# A Mystery

RICHARD MARSH

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# THE BEETLE

BY

RICHARD MARSH

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# BOOK I

# THE HOUSE WITH THE OPEN WINDOW

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## *The Surprising Narration of Robert Holt*

## CHAPTER I

### OUTSIDE

'No room!—Full up!'

He banged the door in my face.

That was the final blow.

To have tramped about all day looking for work; to have begged even for a job which would give me money enough to buy a little food; and to have tramped and to have begged in vain,—that was bad. But, sick at heart, depressed in mind and in body, exhausted by hunger and fatigue, to have been compelled to pocket any little pride I might have left, and solicit, as the penniless, homeless tramp which indeed I was, a night's lodging in the casual ward,—and to solicit it in vain! —that was worse. Much worse. About as bad as bad could be.

I stared, stupidly, at the door which had just been banged in my face. I could scarcely believe that the thing was possible. I had hardly expected to figure as a tramp; but, supposing it conceivable that I could become a tramp, that I should be refused admission to that abode of all ignominy, the tramp's ward, was to have attained a depth of misery of which never even in nightmares I had dreamed.

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As I stood wondering what I should do, a man slouched towards me out of the shadow of the wall.

'Won't 'e let yer in?'

'He says it's full.'

'Says it's full, does 'e? That's the lay at Fulham,—they always says it's full. They wants to keep the number down.'

I looked at the man askance. His head hung forward; his hands were in his trouser pockets; his clothes were rags; his tone was husky.

'Do you mean that they say it's full when it isn't,—that they won't let me in although there's room?'

'That's it,—bloke's a-kiddin' yer.'

'But, if there's room, aren't they bound to let me in?'

'Course they are,—and, blimey, if I was you I'd make 'em. Blimey I would!'

He broke into a volley of execrations.

'But what am I to do?'

'Why, give 'em another rouser—let 'em know as you won't be kidded!'

I hesitated; then, acting on his suggestion, for the second time I rang the bell. The door was flung wide open, and the grizzled pauper, who had previously responded to my summons, stood in the open doorway. Had he been the Chairman of the Board of Guardians himself he could not have addressed me with greater scorn.

'What, here again! What's your little game? Think I've nothing better to do than to wait upon the likes of you?'

'I want to be admitted.'

'Then you won't be admitted!'

'I want to see someone in authority.'

'Ain't yer seein' someone in authority?'

'I want to see someone beside you,—I want to see the master.'

'Then you won't see the master!'

He moved the door swiftly to; but, prepared for such a manœuvre, I thrust my foot sufficiently inside to prevent his shutting it. I continued to address him.

'Are you sure that the ward is full?'

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'Full two hours ago!'
'But what am I to do?'
'I don't know what you're to do!'
'Which is the next nearest workhouse?
'Kensington.'

Suddenly opening the door, as he answered me, putting out his arm he thrust me backwards. Before I could recover the door was closed. The man in rags had continued a grim spectator of the scene. Now he spoke.

'Nice blcke, ain't he?'

'He's only one of the paupers,—has he any right to act as one of the officials?'

'I tell yer some of them paupers is wuss than the orficers,—a long sight wuss! They thinks they owns the 'ouses, blimey they do. Oh it's a —— fine world, this is!'

He paused. I hesitated. For some time there had been a suspicion of rain in the air. Now it was commencing to fall in a fine but soaking drizzle. It only needed that to fill my cup to overflowing. My companion was regarding me with a sort of sullen curiosity.

'Ain't you got no money?'
'Not a farthing.'
'Done much of this sort of thing?'
'It's the first time I've been to a casual ward,—and it doesn't seem as if I'm going to get in now.'
'I thought you looked as if you was a bit fresh. —What are yer goin' to do?'
'How far is it to Kensington?'
'Work'us?—about three mile;—but, if I was you, I'd try St George's.'
'Where s that?'
'In the Fulham Road. Kensington's only a small place, they do you well there, and it's always full as soon as the door's opened;—you'd 'ave more chawnce at St George's.'

He was silent. I turned his words over in my mind, feeling as little disposed to try the one place as the other. Presently he began again.

'I've travelled from Reading this —— day, I 'ave, —tramped every —— foot!—and all the way as I come

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along. I'll 'ave a shakedown at 'Ammersmith, I says, —and now I'm as fur off from it as ever! This is a —— fine country, this is,—I wish every —— soul in it was swept into the —— sea, blimey, I do! But I ain't goin' to go no further,—I'll 'ave a bed in 'Ammersmith or I'll know the reason why.'

'How are you going to manage it,—have you got any money?'

'Got any money?—My crikey!—I look as though I 'ad,—I sound as though I 'ad too! I ain't 'ad no brads, 'cept now and then a brown, this larst six months.'

'How are you going to get a bed then?'

''Ow am I going to?—why, like this way.' He picked up two stones, one in either hand. The one in his left he flung at the glass which was over the door of the casual ward. It crashed through it, and through the lamp beyond. 'That's 'ow I'm goin' to get a bed.'

The door was hastily opened. The grizzled pauper reappeared. He shouted, as he peered at us in the darkness.

'Who done that?'

'I done it, guvnor,—and, if you like, you can see me do the other. It might do your eyesight good.'

Before the grizzled pauper could interfere, he had hurled the stone in his right hand through another pane. I felt that it was time for me to go. He was earning a night's rest at a price which, even in my extremity, I was not disposed to pay.

