised to give it a trial. You would be among friends and fellow-workers, and, if you found that the neighbourhood was too much for you, you would be in London and could seek a new residence at your leisure. I will write the address on one of my cards, and if on reflection you decide to give Ratcliff a trial, you can write to Miss Polton and me at the same time."

He wrote the address, and, handing me the card, stood up and glanced at his watch.

"How long will it take me to walk to the station?" he asked.

"Less than twenty minutes."

"I have half an hour, so I can walk easily. Good-bye, Mrs. Otway. I wish I could have given you a better account of your position. But I can only advise you to make the best of a bad bargain and keep your own counsel."

"You have been most kind, Dr. Thorndyke," I said, earnestly, "in giving me so much time and patient attention. I don't know how I can thank you."

"I will tell you," said he. "By keeping a good heart and letting me know how your affairs progress."

He shook my hand heartily, and, when I had let him out, strode down the garden path, the very personification of manly dignity, alertness and vigour. At the gate he turned to raise his hat, with a smile of friendly farewell; and I closed the door and turned back into the house, feeling, for the first time since my father's death, that I was not alone in the world, but that, if the need should arise, the strength of this strong, commanding man was at my call.

The short remainder of my life at Maidstone I shall pass over briefly. It comes back to me in scenes like those of a play, separate but related. I see the interior of the parish church, noble, spacious, cathedral-like; I hear the voice of the clergyman reciting reverently those flowers of ancient poetry rendered into perfect English speech that usher the departed into the realms of silence with so gracious a dignity; I see the flower-strewn coffin sink into the grave wherein sleeps my unremembered mother, while the russet-sailed barges glide past the churchyard on the placid river below towards the mills at Tovil. And so farewell for ever to the best of fathers and the kindest, most lovable of friends.

These closing weeks, in which I wound up my old life and made ready for the new, were full of bustle and unrest. I had written to Miss Polton and Dr. Thorndyke, and from the former had received a kindly letter assuring me of the warmest welcome: and now I was busily collecting my tools and workshop appliances and packing them into travelling boxes to be dispatched with my heavier luggage. There was the furniture to be stored or set aside for sale, the servants to be placed in new situations, and various business to be transacted with Mr. Jackson, who, indeed, relieved me of all that lay within his powers.

Then there was Mr. Otway, from whom I received an abject letter and with whom I must needs have a rather distressing interview. He was really horrified at my proposed mode of life (I suspect he had never done a stroke of manual work in his life), and even more so at my proposed

place of residence ; and was, I believe, sincerely distressed at my firm refusal to permit him to make me an allowance. Indeed, the devotion which he professed for me, little as I wanted it, seemed to be as real as was possible in the case of a man so self-centred and so callously egoistic. But the very sight of him hardened my heart and lighted up afresh my indignation at the havoc that he had wrought in my life. What I had agreed to do, I did ; but I made no hair's breadth of concession. I gave him my future address, and agreed to his addressing letters there ; but I refused resolutely to receive any visits from him, or even to enter into any correspondence other than that which circumstances might render necessary.

And now the last day has come ; the day of final parting. I see myself wandering through the empty house, stripped of all but the barest necessaries and filled with new and strange echoes ; the van drawn up at the gate to take away the last of the furniture, and the tearful Jessie carrying my two little portmanteaux down the path to the porter's barrow. I see her return, wiping her eyes and gazing at me in dumb appeal, and, with a sudden impulse of tenderness, I kiss her and stroke her hair ; whereupon she bursts into tears and throws herself sobbing on to my breast.

It was hard to close the old life, which had been so sweet and peaceful, so full and satisfying ; to bid farewell to the beautiful old town which was the only place I had known and which I had loved so well. As I took my way through the streets, attaché-case in hand, all my old friends seemed to look on me reproachfully and call on me to stay. The quaint plaster-fronted house in Week Street, the venerable medieval pile at the corner of Gabriel's Hill, the grinning masks on the corbels of the old house-fronts of Middle Row ; all the old familiar landmarks, had suddenly grown dear and precious, and each exacted its twinge of regret as I looked my last on it. On the bridge I halted to survey the upper river, with the church and the Old Palace, both embowered in trees and brooding over the quiet water. Often as I had looked upon that view, it had never seemed to me so pleasant and desirable as now. And with this last impression—to be recalled how often in the troubled future ! —I turned away and headed resolutely for the station.

Chapter XI — A Harbour of Refuge

It was the cabman who first made it clear to me that my town address was somewhat out of the common. He had stowed my two portmanteaux on the roof (it was a four-wheeled cab), and, descending to hold the door open for me to enter, shut it after me with a bang and waited while I stated my destination.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," he said, incredulously; "did you say Wellclose Square?"

"Yes. Number sixty-nine."

Again he regarded me with wrinkled brows. "That won't be Wellclose Square down by the Docks?" he suggested.

"I don't know if it's near the Docks," I replied, "but it isn't far from Ratcliff Highway."

"That's the place, sure enough," said he. "Number sixty-nine. Well, I'm jiggered." With this he turned and slowly climbed to the box, looking in at me through the front window as he mounted; and even when he had taken his seat and gathered up the reins, he took yet another confirmatory glance over his shoulder before starting.

These mysterious proceedings occasioned me some surprise, not entirely unmixed with anxiety. Dr. Thorndyke had admitted that the neighbourhood was squalid, and the question arose, How squalid was it? The first part of the journey, through Eastcheap and Great Tower Street, was rather reassuring; and as we crossed Tower Hill and the grey pile of ancient buildings loomed up above the trees, I was quite pleasantly impressed. But then came a change for the worse. Long streets of characterless houses, all of a dingy, grey colour—the colour of all-pervading dirt—and growing greyer and dingier as we proceeded; populated by men and women, and especially children, of the same cobwebby tint, with something foreign and unfamiliar in their aspect and manners—a deficiency of artificial head-covering with a remarkable profusion of the natural, and a

tendency to sit about on doorsteps; these, with a general outbreak on the shop signs of Wowskys, Minskys, Steins and Popoffs, were the features of the neighbourhood that chiefly attracted my attention as the cab rattled eastward. But there was not much time for extended observation, for I had barely noted these appearances when we turned into a short side-street and emerged into a square, the dingyness of which was somewhat relieved by a group of faded trees in the central enclosure.

Round the square the cab trundled slowly until it drew up opposite a tall house of the Georgian type, with white window frames and a green door. As the cab stopped, the green door opened and a small elderly lady came forth, while three younger women lurked in the background. Escaping from the cab, I advanced to meet the elderly lady, who received me with a singularly pleasant smile and a few quietly-spoken words of welcome; a proceeding that was observed with furtive interest by the cabman as he transferred my portmanteaux from the cab-roof to the pavement and thence to the hall; nor did his curious observation of me cease until it was brought to an end by actual invisibility, for, as the cab moved out of the square, I saw his face still turned towards me over the roof, with the same expression of puzzled surprise.

"You would like to see your room, I expect," said the elderly lady whom I had correctly assumed to be Miss Polton; "then we will have tea and talk over your arrangements." She moved towards the stairs (up which I had just seen one of the young women hopping with surprising agility, with one of my portmanteaux in either hand), and conducted me to a room on the second floor, where the portmanteaux had been duly deposited, though the bearer had vanished.

"It's rather bare," said Miss Polton, "but you can have some pictures and ornaments if you like. My young ladies usually prefer to have their own things and arrange them in their own way. Your workroom is downstairs. I consulted my brother about it, and he said he thought you would like a room with a stone floor if you were going to do hammered work and use a furnace. So, as I had one with quite a good light, I have kept it for you—that is, of course, if you like it."

"I expect I shall," I replied. "A wooden floor is dreadfully noisy when one is hammering on a stake, and not very safe when there are red-hot crucibles about."

"Yes," she agreed, "and you can have a mat for your feet when you are sitting at the bench. And now I will leave you and go and see about the tea."

Left to myself, I looked around at my new home. The room, though spacious, was undeniably bare, but yet it gave me an impression of comfort. For its bareness was due merely to the absence of superfluities. The empty walls, distempered a pale cream colour, were severe to baldness; but how much better than the usual boarding-house walls, covered with staring flowered paper and disfigured with horrible prints or illuminated texts! They, like the empty book-shelves, were ready to receive the personal touches and to become friendly and sympathetic. Of actual necessaries there were more than in many an over-furnished room; a small wardrobe, a good-sized, firm table, a chest of drawers with a looking-glass on it, a small writing chair, a comfortable folding arm-chair, a washing-stand and a sponge bath, besides the book-shelves aforesaid, and a daintily-furnished bed, gave me a foundation of material comfort and convenience on which it would be easy to build and make additions. As I concluded my survey and refreshed myself with a wash, I decided that, whatever the surroundings of the house might be like, its interior seemed to have the makings of a home.

Nor was I less favourably impressed when I went downstairs. The dining-room, in which I found the ladies assembled, was pervaded by an air of spotless cleanliness with a severity approaching bareness. The absence of superfluous furniture and useless ornaments and bric-a-brac struck me, indeed, as rather odd in a household composed—so far as I knew—entirely of women.

"I must introduce you to the family," said Miss Polton, with a pleasant wrinkly smile, "at least those who are at home. There are three more who will come in to dinner. This is Miss Blake, and these ladies are Miss Barnard and Miss Finch."

I shook hands with my new comrades—the last being the little lady who had skipped up the stairs so actively with my luggage—and then we sat down to the table, at the

head of which Miss Polton presided, and made the tea in a delightful Delft teapot from a brass kettle on which I cast an expert and somewhat disapproving eye, for it was of a blatantly commercial type and quite unworthy of the teapot.

At first, conversation was spasmodic and punctuated by considerable pauses. Miss Polton was evidently a silent, self-contained woman, though genial in a quiet, restful way. Miss Finch, too, who sat by me, was quiet and a little shy, speaking rarely but silently plying me with food. Miss Blake, on the other hand, had a restless manner, and, though she spoke little at first, was undisguisedly interested in me, for whenever I looked at her I caught her wide-open, blue eyes fixed on me with an intensity that was almost embarrassing. She was a rather remarkable-looking girl, with a wealth of red-gold hair, a white and pink complexion, and a profile which, with its sharp, projecting chin and retroussé nose, might have been taken direct from one of Burne-Jones's allegories; indeed, my first glance at her had made me think of the "Briar Rose" and the "Golden Stairs." And now, as I caught her intense gaze again and again, I had the feeling that she was wanting to say something to me; and the more so since I thought I detected a certain expectancy in the expression of her neighbour, Miss Barnard. Nor was I mistaken; for, after one of the periodic pauses in the conversation, she leaned over the table towards me and said in low, portentous tones:

"Mrs. Otway, I want to ask you a question, if you won't think me too inquisitive." Here she paused—and Miss Barnard also paused in the conveyance to her mouth of a large piece of bread and marmalade.

"I don't suppose your question would be too inquisitive," I said, guardedly.

"It isn't really," said she.. "You know, I have been looking at your face, and I've been wondering—it's an extraordinary psychic face, do you know?"

"Is it?" said I, noting that Miss Barnard had broken out into a slow smile, which she was trying to obliterate with the lump of bread and marmalade.

"Oh, very. Intensely so. It is a face, you know, in which the workings of the subconscious appear, as it were,

like an undercurrent moving beneath the surface of the conscious. I have been watching it with deep interest, and I have been wondering if you are, as I am, a dweller in the larger world beyond that inhabited by the conscious self, beyond the mere material universe. Is it not so, Mrs. Otway ? "

Now this was a " facer." As my dear father would have expressed it in his playful fashion, it " knocked me sideways." I cast a bewildered glance round the table, and was aware of a very extensive outbreak of the subconscious, Miss Polton was blandly indulgent, her face transformed into a network of amiable wrinkles ; Miss Finch was engaged in an intense scrutiny of the bowl of a jam spoon ; while Miss Barnard's feats, with the bread and marmalade, were becoming positively dangerous.

" I am not sure that I quite understand your question," said I.

" You generally don't," murmured Miss Finch, as Miss Polton explained that " Miss Blake was somewhat of a mystic."

" Like her famous namesake," said I.

" And ancestor," Miss Blake added, eagerly.

" Really ! " I exclaimed, clutching at this straw ; " you are actually a descendant of William Blake ? And I daresay you are a great admirer of his works ? "

" I should think she is ! " exclaimed Miss Barnard. " You should just see her fashion plates."

Recalling Blake's usual rendering of the human figure and its unadaptability to the conditions of our climate, I secretly resolved to take an early opportunity of examining those fashion plates. Meanwhile, I remarked, " I was thinking of his poems rather than the drawings."

" Yes," said Miss Blake ; " though the drawings are very spiritual, too. But to return to my question. You see, I had been looking at your intensely psychical face, and hoping that, at last, I had met with a kindred spirit. And I do hope—I feel convinced—that I have. Perhaps I did not put my question very clearly—it is difficult to be very definite when one is speaking of the psychic life ; but I was wondering if you had ever had experiences that had made you aware of that larger world beyond the world of mere matter and sense-perception ; if you had sometimes felt the

thoughts of other minds stealing into your own without the aid of speech or bodily presence and even, perhaps, held converse with those dear to you who, while they have passed out of this little, material world, still share with you the greater world in which soul speaks to soul unhampered by the limitations——"

The humorous wrinkles had suddenly faded from Miss Polton's face, leaving it grave and quiet; and now, in a quiet, grave voice, she interposed:

"I think, Lilith, dear, that Mrs. Otway's griefs are too new and too real——"

"I know!" Miss Blake exclaimed, impulsively. "I am an egotistical wretch. It was horrid of me to be so wrapped up in my own interests. I am so sorry; so very, very sorry. Please forgive me, dear Mrs. Otway! Let us talk of something else."

"I don't think we must talk of anything much longer," said Miss Polton. "We have finished tea and we ought to get on with our work. Besides, Mrs. Otway will want to unpack her things and set her room in order."

On this there was a general up-rising. Miss Finch immediately fell to work gathering up the débris and returning the cups and saucers to the tray, while Miss Blake renewed her apologies and expressions of sympathy. Then Miss Polton took possession of me, and, having shown me my workshop—a smallish, well-lighted room, with a paved floor and a large window looking on an unexpectedly pleasant garden—took me upstairs to a box-room in which my personal luggage had been deposited.

"Supper is at eight o'clock," said she. "We have made it rather late so that everyone may have a good, long day's work and all the wanderers may have come home. It is the social event of the day. And now I will leave you to your unpacking."

She tripped away up a narrow flight of stairs that opened from the landing, towards what I took to be the attics; from whence presently came a rhythmical "click-clack" that I associated with the loom of which Dr. Thorndyke had spoken. Meanwhile, I fell to work on my trunks, with a view to transferring their contents to my room; but I had hardly got them open when Miss Finch appeared at the open door.

"Can I help you?" she asked. "If I carry some of the things down you won't have so many journeys."

"But aren't you busy?" I asked in return.

"Do I look like it? No, I'm lazy this afternoon, but I should like to help you, if you will let me."

Of course I was only too glad, and forthwith loaded her with an armful of books, following her with a second consignment. For some time we continued our journeys up and down the stairs with very little said on either side, and gradually my room began to lose its emptiness and severity, and to take on the friendly aspect of an inhabited apartment.

"It doesn't look so bad," said Miss Finch, surveying it critically. "Looks as if someone lived in it. Do you like the wash-stand?"

"I've been admiring it. It's so simple and so tasteful and unusual."

"Yes; and yet it is only stained deal, with a few touches of gesso. Phillibar made it—Phyllis Barton, you know. You'll meet her at supper.",

"Is she a carpenter?"

"No; she makes frames for mirrors and pictures; wooden frames decorated with gesso, or compo, or else carved. But she's very thorough. Does it all herself. Makes up the frames from the plank, makes the compo and the moulds and does the gilding. And she is quite a good wood-worker and carves beautifully."

"And does she make a pretty good living?" I asked, bearing Dr. Thorndyke's observations in mind.

"She does quite well now, though she had a hard struggle at first. But now she works direct for the artists and gets as much as she can do. You will often see her frames in the exhibitions. The floor-cloth is rather nice, too, isn't it, though it is only stencilled sacking. You'd be surprised to see how durable it is. The more it is worn, the better it looks—if it is properly done. This is stencilled with a stain. Lilith did it."

"Lilith? Is that Miss Blake?"

"Yes. Her name is really Winifred, but we call her Lilith because she looks as if she had come out of a stained-glass window. You might think that she was a little—well, a little barmy. But she's awfully clever."

"She does fashion-plates, doesn't she?"

"Yes, poor Lilith! She hates them, but she does them rippingly all the same. She would rather paint pictures or mural decorations or design tapestries, but you've got to do what you can sell, you know, if you want to make a living; and Lilith has a little brother whom she keeps at school—an awfully nice little kiddie. She's a really good sort, you know, though frightfully spooky—planchette, crystal ball and all that sort of tosh; and she thinks she has found a fellow-spook, so you will have to look out."

As Miss Finch paused to take another survey, her eye and mine fell upon the wash-stand, or rather on what it supported.

"I think," I remarked, "that I shall have to treat myself to some new crockery. That jug and basin are hardly worthy of Miss Barton's masterpiece."

"No; they're horrid, aren't they? Regular Whitechapel china-shop stuff. But I believe I've got some—I'll just run up and see."

She tripped away up the stairs and presently returned, bearing a basin and pitcher of simple, reddish-buff earthenware glazed internally with a fine green glaze.

"They are frightfully crude and coarse," she said apologetically (and with cheeks several shades redder than the ware), "but they aren't vulgar. Would you like to have them until you can get something better?"

"I shall have them a long time, then," said I. "They are charming—delightful, and they suit the wash-stand perfectly. What a house this is for pottery! I noticed the teapot and the beautiful cups and plates, all so interesting and uncommon. And now you produce these wonderful things like some benevolent enchantress. How do you do it? Do you keep a crystal ball, too?"

Miss Finch laughed and blushed very prettily. "We all do our little bit towards making the home presentable and saving expense. Miss Polton distempered these walls, and Joan Allen painted the woodwork—you'll like Joan, I think; she paints portraits when she can get them, and fills in her time by doing magazine covers and book-wrappers. We shall expect a diploma work from you, too. You're a goldsmith, aren't you?"

It was my turn to laugh and blush as this magnificent

title was applied to me. "Not exactly a goldsmith," I protested. "Say, rather, a very elementary jeweller and metal-worker, or perhaps a coppersmith. And, as we have finished with this room for the present, I had better begin to get my workshop in going order."

"And you'll let me help you with that, too, won't you?" said Miss Finch, with a wheedling air; and as I gladly accepted her help, she linked her arm in mine and we descended together to the scene of my future labours.

My experience of various workers has led me to observe that manual skill is a much more generalized quality than is commonly realized. The old saw of the "Jack of all trades and master of none" is entirely misleading; for manual skill acquired in the practice of one art is largely transferable to others. The acquirement of a particular kind of skill results in the establishment of a generally increased manual faculty, so that a person who has completely learned one handicraft is already more than half-way towards the attainment of skill in any other. This fact was impressed upon me as I watched little Miss Finch and noted her extraordinary handiness with probably unfamiliar appliances and her instant comprehension of the uses of things that she had probably never seen before. My two benches—the jeweller's and the general bench—had fortunately been made in a portable form, and now had to be joined up with their screw-bolts. But my little assistant took this in at a glance, and, before I had half finished unpacking the tool cases, she had the bench-tops up-ended, had sorted out the legs, struts and the appropriate bolts, and was hard at work with the spanner. Yet, as she worked, she kept an alert and interested eye on the tools and appliances that came forth from the cases.

"What a jolly little muffie!" she exclaimed, as I deposited the small enamel furnace on the floor, pending the erection of its stand; "but won't it eat up the gas. You'll have to have your own meter—and watch it, too, to see that your earnings don't all go to the gas company. And what a little duck of an anvil! But what on earth are those things?" pointing to a bundle of body-tools and snarling-irons.

I explained the use of these mysterious appliances and of sundry others; and so, with a good deal of gossip, partly

personal and partly technical, we worked on until the sound of the first supper-bell sent us to our rooms to make ourselves presentable; by which time the fitting out of the workshop was so far advanced as to make it possible for me to begin work on the morrow.

The great social function of supper introduced me to the rest of my comrades; Phyllis Barton, who turned out, to my surprise, to be a tiny, frail-looking middle-aged woman of meek aspect—I had pictured her as a large, muscular, boisterous young woman; Joan Allen, who really corresponded somewhat to this description, and whom I detected more than once in the act of inspecting me with one eye closed; and a tall, rather shy girl, by name Edith Palgrave, a scrivener and calligrapher, who, I learned from Miss Finch, wrote, by choice, Church service books and illuminated addresses, but, by necessity, gained her principal livelihood by writing shop-tickets.

It was a pleasant genial gathering: homely, informal, and yet quite regardful of the indispensable social amenities. What the social class of my companions might have been I could hardly guess. They were all educated women, of good intelligence and pleasant manners, all keenly interested in one another's doings, but each fully occupied with her own activities. The agreeable impression was conveyed that, in this little human hive, the companionship arising from the community of domestic life tended in no way to hinder a self-contained person like myself from living her own life and pursuing her own interests and satisfactions.

And so, when, somewhat early, I retired to my room to spend an hour with my books before going to bed, my thoughts turned gratefully to Dr. Thorndyke, and I congratulated myself not a little on having found this quiet anchorage in which to rest after the stormy passages of my troubled life.

Chapter XII

The Hidden Hand

I HAD been settled in my new home about a month when I received a letter from Mr. Jackson. It was principally devoted to a report on business matters concerned with the

disposal of my father's practice and the sale of the surplus furniture and effects, but it contained one passage that gave me considerable food for thought. The passage in question had been added as a postscript, and ran thus :

"You have probably heard that Mr. Otway has left Maidstone. I fancy things had become rather uncomfortable for him. From what transpired at the inquest, an impression got abroad that he was, to a great extent, responsible for your father's death, and there was consequently a rather strong feeling against him. I don't know where he has gone, but rumour has it that he has migrated to London."

This was, in more than one respect, somewhat disquieting news. I turned it over again and again as I sat at my bench and tried to estimate its significance. The inquest had "gone off quite smoothly," as Mr. Jackson had expressed it, but it was clear that some, at least, of the persons present had read a meaning into the evidence which the coroner and his jury seemed to have missed. Dr. Thorndyke was one of these ; but, as no rumour could be traceable to him, there were evidently others. What did this portend. To Mr. Jackson it meant no more than a local prejudice. To me, conscious of a secret covenant which I had not dared to confide even to Dr. Thorndyke, it conveyed an uneasy feeling that suspicion was abroad, that it might become cumulative, and that, even yet, that covenant might be dragged into the light of day which it would bear so ill. Ever since my talk with Dr. Thorndyke, my conscience had been somewhat ill at ease. I felt that, as a witness giving testimony on oath, I had been at least uncandid, if not positively untruthful ; and the word "collusion" had acquired an unpleasantly personal quality.