When I left two or three other persons had appeared upon the scene, and the man in rags was addressing them with a degree of frankness, which, in that direction, left little to be desired. I slunk away unnoticed. But had not gone far before I had almost decided that I might as well have thrown in my fortune with the bolder wretch, and smashed a window too. Indeed, more than once my feet faltered, as I all but returned to do the feat which I had left undone.

A more miserable night for an out-of-door excursion I could hardly have chosen. The rain was like a mist, and was not only drenching me to the skin, but it was rendering it difficult to see more than a little distance

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in any direction. The neighbourhood was badly lighted. It was one in which I was a stranger. I had come to Hammersmith as a last resource. It had seemed to me that I had tried to find some occupation which would enable me to keep body and soul together in every other part of London, and that now only Hammersmith was left. And, at Hammersmith, even the workhouse would have none of me!

Retreating from the inhospitable portal of the casual ward, I had taken the first turning to the left,—and, at the moment, had been glad to take it. In the darkness and the rain, the locality which I was entering appeared unfinished. I seemed to be leaving civilisation behind me. The path was unpaved; the road rough and uneven, as if it had never been properly made. Houses were few and far between. Those which I did encounter, seemed, in the imperfect light, amid the general desolation, to be cottages which were crumbling to decay.

Exactly where I was I could not tell. I had a faint notion that, if I only kept on long enough, I should strike some part of Walham Green. How long I should have to keep on I could only guess. Not a creature seemed to be about of whom I could make inquiries. It was as if I was in a land of desolation.

I suppose it was between eleven o'clock and midnight. I had not given up my quest for work till all the shops were closed,—and in Hammersmith, that night, at anyrate, they were not early closers. Then I had lounged about dispiritedly, wondering what was the next thing I could do. It was only because I feared that if I attempted to spend the night in the open air, without food, when the morning came I should be broken up, and fit for nothing, that I sought a night's free board and lodging. It was really hunger which drove me to the workhouse door. That was Wednesday. Since the Sunday night preceding nothing had passed my lips save water from the public fountains,—with the exception of a crust of bread which a man had given me whom I had found crouching at the root of a tree in Holland Park. For three days I had been fasting,—practically all the time upon my feet. It

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seemed to me that if I had to go hungry till the morning I should collapse—there would be an end. Yet, in that strange and inhospitable place, where was I to get food at that time of night, and how?

I do not know how far I went. Every yard I covered, my feet dragged more. I was dead beat, inside and out. I had neither strength nor courage left. And within there was that frightful craving, which was as though it shrieked aloud. I leant against some palings, dazed and giddy. If only death had come upon me quickly, painlessly, how true a friend I should have thought it! It was the agony of dying inch by inch which was so hard to bear.

It was some minutes before I could collect myself sufficiently to withdraw from the support of the railings, and to start afresh. I stumbled blindly over the uneven road. Once, like a drunken man, I lurched forward, and fell upon my knees. Such was my backboneless state that for some seconds I remained where I was, half disposed to let things slide, accept the good the gods had sent me, and make a night of it just there. A long night, I fancy, it would have been, stretching from time unto eternity.

Having regained my feet, I had gone perhaps another couple of hundred yards along the road—Heaven knows that it seemed to me just then a couple of miles!—when there came over me again that overpowering giddiness which, I take it, was born of my agony of hunger. I staggered, helplessly, against a low wall which, just there, was at the side of the path. Without it I should have fallen in a heap. The attack appeared to last for hours; I suppose it was only seconds; and, when I came to myself, it was as though I had been aroused from a swoon of sleep,—aroused, to an extremity of pain. I exclaimed aloud,

'For a loaf of bread what wouldn't I do!'

I looked about me, in a kind of frenzy. As I did so I for the first time became conscious that behind me was a house. It was not a large one. It was one of those so-called villas which are springing up in multitudes all round London, and which are let at rentals of from twenty-five to forty pounds a year. It was detached.

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So far as I could see, in the imperfect light, there was not another building within twenty or thirty yards of either side of it. It was in two storeys. There were three windows in the upper storey. Behind each the blinds were closely drawn. The hall door was on my right. It was approached by a little wooden gate.

The house itself was so close to the public road that by leaning over the wall I could have touched either of the windows on the lower floor. There were two of them. One of them was a bow window. The bow window was open. The bottom centre sash was raised about six inches.

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# CHAPTER II

## INSIDE

I REALISED, and, so to speak, mentally photographed all the little details of the house in front of which I was standing with what almost amounted to a gleam of preternatural perception. An instant before, the world swam before my eyes. I saw nothing. Now I saw everything, with a clearness which, as it were, was shocking.

Above all, I saw the open window. I stared at it, conscious, as I did so, of a curious catching of the breath. It was so near to me; so very near. I had but to stretch out my hand to thrust it through the aperture. Once inside, my hand would at least be dry. How it rained out there! My scanty clothing was soaked; I was wet to the skin! I was shivering. And, each second, it seemed to rain still faster. My teeth were chattering. The damp was liquefying the very marrow in my bones.

And, inside that open window, it was, it must be, so warm, so dry!

There was not a soul in sight. Not a human being anywhere near. I listened; there was not a sound. I alone was at the mercy of the sodden night. Of all God's creatures the only one unsheltered from the fountains of Heaven which He had opened. There was not one to see what I might do; not one to care. I need fear no spy.

Perhaps the house was empty; nay, probably. It was my plain duty to knock at the door, rouse the inmates, and call attention to their oversight,—the open window. The least they could do would be to reward me for my pains. But, suppose the place was empty, what would be the use of knocking? It would be to make a useless clatter Possibly to disturb the

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neighbourhood, for nothing. And, even if the people were at home, I might go unrewarded. I had learned, in a hard school, the world's ingratitude. To have caused the window to be closed—the inviting window, the tempting window, the convenient window!—and then to be no better for it after all, but still to be penniless, hopeless, hungry, out in the cold and the rain—better anything than that. In such a situation, too late, I should say to myself that mine had been the conduct of a fool. And I should say it justly too. To be sure.

Leaning over the low wall I found that I could very easily put my hand inside the room. How warm it was in there! I could feel the difference of temperature in my finger-tips. Very quietly I stepped right over the wall. There was just room to stand in comfort between the window and the wall. The ground felt to the foot as if it were cemented. Stooping down, I peered through the opening. I could see nothing. It was black as pitch inside. The blind was drawn right up; it seemed incredible that anyone could be at home, and have gone to bed, leaving the blind up, and the window open. I placed my ear to the crevice. How still it was! Beyond doubt, the place was empty.

I decided to push the window up another inch or two, so as to enable me to reconnoitre. If anyone caught me in the act, then there would be an opportunity to describe the circumstances, and to explain how I was just on the point of giving the alarm. Only, I must go carefully. In such damp weather it was probable that the sash would creak.

Not a bit of it. It moved as readily and as noiselessly as if it had been oiled. This silence of the sash so emboldened me that I raised it more than I intended. In fact, as far as it would go. Not by a sound did it betray me. Bending over the sill I put my head and half my body into the room. But I was no forwarder. I could see nothing. Not a thing. For all I could tell the room might be unfurnished. Indeed, the likelihood of such an explanation began to occur to me. I might have chanced upon an empty house. In the darkness there was nothing to suggest the contrary. What was I to do?

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Well, if the house was empty, in such a plight as mine I might be said to have a moral, if not a legal, right, to its bare shelter. Who, with a heart in his bosom, would deny it me? Hardly the most punctilious landlord. Raising myself by means of the sill I slipped my legs into the room.

The moment I did so I became conscious that, at any rate, the room was not entirely unfurnished. The floor was carpeted. I have had my feet on some good carpets in my time; I know what carpets are; but never did I stand upon a softer one than that. It reminded me, somehow, even then, of the turf in Richmond Park,—it caressed my instep, and sprang beneath my tread. To my poor, travel-worn feet, it was luxury after the puddly, uneven road. Should I, now I had ascertained that the room was, at least, partially furnished, beat a retreat? Or should I push my researches further? It would have been rapture to have thrown off my clothes, and to have sunk down, on the carpet, then and there, to sleep. But,—I was so hungry; so famine-goaded; what would I not have given to have lighted on something good to eat!

I moved a step or two forward, gingerly, reaching out with my hands, lest I struck, unawares, against some unseen thing. When I had taken three or four such steps, without encountering an obstacle, or, indeed, anything at all, I began, all at once, to wish I had not seen the house; that I had passed it by; that I had not come through the window; that I were safely out of it again. I became, on a sudden, aware, that something was with me in the room. There was nothing, ostensible, to lead me to such a conviction; it may be that my faculties were unnaturally keen; but, all at once, I knew that there was something there. What was more, I had a horrible persuasion that, though unseeing, I was seen; that my every movement was being watched.

What it was that was with me I could not tell; I could not even guess. It was as though something in my mental organisation had been stricken by a sudden paralysis. It may seem childish to use such language; but I was overwrought, played out; physically speaking, at my last counter; and, in an instant, without the

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slightest warning, I was conscious of a very curious sensation, the like of which I had never felt before, and the like of which I pray that I never may feel again—a sensation of panic fear. I remained rooted to the spot on which I stood, not daring to move, fearing to draw my breath. I felt that the presence with me in the room was something strange, something evil.

I do not know how long I stood there, spell-bound, but certainly for some considerable space of time. By degrees, as nothing moved, nothing was seen, nothing was heard, and nothing happened, I made an effort to better play the man. I knew that, at the moment, I played the cur. And endeavoured to ask myself of what it was I was afraid. I was shivering at my own imaginings. What could be in the room, to have suffered me to open the window and to enter unopposed? Whatever it was, was surely to the full as great a coward as I was, or why permit, unchecked, my burglarious entry. Since I had been allowed to enter, the probability was that I should be at liberty to retreat,—and I was sensible of a much keener desire to retreat than I had ever had to enter.

I had to put the greatest amount of pressure upon myself before I could summon up sufficient courage to enable me to even turn my head upon my shoulders,—and the moment I did so I turned it back again. What constrained me, to save my soul I could not have said,—but I was constrained. My heart was palpitating in my bosom; I could hear it beat. I was trembling so that I could scarcely stand. I was overwhelmed by a fresh flood of terror. I stared in front of me with eyes in which, had it been light, would have been seen the frenzy of unreasoning fear. My ears were strained so that I listened with an acuteness of tension which was painful.