And then, what of Mr. Otway ? Had he slipped away out of my life to hide himself where suspicion would not reach him ? Or had he really migrated to London, and would his sinister shadow presently fall upon my new life as it had done upon the old ? My hopes pictured him driven by his fears—for he was a timorous man—far afield, perhaps beyond the seas ; but a presentiment whispered that I had not heard or seen the last of him.

And the presentiment was right. Less than a week after the arrival of Mr. Jackson's letter came one from Mr. Otway; and its contents were even more disquieting than those of the former. It was headed "Lyon's Inn Chambers, W.C.," and its contents were as follows:—

"My dear Helen,

"As you will see by the above address, I have moved to London. You will, no doubt, easily understand that, after the late distressing events, the neighbourhood of Maidstone was intolerable to me, and I am writing this to give you my new address. But, also, I have two other matters on which I want to speak to you. One is to recommend to you a dealer to whom I think you may be able to dispose of your work, which you might otherwise have to sell at a great disadvantage. His name is Campbell, and his premises are in Wardour Street, near the Oxford Street end on the west side. Mr. Campbell deals in pictures and works of ancient and modern art, jewellery, goldsmith's work, etc.; and, as he is personally known to me, I have taken the liberty of writing to him to the effect that you may possibly call on him, and describing you as a relative of mine without mentioning the nature of the relationship.

"And now I come to a rather difficult matter, which I hope you will not misunderstand. I am going to ask you to meet me, either here or in any other place that you may choose, to talk over something that has happened recently. I have, in fact, received a letter the contents of which have greatly disturbed me. I will not go into details now, but when I say that the matter is of importance to you as well as to me, I think you will understand what I mean and what the letter refers to. I beg you very earnestly not to refuse this request. The letter in question has caused me deep anxiety, and, in fact, some alarm, and I think you ought to be put into possession of its contents.

"Trusting that you will not withhold your help and support in these new and harassing circumstances.

"Believe me,

"Your devoted husband,

"Lewis Otway."

It would have been wiser of Mr. Otway to adopt some

other mode of ending his letter. The disgust and repulsion that the phrase "your devoted husband" occasioned me had nearly determined my refusal. But on reflection, not only reason, charity and a certain reluctantly admitted sense of duty, but curiosity, not unmixed with anxiety, counselled compliance. His letter was vague enough, yet it made pretty clear to me that trouble of some kind was brewing, and I was not in the position of a disinterested spectator; that, in short, my forebodings of the last few days were, perhaps, already receiving some justification.

Accordingly, I decided to agree to the meeting, and the question arose, where was it to take place? His own rooms were out of the question; for the fact of my having visited him there would greatly weaken my position if I should have to resist a claim to end the separation. Finally, I selected the Tower Wharf as a place sufficiently public and yet unfrequented enough to allow of a confidential talk secure from eavesdroppers. It had, of late, become a favourite resort of mine, for it was a pleasant place, with the trees and the old Tower on one side and the broad river on the other, and was but ten minutes' walk from Wellclose Square. I wrote by return, naming six o'clock on the following evening; and at half-past five on that evening I set forth by way of Ship Alley and Upper East Smithfield.

Although I had walked slowly, it wanted yet ten minutes to six when I passed under the side span of the Tower Bridge and came out on to the gravelled walk overlooking the river. But already Mr. Otway was there, pacing up and down a sort of bay at the east end, with his hands behind him grasping a stout cane; and though he made a pretence of inspecting the old guns that, on their side, make a pretence of defending the fortress, he was evidently watchful and expectant, for he saw me almost as soon as I saw him, and quickened his pace to meet me.

His appearance impressed me deeply, even before we met. When I had seen him last he had been looking anxious and worried. But now he was positively haggard, and he had a furtive, hunted look that, little as I was disposed to be sympathetic, made me glad that I had not refused to meet him.

"This is really very good of you, Helen," he exclaimed, with obvious sincerity. "But I felt sure that you would

—er—respond to my appeal. It is strange," he added, "considering what our relations are and what your feelings are towards me, that I seem to look to you, and to you alone, for support and counsel in this—er—this unexpected trouble."

"I don't suppose," said I, "that any counsel of mine will be of much value to a man of your experience. But perhaps you had better tell me what the trouble is—Shall we sit down here? You spoke of having received a letter."

"Yes," he replied, as we sat down on a seat near the bridge. "It is an anonymous letter, and its purport is—ah—very singular, and is—ah—to the effect that—er—in fact——"

"Is there any objection to your repeating the actual wording of the letter?" I asked.

"Well, no. Certainly not. Perhaps it would be better. You are really remarkably business-like and clear-headed. I suppose it is your up-bringing and being so much with your father. No, there is no objection. In fact"—here he produced from his pocket, with evident reluctance, a leather wallet, from which he extracted a folded paper—"in fact, you may as well see the letter for yourself."

I took the paper from him, and opening it found it to be a quite short letter, typewritten upon ordinary typist's paper, without any address or other heading, and undated save for Mr. Otway's written and signed endorsement. There was no signature, but in place of one was written in typed characters, "A Well Wisher"; and this is what it said:

"Mr. Lewis Otway,

"The undersigned is writing to put you on your guard because Somebody knows something about how Mr. Vardon came by his death, and that somebody is not a friend, so you had better keep a sharp look out for your enemy and see what they mean to do. I can't tell you any more at present.

"A Well Wisher."

I read it through twice, noting, the second time, the peculiar construction, the faulty grammar and punctuation, and especially the confusion in the pronouns which is so

characteristic of the writing of an uneducated person. Of course, these peculiarities might have been assumed as a disguise ; but they established a probability that the writer was a person of indifferent education ; to which class, indeed, the bulk of anonymous letter-writers belong.

I handed the document back to Mr. Otway, and asked : "Does this letter convey anything to you ? "

"Nothing," he replied. "Absolutely nothing. It speaks of somebody knowing something. But that is impossible. There was no one in the house but you and I and—er—your father. Besides, there is nothing to know—excepting what you know."

"Have you any idea or suspicion as to who the writer of this letter may be ? "

"None whatever. I have not the faintest clue. You see, there is nobody in the world who has any—er—any special knowledge of the—ah—the exact circumstances but yourself." He paused for a few moments, and then, in a lower tone, asked hesitatingly : "I suppose, Helen, you cannot—er—guess or—ah—surmise who might have——"

I looked up quickly and caught a furtive glance which was instantly averted ; and in a moment it was borne in on me that he suspected me of either being the writer or concerned in the writing of this letter.

"Mr. Otway," said I, speaking slowly and quietly, the better to command my temper, "if you have any idea that I know anything of this wretched production, dismiss it. If you have any idea that there lurks in my mind any suspicion that your account of my father's death was untrue, dismiss that, too. If I had known, or even had the smallest grounds for suspecting, that my father met with foul play, you would not have had to wait till now to hear from me ; nor would my communication have reached you in this form or through these channels."

As I said this, looking at him, I do not doubt, sternly and forbiddingly enough, he turned horribly pale and seemed to shrink visibly. He was completely cowed ; so much so that, cordially as I detested him, I felt really sorry for him.

"You mistake me, Helen. You misjudge me," he protested, huskily ; "you do, indeed. I had no intention—I never, for one moment, suspected—but why do I say this ? Of course, you must know I did not. I merely

thought it possible that you might be able to guess—that you might know of some person——"

"I do not, Mr. Otway," said I. "No one connected with me has any knowledge that is not public knowledge. Nor do I believe that anyone else has. I should say that this person—apparently a person of the lower class—is just a common blackmailer, who was present at, or has read the report of, the inquest, and is trying to make you believe that some suspicion attaches to you."

Mr. Otway drew a deep breath and reflected gloomily. Perhaps my suggestion was not a very comforting one, for a blackmailer is a rather formidable enemy to a man who is concealing an incriminating fact.

"Probably you are right, Helen. But you notice that there is no threat—no direct threat, at least—and that there is no suggestion of any attempt to obtain money from me."

"Perhaps that will come later," said I.

Again he drew a long breath and cast a furtive glance at me. "Perhaps it will," he agreed. "This may be the preliminary move, the laying of ground-bait, so to speak. It's a harassing business, Helen. What do you think I had better do? You see, I rely on you for counsel, although I am so much older. But you have your father's gift of clear judgment and perfect coolness in emergencies."

It was rather a tactless observation, for it recalled vividly my dear father's coolness in that last, fatal emergency; his composure and unruffled cheerfulness when the menace of ruin and disgrace—set up by Mr. Otway—had seemed poised over his head, ready to fall at any moment; and the recollection did not tend to increase my present sympathy.

"For my part," I said, coldly, "I should do nothing at present. I should ignore this letter and wait for the writer to show his hand more clearly. If he should make any threats or demands for hush-money, I should at once put the matter in the hands of the police."

I could see that this advice—particularly the latter part of it—did not greatly commend itself to Mr. Otway. Nor did it to me. But circumstances offered no choice. Any risk is better than that of life-long subjection to a blackmailer.

"It would be very unsafe," said Mr. Otway, "to have

any dealings with the police. They are pretty severe on blackmailers, but they are naturally ready to listen to anyone who professes to have information to give them. And a blackmailer may be very dangerous if he is brought to bay. We couldn't afford to have any enquiries made that might seem to establish what they would call collusion to suppress evidence. We know that the facts that we withheld were not material. Other people would not."

I could not but admire the adroitness with which Mr. Otway made me a participator in his own difficulties and secured me as an ally against his unseen enemy. And the uncomfortable aspect of the case was that he was right. We were partners in an unlawful act. That, I had already recognised ; and the different significance of that act in our respective cases did not so very much affect our position in the present circumstances. I had nothing further to say, but to repeat that I should ignore the letter ; and for a time we sat silent, looking out on the river.

"Well," said Mr. Otway, at length, "so be it. We will wait and see what happens. And now let us put this miserable affair away and talk about your future. I have seen some of your work, and I am sure that you could get good prices for it if it were placed in the proper quarter. But the ordinary shops would be of no use to you. The common retailer does not know or care anything about individual work. He just buys from the wholesaler or the manufacturer, and sells to the public. He would probably not look at your work, or if he were willing to buy it, he would pay no more than he pays to the manufacturer who rattles off his goods by the thousand, with the aid of cheap labour and machinery. But there are people who know the difference between artists' works and manufactured goods, and are willing to pay for the better things. And there are dealers who supply them. Mr. Campbell is one. I have known him for many years, and I can assure you that he is an excellent judge of works of art and very anxious to get the best for his customers, who are mostly good judges, too. He is well known in artistic circles, and, as he is able to dispose of things of real value, he can afford to pay the artist a fair price. I strongly advise you to give him a trial. Of course, I would infinitely rather that you accepted an allowance from me, but, if you really——"

"It is very good of you, Mr. Otway, but I assure you that it is out of the question."

"Very well, then. If you are quite resolved, I can only advise you to make the most profitable use of your talents. Go to Mr. Campbell, and I am sure that you will be treated fairly."