Something moved. Slightly, with so slight a sound, that it would scarcely have been audible to other ears save mine. But I heard. I was looking in the direction from which the movement came, and, as I looked, I saw in front of me two specks of light. They had not been there a moment before, that I would swear. They were there now. They were eyes,—I told myself they

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were eyes. I had heard how cats' eyes gleam in the dark, though I had never seen them, and I said to myself that these were cats' eyes; that the thing in front of me was nothing but a cat. But I knew I lied. I knew that these were eyes, and I knew they were not cats' eyes, but what eyes they were I did not know, —nor dared to think.

They moved,—towards me. The creature to which the eyes belonged was coming closer. So intense was my desire to fly that I would much rather have died than stood there still; yet I could not control a limb; my limbs were as if they were not mine. The eyes came on,—noiselessly. At first they were between two and three feet from the ground; but, on a sudden, there was a squelching sound, as if some yielding body had been squashed upon the floor. The eyes vanished, —to reappear, a moment afterwards, at what I judged to be a distance of some six inches from the floor. And they again came on.

So it seemed that the creature, whatever it was to which the eyes belonged, was, after all, but small. Why I did not obey the frantic longing which I had to flee from it, I cannot tell; I only know, I could not. I take it that the stress and privations which I had lately undergone, and which I was, even then, still undergoing, had much to do with my conduct at that moment, and with the part I played in all that followed. Ordinarily I believe that I have as high a spirit as the average man, and as solid a resolution; but when one has been dragged through the Valley of Humiliation, and plunged, again and again, into the Waters of Bitterness and Privation, a man can be constrained to a course of action of which, in his happier moments, he would have deemed himself incapable. I know this of my own knowledge.

Slowly the eyes came on, with a strange slowness, and as they came they moved from side to side as if their owner walked unevenly. Nothing could have exceeded the horror with which I awaited their approach, —except my incapacity to escape them. Not for an instant did my glance pass from them,—I could not have shut my eyes for all the gold the world contains!

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—so that as they came closer I had to look right down to what seemed to be almost the level of my feet. And at last, they reached my feet. They never paused. On a sudden I felt something on my boot, and, with a sense of shrinking, horror, nausea, rendering me momentarily more helpless, I realised that the creature was beginning to ascend my legs, to climb my body. Even then what it was I could not tell,—it mounted me, apparently, with as much ease as if I had been horizontal instead of perpendicular. It was as though it were some gigantic spider,—a spider of the nightmares; a monstrous conception of some dreadful vision. It pressed lightly against my clothing with what might, for all the world, have been spider's legs. There was an amazing host of them,—I felt the pressure of each separate one. They embraced me softly, stickily, as if the creature glued and unglued them, each time it moved.

Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. It was moving towards the pit of my stomach. The helplessness with which I suffered its invasion was not the least part of my agony,—it was that helplessness which we know in dreadful dreams. I understood, quite well, that if I did but give myself a hearty shake, the creature would fall off; but I had not a muscle at my command.

As the creature mounted its eyes began to play the part of two small lamps; they positively emitted rays of light. By their rays I began to perceive faint outlines of its body. It seemed larger than I had supposed. Either the body itself was slightly phosphorescent, or it was of a peculiar yellow hue. It gleamed in the darkness. What it was there was still nothing to positively show, but the impression grew upon me that it was some member of the spider family, some monstrous member, of the like of which I had never heard or read. It was heavy, so heavy indeed, that I wondered how, with so slight a pressure, it managed to retain its hold,—that it did so by the aid of some adhesive substance at the end of its legs I was sure, —I could feel it stick. Its weight increased as it ascended,—and it smelt! I had been for some time

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aware that it emitted an unpleasant, fœtid odour; as it neared my face it became so intense as to be unbearable.

It was at my chest. I became more and more conscious of an uncomfortable wobbling motion, as if each time it breathed its body heaved. Its forelegs touched the bare skin about the base of my neck; they stuck to it, —shall I ever forget the feeling? I have it often in my dreams. While it hung on with those in front it seemed to draw its other legs up after it. It crawled up my neck, with hideous slowness, a quarter of an inch at a time, its weight compelling me to brace the muscles of my back. It reached my chin, it touched my lips,—and I stood still and bore it all, while it enveloped my face with its huge, slimy, evil-smelling body, and embraced me with its myriad legs. The horror of it made me mad. I shook myself like one stricken by the shaking ague. I shook the creature off. It squashed upon the floor. Shrieking like some lost spirit, turning, I dashed towards the window. As I went, my foot, catching in some obstacle, I fell headlong to the floor.

Picking myself up as quickly as I could I resumed my flight,—rain or no rain, oh to get out of that room! I already had my hand upon the sill, in another instant I should have been over it,—then, despite my hunger, my fatigues, let anyone have stopped me if they could! —when someone behind me struck a light.

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# CHAPTER III



THE illumination which instantly followed was unexpected. It startled me, causing a moment's check, from which I was just recovering when a voice said,

'Keep still!'

There was a quality in the voice which I cannot describe. Not only an accent of command, but a something malicious, a something saturnine. It was a little guttural, though whether it was a man speaking I could not have positively said; but I had no doubt it was a foreigner. It was the most disagreeable voice I had ever heard, and it had on me the most disagreeable effect; for when it said, 'Keep still!' I kept still. It was as though there was nothing else for me to do.

'Turn round!'

I turned round, mechanically, like an automaton. Such passivity was worse than undignified, it was galling; I knew that well. I resented it with secret rage. But in that room, in that presence, I was invertebrate.