"I thanked him for his advice and promised to act on it; and very shortly after this I brought the interview to an end.

As I took my way slowly back to Wellclose Square, I reflected on the new developments that my meeting with Mr. Otway had disclosed. That some mischief was brewing there could hardly be a doubt. The disguise of the "Well Wisher" was too thin to create any illusion. As to the somebody who knew something, he was an obvious myth, for, as Mr. Otway had said, the circumstances did not admit of anyone knowing even what was known to me. My own explanation was that some person, who had been present at the inquest, had observed Mr. Otway's excessive nervousness and had marked him as a likely subject for blackmailing operations. It was a chance shot and nothing more.

But Mr. Otway's evident alarm was not difficult to account for. He was a naturally timorous man; he had been subjected to a great and prolonged strain, and he had an incriminating secret. His position was, in fact, one of appreciable danger, as he fully realized. If the details of my father's death had been fully disclosed at the inquest, Mr. Otway's statement and explanation would probably have been accepted without demur. But the suppression of certain material facts put a different complexion on the matter. If the inquiry were now revived, he would have to explain, not only the original circumstances, but his motives for suppressing them. He had very good reason for alarm.

And yet his abject terror produced an uncomfortable impression on me. I could not disguise from myself that the whole tragedy of my father's death was due to an error of judgment on my part. The secret marriage was the outcome of a mistake. Woman-like, I had acted on a strong conviction; and that conviction had been wrong. What if I had once again acted on an erroneous belief? I had assumed that Mr. Otway's account of my dear father's death

was correct. There had seemed to be excellent reasons for the assumption. But what if I had been wrong, after all? If I had actually misled a Court of Justice to shield the murderer of my dearly loved father? It was undeniably possible. I had formed my opinion on mere probabilities, backed by a statement that, however plausible, was manifestly worthless as evidence. And that opinion might have been utterly wrong. It was a dreadful thought. So dreadful that, though I tried to put it away and remind myself that I did not entertain and never had entertained it, it haunted me during the whole of my walk home, even to the exclusion of the menace to myself that lurked in this blackmailer's letter.

Chapter XIII *A Crystal-Gazer and Other Matters*

THE cheerful atmosphere of the old house in Wellclose Square soon dissipated my gloomy thoughts. It was nearing supper-time when I arrived, and an agreeable clink of china proceeded from the dining-room, accompanied by a faint aroma suggestive of curry. On my landing I found Lilith and Miss Finch engaged in earnest discussion, and both greeted me as if I had returned after a long absence.

"We have been wondering," said the former, "what had become of our Sibyl" (she had bestowed this title on me, presumably, by reason of my peculiarly "psychic" cast of countenance). "As for the poor Titmouse" (this was Miss Finch's pet name), "she has been wandering about like a cat that has lost its kitten."

"Or like a kitten that has lost its cat," I suggested, bestowing an affectionate pinch on my little comrade's ear. "Well, I haven't been far afield, but I have done quite an important stroke of business."

"You don't mean to say you've sold something!" the Titmouse exclaimed, incredulously.

"Not actually sold. But I have discovered a market. I have tidings of a benevolent person—of the Scottish persuasion, I believe—who traffics in works of art and other productions of the human hand."

"A Scotchman!" exclaimed Miss Finch. "I thought all art dealers were Jews. When are you going to call on the Laird?"

"It is hardly worth while to call on him until I have a fair collection of work to show him," said I.

"I don't agree with you, Sibyl," said Lilith. "The first thing to do is to catch your dealer. To do that, you must find out what he wants. He is sure to have his own personal fancies, and he knows what he can sell most easily. Take him all that you have ready. He will be able to see from that what you can do, and he will tell you what kind of work he will take from you. And don't lose any time. I should go to-morrow if I were you."

"Does an artist have to work to order, then, like salaried journeymen?" I asked.

"Practically, yes," replied Lilith. "And why not? He makes things that he wants people to buy. Surely it is only reasonable that he should consider the needs and the wishes of the buyers. And all good craftsmen do. Chippendale's chairs were not only good to look at; they were comfortable to sit on and serviceable in use. The only difference between an artist craftsman and a commercial producer is that the artist always does his best, for his own satisfaction apart from the question of payment; whereas the commercial producer thinks of the profit only, and turns out the worst stuff that the buyer will put up with."

"But surely an artist may choose what he will make," said I.

"Of course he may," replied Lilith, "if he is willing to keep the thing when he has made it. Not if he is going to ask someone to pay him money for it."

I was inwardly somewhat taken aback by this exhibition of hard-headed reasonableness on the part of the mystical Lilith; so much so that, when she had gone to her room, I remarked on it to Miss Finch.

"Yes," she agreed; "Lilith is an extraordinary girl. In fact, there seem to be two Liliths; one is as cranky as a March hare, and the other is perfectly sane and really very shrewd. I sometimes wonder whether she really believes in all that crystal-gazing tosh and telepathic bunkum. But she practices what she has just been preaching. She does her fashion-plates according to orders—but ever so much

better than she need—and does other work to please herself and is content to keep it. You should look in at her studio and see her at work; then you'd understand."

"And you think I had better take her advice?"

"I do. First catch your dealer; and if he wants to keep you turning out the same things over and over again, try to catch another dealer who wants something different. The great thing is to get a market. It's frightfully disheartening to keep on doing good work and having it all left on your hands."

Impressed by this wise counsel, I betook myself after supper to my workshop and reviewed my stock. A month's work had produced no great accumulation, for I was still a slow worker, though the continuous practice was improving that. On the other hand, I had brought with me a certain number of unfinished pieces as well as some of my finished work; so that I had enough to give Mr. Campbell the means of judging my capabilities. When I had looked over the collection and withdrawn one or two pieces that were not up to my present standard, I packed the approved specimens in a hand-bag which I took up with me in readiness for the morrow. I was just opening the door of my room when Lilith came running up the stairs.

"You see," I said, holding up the hand-bag. "I am acting on your advice. I have packed up a selection from my stock to take to the dealer to-morrow morning."

"I am glad of that," said she. "The business side of art is tedious and disagreeable, but you have got to sell if you are to live by your work. Would you mind giving me a private view of your masterpieces?"

"I shall be proud to show them to you," I replied, conducting her into my room and placing the arm-chair by the table, "Let us put out the whole collection."

I emptied the bag of its contents, which I set out on the table to the best advantage, and she examined the pieces one by one.

"They *are* charming," she exclaimed, enthusiastically. "I can't judge the work, though it looks most expert to my inexpert eye, but the design is delightful. They are all so individual and full of character, and so simple and restrained. You have a fine colour-sense, too. I think your use of enamel quite masterly, and I like your

employment of bronze in place of the precious metals. It is fortunate that your dealer is a Scotchman, for the Jews, from Solomon downwards, have always had a leaning towards gold."

"Yes," said I; "bronze is my favourite material, even for personal ornaments. And it is capable of great variety in the patina, especially if one uses the Japanese methods of surface treatment. I wish it took the enamel better."

"You seem to have overcome the difficulties pretty completely," said Lilith. "This pendant, for instance, is beautiful, and so is the belt-clasp. Do you know, Sibyl, I think we might collaborate. Some of my designs might very well include metal ornaments—clasps, buckles, and buttons forming part of the decorative scheme. We must talk it over. And now, my dear Sibyl, I want to say something to you—something quite serious—and I want you to listen without prejudice."

I looked at her, and was instantly aware of a change that had come over her. The shrewd, business-like, capable Lilith had suddenly become transformed into the mystic—; wide-eyed, dreamy, yet intense.

"I have avoided talking to you about the things that are to me the great things of life," she said in low, earnest, tones. "I have wished to, but I have been fearful of intruding on your strongly individual, self-contained, personality. But I have felt that you have great gifts—great psychic gifts. You are a woman of power. The common herd live their little lives locked up in the prison of the visible and the conscious. If they would convey their thoughts to other minds they must use the unwieldy means of speech and visible signs. What they know of their fellow-immortals reaches them crudely through the organs of sense; and through those primitive and inadequate media they must needs communicate with others, bound by the limitations of time and space and mere material contact—at least, so long as they are prisoned within a material body. But there are others for whom no such limitations exist; specially gifted souls who can see without mere material eyes, who can hear without ears, who can speak their thoughts across the gulfs of time and space; who can look into the remote past, and even into the future; who can make their will-power operate at limitless distances

and without the aid of gross bodily action. And you are one of these, Sibyl. I am convinced that you are endowed with these powers. But they are latent, unsuspected, because you have never tried to exercise them; because you have never sought to bring the subconscious within the domain of the conscious, or rather to make a contact between the two."

To this strange and rather wild harangue (which the matter-of-fact Titmouse would have called "barmy") I listened with grave attention, though with little enough conviction—for I could not but recall my ignorance and my mistaken judgment in the greatest crisis of my life—noting how like a prophetess the picturesque Lilith looked, with her golden aureole of auburn hair and her great, blue eyes and parted lips. But I made no reply—there was, indeed, nothing to say—and after a short pause she continued:

"Don't think I am saying this with any impertinent intention of trying to force my own views on you. I have a definite practical purpose. You are going to-morrow to make your first essay in a vitally important branch of an artist's calling. On your success depends the possibility of your following art as a profession—that is, if you have not enough to live without work."

"I have not," said I.

"Then artistic success is not sufficient. You must achieve industrial success; you must get a livelihood out of your work. As far as the creation of beautiful things is concerned you are quite competent and will become more so with more practice. Now you have to learn how to dispose of those works profitably; how to make people buy them."

"But surely that will be decided by the suitability of the things themselves."

"Partly, no doubt. But you mustn't leave it at that. You must learn to exercise the power of silent willing combined with suggestion."

"I don't think I quite understand," said I.

"We must talk about this more fully some other time," said Lilith, "and go into the theory and the results of experiments. For the present you must try to take my word for the fact that silent willing and suggestion are real

powers. I don't ask you to believe it without proof—I will give you the proof later—but I do beg you, dear Sibyl, to give the method a trial. If it fails in your hands you will be none the worse; but it won't fail if you make up your mind to succeed."

"What do you want me to do, Lilith?" I asked, not a little bit bewildered by her mysterious and rather vague expressions.

"I will tell you what I do myself," she replied. "When I take a batch of drawings to a publisher, I stand outside the office for five minutes and silently will that he shall accept them. Sometimes I write on a piece of paper a command to the publisher to accept my work, and while I am waiting for the interview I keep my eyes fixed on the writing and mentally endorse the command. The writing, you see, helps me to concentrate my will-power. Then, at the interview, I use the method of suggestion. Whatever the editor or publisher may say, whatever objections he may make to my work, I continue steadily to impress on him that he is going to accept it, that, in fact, he has accepted it. If he refuses it, I ignore the refusal and go on talking as if he had accepted it—not rudely, of course; one must do these things tactfully—and all the time that he is talking, I continue silently to concentrate my will-power on him."

"And what is the result?" I asked.

"The result, my dear Sibyl, is that I sell all the drawings that I offer for sale."

This sounded convincing enough, and would have been more so if I had not happened to know that Lilith's drawings were of the very best of their kind, and that she submitted them to the most rigorous criticism before letting anyone see them. Still, the fact that she sold her work was undeniable, and it was impossible to say how many excellent drawings had failed to gain acceptance. Certainly every capable artist is not a successful one.

"And what is it exactly that you want me to do?" I asked.

"I want you," she replied, "to do just what I do, myself. I want you to stand outside the shop for five minutes and silently will that this dealer shall buy your work. It would probably help you if you were to write down the command and keep your eyes fixed on the writing

while you are willing; but if the dealer himself should happen to be visible, it would be well to fix your eyes on him so as to direct the will-force with more precision. And when you go into the shop, keep on willing with the greatest concentration that you can command, and when you are talking to the dealer, talk as if he had bought your work; keep on impressing on him that he *has* bought it, and don't take any notice of contrary statements on his part. If he seems to think that he has refused it, you must correct his mistake and guide his thoughts into the proper channels."

I suppose I must have looked somewhat dismayed at this rather startling programme, for Lilith continued, eagerly: "Now, don't raise objections, Sibyl, dear. It will be quite easy if you will only make up your mind. You have abundant will-power, and I am certain that you have the gift of projecting your mental states into the minds of others. And I am so anxious that you should succeed and that your great gifts should not be wasted. Say you will try, Sibyl, if only to please your friend."

What could I do? Utterly as my mind refused to accept the connection between the alleged cause and effect, I could not say that no such connection existed. I was completely unconvinced; but my unconviction might conceivably be less rational than Lilith's whole-hearted belief. For she declared herself able to support her belief with proof, whereas I had to admit that my scepticism was largely a matter of temperament. And she was so eager, and it was so sweet of her to be so full of anxiety on my behalf, that it would have seemed ungracious to make difficulties. The end of it was that I agreed to carry out her plan of conquest, on which she further inducted me into the arts of silent willing and suggestion and even supervised me while I wrote out, at her dictation, a peremptory command to the dealer, which I promised to use, as directed, for the reinforcement of my will-power at the appropriate time.

On the following morning, after a careful study of my father's atlas of London, which I had brought with me from Maidstone, I set forth, hand-bag in hand and encouraged by the good wishes of my comrades and of Lilith in particular. Entering the Underground Railway at Mark Lane, I came to the surface at Charing Cross Station and bore away northwards across Leicester Square. During

the journey, I had turned over in my mind the plan of attack to which I stood committed, with increasing distaste, I must admit, as the time for its execution drew nearer. And as my dislike grew, so also did my scepticism. I found myself recalling the fact that Lilith, successful as she claimed to be, was yet a fashion-plate artist very much against her own wishes, and reflecting that, if her silent willing were as efficacious as she believed it to be, she might surely compel the purchase of the kind of work that she enjoyed doing, instead of being herself compelled to follow a distasteful occupation. However, it was useless to think about it now. I had promised to give the method a trial and must carry out my promise.

These reflections brought me to the bottom of Wardour Street, and my attention was now fully occupied by the search for Mr. Campbell's shop. Mr. Otway had omitted to give me the number of the house, but I remembered his saying that it was on the west side near the Oxford Street end; so I walked slowly up the east side and scanned the shop-fronts across the road. Near the top of the street my eye lighted on a smallish shop, above the window of which was inscribed in faded gold lettering "Donald Campbell," and I immediately crossed the road, becoming aware as I did so of a sudden access of nervousness. For this was a new experience to me. Hitherto all my transactions with shopkeepers had been in the character of a purchaser; and my transformation into a vendor was accompanied by a diffidence and shyness that I had not expected or foreseen. Indeed, in the course of that short journey across the road, my bashfulness increased so much that I had nearly forgotten my promise to Lilith and was on the point of entering the shop when it flashed into my mind.

But even when I recalled Lilith's instructions, they were not easy to carry out. I swerved from the shop door to the side of the window and stood there trying to concentrate my will-power. But it would not be concentrated. In the window was displayed a fascinating array of base metal spoons which instantly rivetted my attention; particularly a set, of the late seventeenth century, wrought in a fine-coloured latten, and exhibiting in a most charming manner the combined effect of delicate workmanship, with the patina of age and the softening of outlines from use and wear.

Unconsciously, I had begun to compare them with my own cruder productions before I realized that my will-power had escaped control. Then I jerked myself back from the spoons to my present task, and, hastily drawing the paper from my pocket, fixed my eyes on the written command and struggled to concentrate my thoughts on it and to suppress a growing consciousness of the absurdity of the whole proceeding. Presently I raised my eyes from the paper, and as they sought to dodge the spoons, they encountered another object equally disturbing. "It was only a face at the window," as the ridiculous song has it, but it instantly engrossed my attention and transported me in spirit, not to any Highland glen, but straight away to the banks of the Jordan; a fattish face, framed with glossy, black hair that broke out at the temples into rows of little crisp curls like a barrister's wig; a face with small, grey eyes, full under the lids, and surmounted by strong, black eyebrows, with full, red lips and a rather sketchy nose of the general form of a William pear with the stalk uppermost. It was clearly not Mr. Campbell's face, but it appertained to the establishment; and, recalling Lilith's instructions to direct my will-power with more precision by fixing my eyes on the dealer, I directed a stony stare at the face and willed silently. But here I was countered again; for the owner of the face was also apparently possessed of psychic gifts, and fixed on me a gaze of such intensity that I was covered with confusion. On this I straightway forgot all about will-power, and, hastily pocketing the paper, walked nervously and guiltily into the shop.

The proprietor of the face confronted me impassively across the counter; and such was my trepidation that, although he obviously was not Mr. Campbell, I could think of nothing better than to ask him if he was; whereupon he completed my discomfiture by replying in the affirmative.

"I am Mrs. Otway," said I; at which he suddenly grew keenly attentive, and I continued: "I understand that Mr. Otway—Mr. Lewis Otway—has written to you about me. I had a letter from him to that effect."

"Yes," said Mr. Campbell, "he has; and, if I remember rightly, he suggested that I might be able to dispose of some of your work. I think he said you did some repoussé or something of the kind."

Apparently Mr. Campbell was preparing to treat me as an amateur, and my work as the product of a hobby. This would not do at all. Before saying anything further, I opened my bag and handed out the pieces one by one, setting them on the counter before him.

"Oh!" said he. "Yes; ha—hum; this isn't exactly what I expected." He picked up a teaspoon, turned it over between his fingers, closely examined the joining of the shank and bowl and the little bust that formed the knob, and then held it at arm's length with his head on one side. There was something in the action and the facial expression that accompanied it which encouraged me even before he spoke.

"Nithe thpoon that," was his comment as he laid it down (I observed that he tended to develop a lisp when preoccupied or off his guard); "well made, well designed; quite original, too. Spoons are my fancy—you saw that set in the window. If I could afford it, I would specialize in them more than I do. Not but what I'm fond of all goldsmith's work if it's good—or any other art work, for that matter; but I do love a good spoon."

This was pleasant hearing, for I had a weakness for spoons myself. They are useful objects, they admit of infinite variety in design, and their small size adapted them peculiarly to my rather limited resources.

"But there is one thing that you must bear in mind," continued Mr. Campbell. "Single spoons are not very saleable unless they are antique or collectors' pieces. Modern spoons are bought for use as well as ornament, and buyers like them in sets; not all alike, of course, but with a general design running through the set. Twelve spoons, all different, but all brothers; that's what they want."

"Like the apostle sets," said I.

"Yes," he replied, "but we don't want any more apostles. Too many on the market already. The apostles are done. They're a back number. Everybody does them because they can't think of anything else connected with the number twelve. But there is an opening for something original. If you can do me a set with a good striking design, I think I know where I can place them at a liberal price."

I made a note of this proposal, and Mr. Campbell

proceeded with his examination of my samples, accompanying the process with shrewd comments and useful hints. "Now, I'm rather doubtful about this," said he, picking up a bronze paper-weight on which was a little figure with an open book; "it's pretty and might take the fancy of a bookish man, but I question whether you'll get paid for the work that you've put into it. People don't always realize the value of a bronze casting. You must have done this by the *cire perdue* process."

"I did."

"Well, I should save that for more important pieces. Simple modelling and sand-casting is good enough for paper-weights. And you are too lavish with your silver. Just feel this candlestick. You could have done it with half the silver and got paid just as much. The extra cost of the unnecessary silver will have to come off the workmanship —at least, that is the tendency although it is nominally sold by weight."

As Mr. Campbell was speaking, a woman came out of an inner room and advanced to the counter. I glanced at her casually and then looked again more attentively, for I had instantly the feeling of having seen her before, though I could not recollect where. She was a Jewess of the dark and sallow type, about my own age, and of a sombre and rather forbidding aspect; and the glance that she cast on my samples, though impassive, was faintly disparaging.

"This is Mrs. Otway, me dear," said Mr. Campbell. "You remember the letter I showed you about her. And these pretty things are her work."

Mrs. Campbell—as I assumed her to be—raised her eyes and bestowed on me a quietly insolent stare, but made no remark. Then she cast another disparaging glance at my wares and said coldly:

"They are all right of their kind; but you don't want to fill the place up with modern stuff."

Disagreeable as the remark was, its matter impressed me less than its manner. For again I was sensible of a certain vague familiarity in the voice, the intonation and the accent. She gave me, however, no opportunity for studying either, for, with the curt observation that "she supposed he knew his own business," she retired to the inner room without taking any further notice of me.

"Well," said Mr. Campbell, "there's some truth in what my wife says. I can't afford to lock up my capital in things that I can't sell. But I like your work. It is good work, and you'll improve. I am willing to buy this lot of pieces—at a price. But it will have to be a low price, because I don't know how they will go. If you take my advice, you'll leave them with me and let me try the market with them. When I have sold one or two I shall know what I can do with them, and then I can offer you a fair price based on what they fetch. How will that thoot you?"

It seemed, on the whole, the most satisfactory arrangement, though I should have liked to have some definite idea as to the value of my work. I mentioned this, pointing out that I wanted to know if it would be worth my while to continue this kind of occupation.

"Well," said Mr. Campbell, "you leave the things with me, and I will look them over carefully and weigh the silver. Then I will make you the best offer I can for the lot, and you can either accept it or refuse it, or wait and see what the things fetch. Give me your address and I will write you out a receipt for what you leave. Will that do?"

I replied that it would do admirably, whereupon he supplied me with a slip of paper and pen and ink, and retired to the desk with my collection to write out the receipt. I had taken off my glove and was beginning to write when somebody entered the shop with a quick, light step, suggesting a young and active man. Just behind me the footsteps shopped short, and a pleasant, masculine voice addressed the dealer.

"All right, Mr. Campbell; don't let me disturb you. I'm in no hurry."

"I'm afraid, sir, your things are not quite ready, but if you don't mind waiting a moment I'll make sure."

"I suspected," the voice rejoined, "that I might be a little over-punctual. However, you finish what you are doing, while I browse round the museum."

At the first sound of the voice my pen stopped short; and it seemed as if my heart stopped, too—though it soon began to make up for lost time. I was disconcerted and vaguely annoyed that a small surprise should set up such a disproportionate disturbance. Perhaps, too, I was a little startled to find a voice so long unheard elicit such instant

and undoubting recognition. But I recovered immediately and resumed my writing, though, to be sure, the pen-point no longer traced the firm and steady lines of the first-written words. Meanwhile, Mr. Campbell had completed his receipt, and we now exchanged our documents, I checking his list of my sample works, and he scanning my address with apparent surprise.

"Wellclose Square," he read out. "There is a Wellclose Square somewhere down Wapping way. It won't be that one?"

"Yes. But I think it is actually in Ratcliff. When shall I hear from you?"

"I will write and post the letter this evening."

"Thank you, Mr. Campbell. Good morning."