When I turned I found myself confronting someone who was lying in bed. At the head of the bed was a shelf. On the shelf was a small lamp which gave the most brilliant light I had ever seen. It caught me full in the eyes, having on me such a blinding effect that for some seconds I could see nothing. Throughout the whole of that strange interview I cannot affirm that I saw clearly; the dazzling glare caused dancing specks to obscure my vision. Yet, after an interval of time, I did see something; and what I did see I had rather have left unseen.

I saw someone in front of me lying in a bed. I could not at once decide if it was a man or a woman. Indeed

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at first I doubted if it was anything human. But, afterwards, I knew it to be a man,—for this reason, if for no other, that it was impossible such a creature could be feminine. The bedclothes were drawn up to his shoulders; only his head was visible. He lay on his left side, his head resting on his left hand; motionless, eyeing me as if he sought to read my inmost soul. And, in very truth, I believe he read it. His age I could not guess; such a look of age I had never imagined. Had he asserted that he had been living through the ages, I should have been forced to admit that, at least, he looked it. And yet I felt that it was quite within the range of possibility that he was no older than myself, —there was a vitality in his eyes which was startling. It might have been that he had been afflicted by some terrible disease, and it was that which had made him so super-naturally ugly.

There was not a hair upon his face or head, but, to make up for it, the skin, which was a saffron yellow, was an amazing mass of wrinkles. The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal. The nose, on the other hand, was abnormally large; so extravagant were its dimensions, and so peculiar its shape, it resembled the beak of some bird of prey. A characteristic of the face —and an uncomfortable one!—was that, practically, it stopped short at the mouth. The mouth, with its blubber lips, came immediately underneath the nose, and chin, to all intents and purposes, there was none. This deformity—for the absence of chin amounted to that—it was which gave to the face the appearance of something not human,—that, and the eyes. For so marked a feature of the man were his eyes, that, ere long, it seemed to me that he was nothing but eyes.

His eyes ran, literally, across the whole of the upper portion of his face,—remember, the face was unwontedly small, and the columna of the nose was razor-edged. They were long, and they looked out of narrow windows, and they seemed to be lighted by some internal radiance, for they shone out like lamps in a lighthouse tower. Escape them I could not, while, as I endeavoured to meet them, it was as if I shrivelled

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into nothingness. Never before had I realised what was meant by the power of the eye. They held me enchained, helpless, spell-bound. I felt that they could do with me as they would; and they did. Their gaze was unfaltering, having the bird-like trick of never blinking; this man could have glared at me tor hours and never moved an eyelid.

It was he who broke the silence. I was speechless.

'Shut the window.' I did as he bade me. 'Pull down the blind.' I obeyed. 'Turn round again.' I was still obedient. 'What is your name?'

Then I spoke,—to answer him. There was this odd thing about the words I uttered, that they came from me, not in response to my will power, but in response to his. It was not I who willed that I should speak; it was he. What he willed that I should say, I said. Just that, and nothing more. For the time I was no longer a man; my manhood was merged in his. I was, in the extremest sense, an example of passive obedience.

'Robert Holt.'

'What are you?'

'A clerk.'

'You look as if you were a clerk.' There was a flame of scorn in his voice which scorched me even then. 'What sort of a clerk are you?'

'I am out of a situation.'

'You look as if you were out of a situation.' Again the scorn. 'Are you the sort of clerk who is always out of a situation? You are a thief.'

'I am not a thief.'

'Do clerks come through the window?' I was still,—he putting no constraint on me to speak. 'Why did you come through the window?'

'Because it was open.'

'So!—Do you always come through a window which is open?'

'No.'

'Then why through this?'

'Because I was wet—and cold—and hungry—and tired.'

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The words came from me as if he had dragged them one by one,—which, in fact, he did.

'Have you no home?'

'No.'

'Money?'

'No.'

'Friends?'

'No.'

'Then what sort of a clerk are you?'

I did not answer him,—I did not know what it was he wished me to say. I was the victim of bad luck, nothing else,—I swear it. Misfortune had followed hard upon misfortune. The firm by whom I had been employed for years suspended payment. I obtained a situation with one of their creditors, at a lower salary. They reduced their staff, which entailed my going. After an interval I obtained a temporary engagement; the occasion which required my services passed, and I with it. After another, and a longer interval, I again found temporary employment, the pay for which was but a pittance. When that was over I could find nothing. That was nine months ago, and since then I had not earned a penny. It is so easy to grow shabby, when you are on the everlasting tramp, and are living on your stock of clothes. I had trudged all over London in search of work,—work of any kind would have been welcome, so long as it would have enabled me to keep body and soul together. And I had trudged in vain. Now I had been refused admittance as a casual,—how easy is the descent! But I did not tell the man lying on the bed all this. He did not wish to hear,—had he wished he would have made me tell him.

It may be that he read my story, unspoken though it was,—it is conceivable. His eyes had powers of penetration which were peculiarly their own,—that I know.

'Undress!'

When he spoke again that was what he said, in those guttural tones of his in which there was a reminiscence of some foreign land. I obeyed, letting my sodden, shabby clothes fall anyhow upon the floor. A look came on his face, as I stood naked in front of him,

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which, if it was meant for a smile, was a satyr's smile, and which filled me with a sensation of shuddering repulsion.