As we exchanged bows, I turned and met the newcomer approaching the counter. He glanced at me, at first without recognition; then he looked again.

"Why, surely it is Miss Vardon!" he exclaimed.

"Wrong, Mr. Davenant," said I. "It is Mrs. Otway. But that is a mere quibble. I am the person whom you knew as Miss Vardon."

"Well, well," said he, "what a piece of luck to meet you—and here of all places!"

"Is this a peculiarly unlikely place, then?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose it isn't, really; at any rate, I mustn't let Mr. Campbell hear me say that it is. Do you mind waiting a moment while I settle my little business with him? I want to hear all your news."

His little business amounted to no more than an arrangement that he should call in about three days for his "things," whatever they were, and when this had been settled, we left the shop together.

"Which way are you walking?" he asked.

"I really don't know," I answered. "I think I had some dim idea of seeing the town and taking a look at the shops."

"Then," said he, "as you are a country mouse, whereas I am a town sparrow of the deepest dye, perhaps I may be permitted to act as conductor and expositor of the wonders of the Metropolis, while you give me the news from Maidstone."

"There is little to tell you excepting that I have lost my

father. He died quite suddenly, about two months ago, from heart failure."

"Ah!" said Mr. Davenant, "I had a presentiment that it was so. Seeing you in mourning, I was afraid to ask after him; and I need not tell you how deeply I sympathize with you. I remember how much you were to one another. What a mercy it is that you were married!"

To this I made no reply, and for a time we walked on slowly without speaking. But though nothing was said, much was thought, at least by me. For I had to make up my mind now, and once for all, on a point that I felt to be of vital importance. Should I tell him how things were with me? Or should I let him think that all was well, and that I was a normal married woman? Something—I did not ask myself what—urged me to tell him everything. But caution, prudence, whispered—and that none too softly—that it were better not. The sudden wave of emotion that had surged over me at the sound of his voice was still a vivid and startling memory; and it counselled reticence.

Thus two opposing forces contended; on the one hand, an emotional impulse, on the other the admonitions of reason; and it is needless to say that reason played losing game. Swiftly I argued out the issues. Sooner or later, the inevitable question must come, and with it the choice of an evasion or a straightforward answer. If it was to be evasion, then must I put Jasper Davenant out of my life at once and for ever, for the evasion could never be maintained; must shut out this gleam of sunshine that came to me from the old, happy days as if to light up my sombre, lonely life, and wend on my pilgrimage without a friend save the companions of my working days.

And reason whispered again that it were better so.

Chapter XIV

Jasper Davenant

THE silence that had fallen between me and my companion remained unbroken (with one exception, when he briefly drew my attention to the old stone name-tablet, inscribed "Wardour Streete 1686") until we came opposite a church,

standing back from the road, and distinguished by a sort of tumour—containing a clock—on its spire. Here Mr. Davenant halted, and looking up at the tower, remarked :

"A quaint-looking church, this ; odd and ugly, but yet not without a certain character and picturesqueness. Quite an aristocratic church, too, for it is the burial place of a king."

"Indeed," said I. "Which of the kings is buried there ? "

"He was but a shabby little king—Theodore of Corsica—and he has the shabbiest little moralizing monument. But he was a somewhat original monarch in his way, for, being in acute financial difficulties, he conceived the briliant idea of making over his kingdom to his creditors. Would you care to see the monument ? "

I assented, without enthusiasm, and we mounted the steps to the grimy churchyard, where presently, against the wall of the church, we found the monument. And still, as we deciphered the weathered inscription, I debated the question whether I should or should not tell him ; and still I reached no conclusion.

"By the way," my companion said, suddenly, "I am acting the showman on the assumption that you are the complete and perfect country bumpkin. But perhaps you are, by now, a fully acclimatized Londoner. How long have you been living in town ? "

"About a month."

"Then the hay-seed is still in your hair, so to speak. I still address a country cousin, and have not presumed unduly ; though, no doubt, you are beginning to learn the rudiments. I heard Mr. Campbell speak of Wellclose Square, for instance, as a region known to you."

"Yes. That is where I live."

As I caught his look of astonishment my heart began to race ; for I knew that the inevitable question was coming.

"I suppose your husband is connected with the docks ? "

"No," I replied. "And he doesn't live at Wellclose Square. I am not living with my husband, Mr. Davenant. I never have lived with him, and it is not my intention ever to live with him."

The deed was done. The murder was out. And though I knew that I had taken the wrong course, I drew a deep

breath of relief. As to Mr. Davenant, he was, for a few moments, too much taken aback to make any comment. At length he said, somewhat gloomily :

"I am sorry to hear this, Mrs. Otway. Very sorry. It sounds as if your domestic affairs were not very comfortable."

"They are not," I answered. "But, as I have told you so much, I should like to tell you what the position really is. Would you mind ? "

"Mind ! " he exclaimed. "Of course I want to know, if you are willing to tell me. Aren't we old friends ? I am most concerned about you."

"Thank you, Mr. Davenant. I *should* like to tell you how this extraordinary position has come about. Shall we sit down ? This place is quieter than the street."

He dusted the wooden bench with his handkerchief, and we sat down just below the shabby monument of the poor, little, bankrupt king. And there I told once again that tragic story of cross-purposes and well-meant blundering. I had intended to give him but a bare outline of the catastrophe ; but it could not be. For the bald fact was that I had sold myself to Mr. Otway for money ; and my womanly pride and self-respect would not be satisfied with anything short of a complete justification such as might be accepted by a scrupulous, high-minded man. And as I poured out my miserable history, glancing at him from time to time, I was surprised and almost alarmed at the change that came over him. He was a sunny-natured man, buoyant, high-spirited, playful and humorous, though all in a quiet way. But now, as he listened to my story, the genial face grew rigid, the humorous mouth set hard and stern, and the short, sharp questions that he put from time to time, came in a voice that was strange to me.

"So now," said I, when I had come to the end of my recital, "you will understand why I refuse to recognize this marriage ; and why I elect to live the life of a spinster, though without a spinster's privileges."

In a moment his face softened, and his clear, hazel eyes looked into mine with grave tenderness.

"Yes," he said ; "I understand. I wish I could say more. I wish I could tell you adequately how I grieve for you—for all the sorrow that you have had to endure and

for the maimed life that lies before you. But words are poor instruments." He laid his hand on mine for an instant, and added: "Yet I hope you will feel what I want to express in these threadbare phrases."

I thanked him for the sympathy, which he had indeed made very clearly evident, and for a time neither of us spoke. Nevertheless, I could see that he was cogitating something. Once or twice he seemed about to speak, for he looked at me, but then again bent his gaze reflectively on the ground. At length, with some hesitation, he said:

"I hope you won't think me inquisitive or impertinent, but I feel rather anxious as to—as to how you are placed. I gather that this man Otway does not—er—contribute——."

"He is quite willing to. But I can't allow him to maintain me if I repudiate the marriage."

"No; at least I think you are quite wise not to. But—you don't mind my asking, do you? Are you properly provided for? I'm really not——"

"Of course, you're not," I interrupted, smiling at his diffidence. "As to my means—well, I don't quite know what they will be eventually, but at present I am living in a reasonable state of comfort. I am not anxious about the future."

My answer did not seem to satisfy him completely, for he continued to cogitate rather uneasily. But, now that I had the key, I could read pretty clearly, without the aid of any magic crystal, what was passing in his mind. He knew that I lived in a squalid east-end neighbourhood. He had seen me at the dealers, and evidently surmised that I was not there as a buyer; that I was in straitened circumstances—perhaps in a state of actual poverty—and that I was disposing of my jewellery and valuables to enable me to live. That, I had no doubt, was what he suspected; and the question that he was debating so earnestly was whether he could, without impertinence, extract any further information and whether our friendship was intimate enough to allow of his making any kind of offer of help.

I should have liked to set his mind at rest, but, in truth, I was none too confident about my future. That depended largely on the nature of Mr. Campbell's offer; on my ability to earn a reasonable livelihood.

"Well," Mr. Davenant said, at length, "I hope your confidence is justified. But in any case, I suppose you have friends?"

"There's no need for you to worry about me," I replied, evasively—for I had no near relatives from whom I could claim assistance. "I am in quite comfortable circumstances at present. And now let us put away my bothersome affairs and talk of something more pleasant."

"Very well," said he. "Let us choose an agreeable topic and discuss it in all its bearings as we used to do." He drew his watch from his pocket, and, glancing at it, continued: "It is now nearly one o'clock. What do you say to the question of lunch as an agreeable topic for our debate?"

I admitted that the subject was not without its attractions.

"Then," said he, "I will suggest that a club is an appropriate place in which to consume it, and that a mixed club satisfies the most extreme proprieties."

"I should hardly have suspected you of a mixed club."

"In strict confidence," he replied, "between you and me and our friend Theodore of insolvent memory, I have another—unmixed—for normal club purposes. This one is my lunch club. It is quite near to my chambers, and is quieter and more pleasant than a restaurant. And it has a special character of its own, as is indicated by its name. It is called the 'Magpies' Club."

"That sounds rather ominous."

"Doesn't it? But it isn't a burglars' club. Its members are collectors and connoisseurs—furniture and china maniacs and so forth; and the main function of the club is to enable them to show their specimens to one another and to exchange or sell duplicate pieces. May I take it that you consent to honour the 'Magpies'?"

I accepted the invitation gladly, for a month's residence in the East End had made me decidedly appreciative of the amenities of the more civilized regions. We decided to walk to Essex Street, in which the club had its premises, and to go by way of the side streets for greater quiet and ease of conversation.

"You spoke just now of your chambers," said I. "Does that mean that you are in practice now?"

"Yes. But not in the law. I finished my legal studies

and got called, but then I decided to give up the Bench and the Woolsack, though they shouted for me never so loudly, and return to an old love. I am now an architect."

"Is a barrister allowed to practice as an architect?"

"On that I am not quite clear; but it really doesn't matter to me. It is a question for the benchers or other authorities."

"Have you been in practice long?"

"Exactly three weeks to-day. And when I tell you that I have already received a commission to design and erect a greenhouse no less than twelve feet by eight in plan, you will realize that I am mounting the ladder of professional success, with the speed of an eagle with a balloon attachment. My client, by the way, is a member of the club."

Thus gossiping, we made our way by devious routes through the less frequented streets, by Garrick Street, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, until, by the Law Courts, we emerged into the Strand, crossed to Essex Street, and presently arrived at the roomy, old-fashioned house in which the Magpies had their meeting-place.

It was a pleasant, homely club, and certainly there could be no question as to its eminent respectability, for the aspect of the members—mostly middle-aged and many of them elderly—bordered on the frumpish. The room in which we selected our table was a large, oblong apartment, quietly furnished and decorated and provided with a glazed museum case, which occupied the centre; while a sort of daïs at one end was devoted to the display of pieces of furniture exhibited by the members. I noticed, too, that the walls were occupied by pictures, each of which bore a written descriptive label.

"Are you interested in ancient ivories?" Mr. Davenant asked, as we looked into the glass case, in which a collection of very brown and cracked specimens were exhibited by a Mr. Udimore-Jones. "For my part, I find it difficult to develop great enthusiasm over the dental arrangements of superannuated elephants, carved into funny shapes by piously-facetious middle-agers. Look out! Here comes my client. Let us sneak off to our table. Aha! Too late! She's seen us."

"Which is your client?" I asked, looking round furtively.