'What a white skin you have,—how white! What would I not give for a skin as white as that,—ah yes!' He paused, devouring me with his glances; then continued. 'Go to the cupboard; you will find a cloak; put it on.'

I went to a cupboard which was in a corner of the room, his eyes following me as I moved. It was full of clothing, —garments which might have formed the stock-in-trade of a costumier whose speciality was providing costumes for masquerades. A long dark cloak hung on a peg. My hand moved towards it, apparently of its own volition. I put it on, its ample folds falling to my feet.

'In the other cupboard you will find meat, and bread, and wine. Eat and drink.'

On the opposite side of the room, near the head of his bed, there was a second cupboard. In this, upon a shelf, I found what looked like pressed beef, several round cakes of what tasted like rye bread, and some thin, sour wine, in a straw-covered flask. But I was in no mood to criticise; I crammed myself, I believe, like some famished wolf, he watching me, in silence, all the time. When I had done, which was when I had eaten and drunk as much as I could hold, there returned to his face that satyr's grin.

'I would that I could eat and drink like that,—ah yes!—Put back what is left.' I put it back,—which seemed an unnecessary exertion, there was so little to put. 'Look me in the face.'

I looked him in the face,—and immediately became conscious, as I did so, that something was going from me,—the capacity, as it were, to be myself. His eyes grew larger and larger, till they seemed to fill all space —till I became lost in their immensity. He moved his hand, doing something to me, I know not what, as it passed through the air—cutting the solid ground from underneath my feet, so that I fell headlong to the ground. Where I fell, there I lay, like a log.

And the light went out.

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# CHAPTER IV

## A LONELY VIGIL

I KNEW that the light went out. For not the least singular, nor, indeed, the least distressing part of my condition was the fact that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I never once lost consciousness during the long hours which followed. I was aware of the extinction of the lamp, and of the black darkness which ensued. I heard a rustling sound, as if the man in the bed was settling himself between the sheets. Then all was still. And throughout that interminable night I remained, my brain awake, my body dead, waiting, watching, for the day. What had happened to me I could not guess. That I probably wore some of the external evidences of death my instinct told me,—I knew I did. Paradoxical though it may sound, I felt as a man might feel who had actually died,—as, in moments of speculation, in the days gone by, I had imagined it as quite possible that he would feel. It is very far from certain that feeling necessarily expires with what we call life. I continually asked myself if I could be dead,—the inquiry pressed itself on me with awful iteration. Does the body die, and the brain—the I, the ego—still live on? God only knows. But, then! the agony of the thought.

The hours passed. By slow degrees, the silence was eclipsed. Sounds of traffic, of hurrying footsteps,—life!—were ushers of the morn. Outside the window sparrows twittered,—a cat mewed, a dog barked—there was the clatter of a milk can. Shafts of light stole past the blind, increasing in intensity. It still rained, now and again it pattered against the pane. The wind must have shifted, because, for the first time, there came, on a sudden, the clang of a distant clock

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striking the hour,—seven. Then, with the interval of a lifetime between each chiming, eight,—nine,—ten.

So far, in the room itself there had not been a sound. When the clock had struck ten, as it seemed to me, years ago, there came a rustling noise, from the direction of the bed. Feet stepped upon the floor,—moving towards where I was lying. It was, of course, now broad day, and I, presently, perceived that a figure, clad in some queer coloured garment, was standing at my side, looking down at me. It stooped, then knelt. My only covering was unceremoniously thrown from off me, so that I lay there in my nakedness. Fingers prodded me then and there, as if I had been some beast ready for the butcher's stall. A face looked into mine, and, in front of me, were those dreadful eyes. Then, whether I was dead or living, I said to myself that this could be nothing human,—nothing fashioned in God's image could wear such a shape as that. Fingers were pressed into my cheeks, they were thrust into my mouth, they touched my staring eyes, shut my eyelids, then opened them again, and—horror of horrors!—the blubber lips were pressed to mine—the soul of something evil entered into me in the guise of a kiss.

Then this travesty of manhood reascended to his feet, and said, whether speaking to me or to himself I could not tell.

'Dead!—dead!—as good as dead!—and better! We'll have him buried.'

He moved away from me. I heard a door open and shut, and knew that he was gone.

And he continued gone throughout the day. I had no actual knowledge of his issuing out into the street, but he must have done so, because the house appeared deserted. What had become of the dreadful creature of the night before I could not guess. My first fear was that he had left it behind him in the room with me,—it might be, as a sort of watchdog. But, as the minutes and the hours passed, and there was still no sign or sound of anything living, I concluded that, if the thing was there, it was, possibly, as helpless as myself, and that during its owner's absence, at anyrate, I had nothing to fear from its too pressing attentions.

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That, with the exception of myself, the house held nothing human, I had strong presumptive proof more than once in the course of the day. Several times, both in the morning and the afternoon, people without endeavoured to attract the attention of whoever was within. Vehicles—probably tradesmen's carts—drew up in front, their stopping being followed by more or less assiduous assaults upon the knocker and the bell. But in every case their appeals remained unheeded. Whatever it was they wanted, they had to go unsatisfied away. Lying there, torpid, with nothing to do but listen, I was, possibly, struck by very little, but it did occur to me that one among the callers was more persistent than the rest.

The distant clock had just struck noon when I heard the gate open, and someone approached the front door. Since nothing but silence followed, I supposed that the occupant of the place had returned, and had chosen to do so as silently as he had gone. Presently, however, there came from the doorstep a slight but peculiar call, as if a rat was squeaking. It was repeated three times, and then there was the sound of footsteps quietly retreating, and the gate re-closing. Between one and two the caller came again ; there was a repetition of the same signal,—that it was a signal I did not doubt ; followed by the same retreat. About three the mysterious visitant returned. The signal was repeated, and, when there was no response, fingers tapped softly against the panels of the front door. When there was still no answer, footsteps stole softly round the side of the house, and there came the signal from the rear, —and then, again, tapping of fingers against what was, apparently, the back door. No notice being taken of these various proceedings, the footsteps returned the way they went, and, as before, the gate was closed.

Shortly after darkness had fallen this assiduous caller returned, to make a fourth and more resolute attempt to call attention to his presence. From the peculiar character of his manœuvres it seemed that he suspected that whoever was within had particular reasons for ignoring him without. He went through the familiar pantomime of the three squeaky calls both at the front

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door and the back,—followed by the tapping of the fingers on the panels. This time, however, he also tried the window panes,—I could hear, quite distinctly, the clear, yet distinct, noise of what seemed like knuckles rapping against the windows behind. Disappointed there, he renewed his efforts at the front. The curiously quiet footsteps came round the house, to pause before the window of the room in which I lay,—and then something singular occurred.

While I waited for the tapping, there came, instead, the sound of someone or something, scrambling on to the window-sill,—as if some creature, unable to reach the window from the ground, was endeavouring to gain the vantage of the sill. Some ungainly creature, unskilled in surmounting such an obstacle as a perpendicular brick wall. There was the noise of what seemed to be the scratching of claws, as if it experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining a hold on the unyielding surface. What kind of creature it was I could not think,—I was astonished to find that it was a creature at all. I had taken it for granted that the persevering visitor was either a woman or a man. If, however, as now seemed likely, it was some sort of animal, the fact explained the squeaking sounds,—though what, except a rat did squeak like that was more than I could say—and the absence of any knocking or ringing.

Whatever it was, it had gained the summit of its desires,— the window-sill. It panted as if its efforts at climbing had made it short of breath. Then began the tapping. In the light of my new discovery, I perceived, clearly enough, that the tapping was hardly that which was likely to be the product of human fingers,—it was sharp and definite, rather resembling the striking of the point of a nail against the glass. It was not loud, but in time—it continued with much persistency—it became plainly vicious. It was accompanied by what I can only describe as the most extraordinary noises. There were squeaks, growing angrier and shriller as the minutes passed; what seemed like gaspings for breath; and a peculiar buzzing sound like, yet unlike, the purring of a cat.

The creature's resentment at its want of success in

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attracting attention was unmistakable. The tapping became like the clattering of hailstones; it kept up a continuous noise with its cries and pantings; there was the sound as of some large body being rubbed against the glass, as if it were extending itself against the window, and endeavouring, by force of pressure, to gain an entrance through the pane. So violent did its contortions become that I momentarily anticipated the yielding of the glass, and the excited assailant coming crashing through. Considerably to my relief the window proved more impregnable than seemed at one time likely. The stolid resistance proved, in the end, to be too much either for its endurance or its patience. Just as I was looking for some fresh manifestation of fury, it seemed rather to tumble than to spring off the sill; then came, once more, the same sound of quietly retreating footsteps; and what, under the circumstances, seemed odder still, the same closing of the gate.

During the two or three hours which immediately ensued nothing happened at all out of the way,—and then took place the most surprising incident of all. The clock had struck ten some time before. Since before the striking of the hour nothing and no one had passed along what was evidently the little frequented road in front of that uncanny house. On a sudden two sounds broke the stillness without,—of someone running, and of cries. Judging from his hurrying steps someone seemed to be flying for his life,—to the accompaniment of curious cries. It was only when the runner reached the front of the house that, in the cries, I recognised the squeaks of the persistent caller. I imagined that he had returned, as before, alone, to renew his attacks upon the window,—until it was made plain, as it quickly was, that, with him, was some sort of a companion. Immediately there arose, from without, the noise of battle. Two creatures, whose cries were, to me, of so unusual a character, that I found it impossible to even guess at their identity, seemed to be waging war to the knife upon the doorstep. After a minute or two of furious contention, victory seemed to rest with one of the combatants, for the other fled, squeaking as with

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pain. While I listened, with strained attention, for the next episode in this queer drama, expecting that now would come another assault upon the window, to my unbounded surprise I heard a key thrust in the keyhole, the lock turned, and the front door thrown open with a furious bang. It was closed as loudly as it was opened. Then the door of the room in which I was, was dashed open, with the same display of excitement, and of clamour, footsteps came hurrying in, the door was slammed to with a force which shook the house to its foundations, there was a rustling as of bed-clothes, the brilliant illumination of the night before, and a voice, which I had only too good reason to remember said,

'Stand up.'

I stood up, automatically, at the word of command, facing towards the bed.

There, between the sheets, with his head resting on his hand, in the attitude in which I had seen him last, was the being I had made acquaintance with under circumstances which I was never likely to forget,—the same, yet not the same.