"The elderly damsel with the smile—a Miss Tallboy-Smith. There! She has caught my eye now. Did you ever see such a set of teeth? She had better be careful or Udimore-Jones will have her."

We were edging away towards our table, with a feeble hope of escape, when she caught us.

"Now, I don't believe you've seen my cup," she exclaimed, with an engaging smile. "You must see it. It is not only genuine Nantgarw, but the roses on it are unquestionable Billingsleys."

"Observe," said Mr. Davenant, "the pride of the inveterate collector. You'd think she had painted those roses herself."

"Indeed, you wouldn't," retorted Miss Tallboy-Smith; "not if you had seen them and knew anything about ceramic painting. And as to pride, isn't it something to be proud of? Nantgarw porcelain is rare, and roses painted by Billingsley are rare; and when you have them both in a single piece, why then, you see, you——"

"Then," said Mr. Davenant, "you multiply the rarity of the one by the rarity of the other, and the product of the multiplication is the rarity of the piece as a whole."

"Isn't he absurd?" she simpered, treating me to a complete private view of the "ancient ivories." "Perfectly incorrigible. Don't you agree with me, Miss—Mrs——"

"Otway," said I.

"Oh, really! Now I wonder—my brother knew a Mr. ——. Oh, but he was a money-lender. That wouldn't be—but won't you come and look at my cup?"

We returned to the glass case, of which Miss Tallboy-Smith opened a door and lifted from its shelf a dainty porcelain teacup.

"Just feel how thin and light it is," she said, holding it out to me.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Mr. Davenant. "This Nantgarw stuff crumbles like a baked egg-shell; and it's hideously valuable."

"Don't take any notice of him," said Miss Tallboy-Smith. "Just feel it—it's positively delicious to touch; and look at the lovely roses; no one but William Billingsley could have painted those roses. And, if there could be

any doubt, you have only to turn the piece up and look at the bottom. There is Billingsley's personal mark—the Number 7. That's infallible."

I took from her hand the delicate, translucent cup, and was admiring the freedom and softness of the flower-painting when she drew nearer and said in a warning whisper:

"Here comes Major Dewham-Brown. If he tries to sell you anything, don't buy it. He only brings his bad bargains here."

She had barely uttered her warning when a brassy voice behind me exclaimed: "How d'you do, Miss Tallboy-Smith? and how are you, Davenant?" and a tall, smart, rather stupid-looking man with a large nose—which seemed to have been produced at the expense of his eyes and chin—sailed into my field of vision.

"Ha!" said he. "Pretty cup, that. Worth a pot of money, too, I expect, though I don't know much about 'em. And that reminds me that I've got rather an interesting thing that I picked up the other day; bit of old church plate; seventeenth century, if not earlier. Like to see it?"

Without waiting for a reply, he fished out of a "poacher's" pocket a flat object wrapped in a silk handkerchief.

"Curious piece, this: interested me very much. The repoussé-work on it is remarkably fine." He unfolded the handkerchief as he spoke, and at length extracted, with a sort of conjuror's flourish, a small, circular, silver platter—apparently a paten, to judge by its size. This he handed to Miss Tallboy-Smith, who grinned at it indulgently and passed it to Mr. Davenant, who, having looked it over without enthusiasm, handed it to me. A very brief inspection, with the piece in my hand, was enough to make Miss Tallboy-Smith's warning unnecessary; for, apart from the unsuitability of the ornament—if it was really meant for a paten—it was an obvious electrotype, which had, however, been pickled, polished and sulphured with intent to deceive. Having noted this fact, I returned the piece to its owner with a few words of polite and colourless commendation of the design; and the Major, chilled by the lack of enthusiasm, invested his treasure once more in

its silken wrapping and went off in search of a more appreciative audience. Under cover of his parting courtesies to Miss Tallboy-Smith, Mr. Davenant and I retreated to our table.

"That antique of the Major's looked to me rather like a fake," said my companion, when we had ordered our lunch. "It was so very venerable."

"It is an electrotype, sulphured to give an appearance of age," said I.

"Is it, by Jove? Now, how did you spot it as an electrotype?"

"It was the disagreement between the back and the face that first attracted my attention. The face was repoussé—pretty coarse too—but there was not a vestige of a toolmark on the back, where, of course, most of the punch-marks would be; nothing but the smooth surface of the deposited metal."

Mr. Davenant chuckled. "I seem to have imported an expert Magpie. Oh! But I remember now that you and your father used to do all sorts of wonderful works in metal. Ha, ha! Poor old Dewham-Brown! He little suspected that he was dealing with a practical artificer."

Here the advent of food put a temporary stop to conversation, for we were both pretty sharp-set; but during the progress of the meal I looked about me and was vastly entertained by the proceedings of the Magpies. The glass case was the centre of interest, around which a small crowd of enthusiasts gathered, eagerly discussing the exhibits, which the proud owners expounded, with their noses flattened against the glass, or tenderly lifted out for closer inspection. And now and again a new exhibitor would arrive with a bag or attaché case, from which fresh treasures were disgorged into the glazed sanctuary.

"I suppose," said I, "your members will have nothing to do with any but antique works?"

"Not as a rule," Mr. Davenant replied. "The collector is usually a lover of old things. But there are exceptions. A good many of the pictures shown here are modern; some, I suspect, are shown by the artists themselves. Then we have one member who collects modern pottery exclusively—not commercial stuff, of course, but the work of modern artist-potters, like De Morgan, the Martin Brothers and

other individual workers. Fine stuff it is, too. I have a few pieces myself. And, talk of the old gentleman—there he is. I'll fetch him over and make him show us what he has got in that bag."

He rose from the table, and crossed the room, and I saw him accost a very tall, pleasant-looking young man who was bearing down on the glass case with a good-sized hand-bag, but readily allowed himself to be led over our table.

"Now, Hawkesley," said Mr. Davenant, "my guest wants to see what really high-class modern pottery is like. What have you got?"

"I have only three pieces with me," replied Mr. Hawkesley, "and they are all of the same type; what I call 'mystery-ware.'"

"What is the mystery about it?" Mr. Davenant asked.

"The mystery is, who makes it? As far as I know, there is only one dealer who has it, and he absolutely refuses to say where he gets it. I have never seen any of it exhibited—excepting here—and nobody can tell me the name of the potter or anything about it beyond the fact that it seems to be the exclusive monopoly of this one dealer, and that he has very little of it, and charges accordingly. But it is wonderful stuff." He lifted out of his bag a couple of jars and a bowl—handling them with that curious delicacy that one often notices in persons with large, strong, supple hands—and placed them carefully on the table.

"You see," he continued, "there are two methods of treatment, which are sometimes combined, as on this jar; and these two styles are based on two very different types of old work—the old English slip-ware, such as the Wrotham and Staffordshire and Toft-ware, and the old French Henri Deux, or Oiron ware. In the one, the ornament is produced by laying on pipes or threads of coloured slip—that is, clay in the semi-liquid state; in the other by inlaying coloured paste or enamel in cavities in the body, which seems to be made with tools like those used by bookbinders. This covered jar—which looks almost like a piece of fine Japanese cloisonné—and this bowl show the inlay method, and this other jar is an example of the slip decoration, but with one or two spots of enamel inlay."

"I think I prefer the pure inlay," said Mr. Davenant.

"So do I," said Mr. Hawkesley, "and so, I think, does the artist. All his finest work is done by the inlay method, though he uses the slip decoration with such skill and taste that it is virtually a new method. The old Wrotham and Toft-ware looks very primitive by the side of this scholarly, refined work."

I turned the three pieces of pottery over in my hands and warmly commended the judgment of the collector. No modern work that I had ever seen approached it for perfection of finish or grace of design; while the colour-scheme combined richness, delicacy and restraint in a truly marvellous manner. It seemed to unite the brilliancy of enamel to the sober beauty of old tapestry. And even the little blue bird, inlaid on the bottom of each piece to form the potter's mark, was finished with care and taste.

"May one inquire as to the local habitation and name of the dealer?" Mr. Davenant asked.

"You may," was the reply. "His name is Maurice Goldstein, and he is to be found at Number 56, Hand Court, Holborn. And I should like to wring his neck."

We both laughed at the vindictive tone in which this benevolent wish was uttered, and at the sudden ferocity of aspect that swept over the usually good-humoured, kindly face.

"Why this homicidal craving?" Mr. Davenant asked.

"Don't you see," the other demanded, indignantly, "that this infernal Goldswine—I beg your pardon——"

"You needn't," said I.

"That this miserable huckster is grinding the face of some poor artist; that he is not only devouring the earnings of this industrious, painstaking worker, but—for his own paltry profit—he is robbing that artist of the credit—of the fame—to which his genius and his enthusiasm entitle him. Look at this lovely jar! I gave that maw worm ten guineas for it. How much do you suppose he gave the potter?"

"Ten shillings, perhaps," suggested Mr. Davenant.

"Probably not much more, though there is getting on for a week's work in it."

"Still," I said, with a mischievous desire to stir up his indignation afresh, "the potter probably enjoys making these beautiful things. The work is its own reward."

"I can't agree to that," Mr. Hawkesley rejoined, warmly. "He doesn't enjoy being hard up and having to work for a pittance. Besides, it isn't just. This man makes a jar that is going to give me a life-long pleasure. I want to pay him for that pleasure. I want to know who he is, to shake his hand and thank him and tell him that he is the salt of the earth. And this Shylock hides him away and just feeds on him like the beastly parasite that he is."

He gathered up the treasured masterpieces, and having wished us adieu, with a sudden return to his customary geniality, crossed to the glass case to find a vacant niche for his samples of "mystery ware."

"I like Jack Hawkesley," said my companion, as we watched him.

"So do I," I agreed warmly. "He takes a human interest in the artist. I wish more collectors were like him."

"Yes," said Mr. Davenant. "He is a good type of rich man. Would that there were more Hawkesleys." He poured out the coffee which the waitress had just brought and then asked: "What do you think of this club—as a feeding and resting place, I mean?"

"It seems a comfortable, homely place, and the members and their exhibits are quite interesting."

"I find it so. You wouldn't care to join, I suppose? It is cheap, as clubs go: five guineas a year and no entrance fee. I should think you would find it a great convenience, living so far from the centre of town."

"It *would* be a great convenience. But should I be eligible? I am not a collector, you know."

"No, but you are something of an expert. At any rate, Hawkesley and I would manage the formalities. Think it over, and if you decide to honour us, drop me a line. This is my address—56, Clifford's Inn."

He handed me his card, and when he had made a note of my address, I prepared to depart.

"I have wasted a fearful amount of your time, Mr. Davenant," said I; "but it has been a very pleasant interlude for me."

"Has it really? I hope it has. For my part, I have enjoyed myself just as I did in the old days when you used to let me wag a philosophic chin at you, and I am reluctant

to let you go so soon. Mayn't I see you to the station, or wherever you are going?"

"I thought of walking back to get myself acquainted with London."

"Then let me put you on the right road and show you some of the short cuts."

"But what about your work?"

He regarded me with that quaint, humorous smile that I had always found so attractive. "My work is, at present, of a somewhat intermittent type. This is one of the intermissions. Let us fare forth and study the architectural beauties of the Metropolis."

And we fared forth accordingly.

The short cuts discovered by my companion did not in the least conform to Euclid's definition of a straight line; and their brevity was relieved by sundry excursions into alleys and by-streets and incursions into churches and other ancient buildings. They led us by way of the Temple and its old round church, Mitre Court, Fetter Lane, Nevill's Court, Gough Square, and so to St. Paul's Churchyard and into the Cathedral; thence by Paul's Alley, Paternoster Row, Cheapside and Lombard Street, dropping into one or two churches on our way, until we came out on Great Tower Hill, and drifted slowly down Royal Mint Street. And all the while we gossiped pleasantly of this wonderful city and its wonderful, inexhaustible past; and my guide expounded, with all his old gaiety and brightness—and with astonishing knowledge of his subject—until I had almost forgotten Wellclose Square and the sinister shadow that hung over my life, and seemed to be back in the untroubled days of my girlhood.

But not quite. For, even as I talked—or more often listened—with the liveliest interest and pleasure, a project was maturing in my mind. I had, in fact, conceived a brilliant idea. Mr. Davenant's suggestion that I should join the club had started a train of thought that ran as an under-current—in the subconscious mind, perhaps, as Lilith would have said. It had begun vaguely when I saw the modern pictures on the walls, and the modern works in the glass case and the Major hawking round his little platter. Here was a place in which the work of the unknown artist could be shown and perhaps sold; my own

work, Lilith's work, the Titmouse's, Philibar's, even Miss Polton's. For five guineas a year I could open this emporium, not only to myself, but to my fellow-workers; could slip past the dealer and secure his profits for us all. I say it was a brilliant idea—at least, it appeared so to me; and throughout that long peregrination, made delightful by the sympathetic companionship of my newly-recovered friend it germinated and grew until, as we halted to say good-bye at the corner of Cable Street, it had grown to full maturity.

"I have been thinking," said I, "of your suggestion—about joining the club, you know. It would be nice to have a place to go to for a rest or a meal, in the centre of town. And I shall often want such a place."

His face brightened perceptibly—perhaps at the implied assurance that I could afford to spend five guineas.

"Then, may I put your name up for election?"

"Will you be so kind?"

"Won't I? It will be jolly, and we shan't lose sight of one another again; though that was my fault for not writing. I was often on the point of sending you a letter, and then I felt a silly diffidence—thought that you might consider I was presuming on a mere acquaintanceship. However, I will propose you for membership at once, and in about a week's time you will be a full-blown Magpie. Then I will send you a line, though, of course, you will get the official notification."

He handed me my bag, and with a hearty hand-shake, we said "Good-bye," and went our respective ways.

It was but a few minutes' walk to Wellclose Square, and I took it slowly; for now that my companion was gone and I was bereft of his buoyancy and vitality, I was suddenly aware of intense bodily fatigue. Moreover, I felt a certain reluctance to bring to a definite close what had been an interval of quiet but perfect happiness. And so, in spite of my fatigue, I sauntered on, loitering awhile in St. George's churchyard and stopping to look up at the quaint stone name-tablet at the corner of Chigwell Lane, until weariness and growing hunger drove me homewards. And even then, it was not without regret that I pulled the

brass bell-knob and, as it were, wrote "Finis" to this pleasant and eventful chapter.

Chapter XV — *The Magic Pendulum*

THE weighty question whether my handicraft would yield me a livelihood was answered on the following morning by the arrival of a letter from Mr. Campbell; and it was answered, though not very emphatically, in the affirmative. The prices that he offered, provisionally—and advised me not to accept—were appallingly low; very little above those of mere commercial goods. But even so, it would be possible, by hard work and spare living, to eke out a bare subsistence. And it was fair to assume that Mr. Campbell's offer was, as indeed he explicitly stated, a minimum, on which an advance might be expected. Accordingly, I declined the offer and decided to await the results of actual sales to his customers.

I was turning these matters over at the breakfast table, when Lilith came and took a vacant chair by my side.

"Well, Sibyl," she said, in a low voice, "how did you fare yesterday? Did you have any success?"

"Yes. I came back with an empty bag."

"And a full purse?"

"Ah! That is another matter. The tide of handicraft doesn't seem exactly to lead on to fortune."

"I want to hear all about it," said Lilith. "But we can't discuss it here. Let us have a quiet talk up in my room after breakfast. If you will run up when you've finished, I will join you in a few minutes."

I assented gladly, for Lilith, apart from what the irreverent Titmouse characterised as her "crystal-gazing tosh," was a sound adviser on business affairs; and a few minutes later I betook myself upstairs to her studio. I had scarcely seen this room before, for there was an unwritten law, sternly enforced by Miss Polton, forbidding the boarders to enter one another's workrooms except by invitation and on specific business, and I now looked about me with a good deal of curiosity.

It was a queer room. The two sides of Lilith's personality,

like two separate persons, seemed to have parcelled it out into two distinct territories. There was the working territory, neat, precise, business-like, strangely free from the usual muddle and disorder of a woman-artist's studio ; the big water-colour easel, the orderly painting cabinet, the papier-maché lay figure, quaintly arrayed in a walking costume such as might have been seen in a Regent Street shop window (miraculously built up, as I observed, of draperies, pinned, tied or lightly stitched together), the charcoal studies from the figure, pinned up on the wall for reference, with careful pencil drawings of heads, hands and feet, and one or two casts of faces and hands. The working department was a model of matter-of-fact efficiency.

In curious contrast to this was the domain of Lilith, the mystic. In a well-lighted corner stood a small table supporting a black velvet cushion on which reposed a crystal globe of the size of a cricket ball. Above the table a couple of book-shelves exhibited a collection of volumes treating of Spiritualism, Telepathy, Apparitions, Psychical Research, and other occult subjects. On the upper shelf stood a bowl filled with the letters of a dissected alphabet ; while, hanging on the wall, was a small heart-shaped object with tiny castors, which I assumed to be Planchette, and by its side a single Egyptian bead suspended at the end of a silken thread.

Yet these two aspects of this strange girl's character were not without a connecting link. On the walls were several framed paintings signed " Winifred Blake," mystical figure subjects, recalling, but not imitating, the works of Burne Jones and Rosetti, exquisitely drawn and delicately painted in water-colour. The work on the easel was a similar drawing of a freize-like character, the figures nude but with lightly indicated draperies ; and one of the nude figures had been traced on to a fashion-plate board and was already partly clothed in the walking costume.

My survey of the room and its contents was interrupted by the arrival of its occupant, who having seated me in the easy chair, perched herself on her painting-stool and opened the examination.

" Now," said she, " I don't want to be inquisitive, but I do want to know just how you got on. Did you carry out the methods that I proposed ? "

"I did—at least as far as the silent willing was concerned—though not very thoroughly. I don't think I did much in the way of suggestion."

"And did you sell your work?"

"Yes, I think I may say I did," and here I gave her an account of Mr. Campbell's two alternative offers.

"You have done admirably, Sibyl," she said enthusiastically. "Your first essay has been a perfect success. And now, tell me: are you convinced?"

As I could not truthfully say that I was, I took refuge in polite evasion, which, however, Lilith brushed aside with some impatience.

"I can never understand this kind of scepticism," said she. "You have the cause and effect before your eyes, but yet you refuse to recognise the connection. You take your work to this man. Outside the shop you will that he shall buy it. You go in and he does buy it. What more could you want?"

"But he might have bought the things if I hadn't willed, you know."

"Yes," she agreed; "he might. But that is not the way we reason about material things. I strike a match and apply it to a laid fire, and the fire burns. It might have burned if I had not applied the lighted match, but no one doubts the connection between the lighted match and the lighted fire. Physical causes and effects are accepted with unquestioning faith, but as soon as we come to spiritual or psychical phenomena, this extraordinary scepticism springs up—this curious refusal to admit and accept the obvious."

"I am not asserting that there was no connection between the silent willing and the purchase of my work," said I. "All I say is that I don't regard the connection as proved. I can't decide for or against because there doesn't seem to be enough evidence either way."

"Yes; I suppose you are right," she admitted, reluctantly. "But I should like to convince you, because I am sure you have very unusual powers."

She was silent for a short space, and then, suddenly, she asked:

"Have you ever been to a séance, Sibyl?"

"Never," I replied.

"Well," said she, "you ought to go to one—not to any of those silly public shows conducted by mere mountebanks, but to a private séance, carried out by really earnest people who are seeking to extend our knowledge. Would you care to come to one with me?"

"It would be rather interesting," I replied, without much enthusiasm.

"It would," said she. "You were speaking of evidence just now. Well, at a genuine séance you would obtain evidence that I think would convince you of the reality of psychical phenomena. I have a friend—a Mr. Quecks—who has given me some most remarkable demonstrations, and I have no doubt that he would be very pleased for you to accompany me to one of them."

"Is Mr. Quecks a medium?" I asked.

"No; I shouldn't describe him as a medium, though he is very sensitive and has most extraordinary powers. But he is a profound student of super-normal phenomena and deeply interested in psychical research. May I ask him to show you some of his experiments?"

"Thank you, Lilith; and I hope you will find me less disappointing than you have to-day. I am really quite curious about these things, although I admit a rather sceptical frame of mind. I was wondering, before you came up, what you do with that bead on the string."

"That," replied Lilith, all agog at the question, "is the *pendule explorateur*—the magic pendulum. It is an instrument of the kind known in psychical science as an autoscope—an appliance for, as it were, bringing the subconscious into view."

"But how does it work?"

"It works by the influence of the subconscious mind upon the muscles. Let me show you—but you shall try it yourself because you are an unbeliever."

She removed the crystal ball and its cushion from the table, and taking the bowl of loose letters, turned out its contents and rapidly arranged the letters in a circle, forming a clock-wise alphabet. Then she took the pendulum down from its hook.

"Now," said she, "what you have to do is this: you rest your elbow on the table to steady your hand, and you hold the string with the thumb and finger, letting the bead

hang just clear of the table in the centre of the circle ; and you must keep your hand perfectly still and steady."

"But if I do, the bead will remain still, too."

"No, it won't, excepting just at first. Presently it will begin to swing, apparently of its own accord, but really in accordance with your mental state. For instance, if you let it hang inside a glass and you will that it shall strike the hour, it will strike the hour. If you will—or I hold your other hand and will—that it shall swing round in a circle to the right or left, it will swing round in the direction willed. But that is an exercise of the conscious will. In the experiment that we are making now we tap the subconscious. If there is any thing or person occupying your subconscious mind, the pendulum will spell out the name of that thing or person by swinging towards the letters. Let me put the chair comfortably for you, so that you can keep quite still."

As I listened to Lilith's explanation I began to wish heartily that I had never embarked on this experiment. Of course, I did not believe for a moment that this absurd pendulum would develop the occult powers that Lilith claimed for it ; but yet her confidence shook mine. And I had a very strong feeling that, on this day of all days, I should prefer to keep my subconscious mind to myself. However, there was no escape ; so I seated myself and proceeded to carry out Lilith's directions.

For nearly half a minute the bead hung quite motionless from my steady hand. Then it began almost imperceptibly to oscillate. My eye had already taken in the positions of the letters which might be incriminating, and now I observed with uneasy surprise that the faint oscillations of the pendulum were taking a direction towards the letter J. I could detect no movement in my hand, but, nevertheless, the oscillations grew wider and wider until the bead, as if possessed by a private demon, swung briskly half-way across the circle.

"That is pretty definite," said Lilith. "It is swinging towards U—or is it J ? The circle ought to have been bigger, so that the letters need not have been opposite to one another. But I'll write down both ; U or J."

The swing of the pendulum now began to shorten ; and then, almost abruptly, it changed its direction to one at