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# CHAPTER V

## AN INSTRUCTION TO COMMIT BURGLARY

THAT the man in the bed was the one whom, to my cost, I had suffered myself to stumble on the night before, there could, of course, not be the faintest doubt. And ..., directly I saw him, I recognised that some astonishing alteration had taken place in his appearance. To begin with, he seemed younger,—the decrepitude of age had given place to something very like the fire of youth. His features had undergone some subtle change. His nose, for instance, was not by any means so grotesque; its beak-like quality was less conspicuous. The most part of his wrinkles had disappeared, as if by magic. And, though his skin was still as yellow as saffron, his contours had rounded,—he had even come into possession of a modest allowance of chin. But the most astounding novelty was that about the face there was something which was essentially feminine; so feminine, indeed, that I wondered if I could by any possibility have blundered, and mistaken a woman for a man; some ghoulish example of her sex, who had so yielded to her depraved instincts as to have become nothing but a ghastly reminiscence of womanhood.

The effect of the changes which had come about in his appearance—for, after all, I told myself that it was impossible that I could have been such a simpleton as to have been mistaken on such a question as gender—was heightened by the self-evident fact that, very recently, he had been engaged in some pitched battle; some hand to hand, and, probably, discreditable encounter, from which he had borne away uncomfortable proofs of his opponent's prowess. His antagonist could hardly have been a chivalrous fighter, for his countenance was marked by a dozen different scratches,

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which seemed to suggest that the weapons used had been someone's finger-nails. It was, perhaps, because the heat of the battle was still in his veins that he was in such a state of excitement. He seemed to be almost overwhelmed by the strength of his own feelings. His eyes seemed literally to flame with fire. The muscles of his face were working as if they were wholly beyond his own control. When he spoke his accent was markedly foreign; the words rushed from his lips in an inarticulate torrent; he kept repeating the same thing over and over again in a fashion which was not a little suggestive of insanity.

'So you're not dead!—you're not dead:—you're alive!—you're alive! Well,—how does it feel to be dead? I ask you!—Is it not good to be dead? To keep dead is better,—it is the best of all! To have made an end of all things, to cease to strive and to cease to weep, to cease to want and to cease to have, to cease to annoy and to cease to long, to no more care, —no!—not for anything, to put from you the curse of life,—forever!—is that not the best? Oh yes!—I tell you!—do I not know? But for you such knowledge is not yet. For you there is the return to life, the coming out of death,—you shall live on!—for me! —Live on!'

He made a movement with his hand, and, directly he did so, it happened as on the previous evening, that a metamorphosis took place in the very abysses of my being. I woke from my torpor, as he put it, I came out of death, and was alive again. I was far, yet, from being my own man; I realised that he exercised on me a degree of mesmeric force which I had never dreamed that one creature could exercise on another; but, at least, I was no longer in doubt as to whether I was or was not dead. I knew I was alive.

He lay, watching me, as if he was reading the thoughts which occupied my brain,—and, for all I know, he was.

'Robert Holt, you are a thief.'

'I am not.'

My own voice, as I heard it, startled me,—it was so long since it had sounded in my ears.

'You are a thief! Only thieves come through

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windows,—did you not come through the window?' I was still,—what would my contradiction have availed me? 'But it is well that you came through the window,—well you are a thief,—well for me! for me! It is you that I am wanting,—at the happy moment you have dropped yourself into my hands,—in the nick of time. For you are my slave,—at my beck and call, —my familiar spirit, to do with as I will,—you know this,—eh?'

I did know it, and the knowledge of my impotence was terrible. I felt that if I could only get away from him; only release myself from the bonds with which he had bound me about; only remove myself from the horrible glamour of his near neighbourhood; only get one or two square meals and have an opportunity of recovering from the enervating stress of mental and bodily fatigue;—I felt that then I might be something like his match, and that, a second time, he would endeavour in vain to bring me within the compass of his magic. But, as it was, I was conscious that I was helpless, and the consciousness was agony. He persisted in reiterating his former falsehood.

'I say you are a thief!—a thief, Robert Holt, a thief! You came through a window for your own pleasure, now you will go through a window for mine, —not this window, but another.' Where the jest lay I did not perceive; but it tickled him, for a grating sound came from his throat which was meant for laughter. 'This time it is as a thief that you will go, —oh yes, be sure.'

He paused, as it seemed, to transfix me with his gaze. His unblinking eyes never for an instant quitted my face. With what a frightful fascination they constrained me,—and how I loathed them!

When he spoke again there was a new intonation in his speech,—something bitter, cruel, unrelenting.

'Do you know Paul Lessingham?'

He pronounced the name as if he hated it,—and yet as if he loved to have it on his tongue.

'What Paul Lessingham?'

'There is only one Paul Lessingham! *The* Paul Lessingham,—the *great* Paul Lessingham!'

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He shrieked, rather than said this, with an outburst of rage so frenzied that I thought, for the moment, that he was going to spring on me and rend me. I shook all over. I do not doubt that, as I replied, my voice was sufficiently tremulous.

'All the world knows Paul Lessingham,—the politician,—the statesman.'

As he glared at me his eyes dilated. I still stood in expectation of a physical assault. But, for the present, he contented himself with words.

'To-night you are going through his window like a thief!'

I had no inkling of his meaning,—and, apparently, judging from his next words, I looked something of the bewilderment I felt.

'You do not understand?—no!—it is simple!—what could be simpler? I say that to-night—to-night!—you are going through his window like a thief. You came through my window,—why not through the window of Paul Lessingham, the politician—the statesman.'

He repeated my words as if in mockery. I am—I make it my boast!—of that great multitude which regards Paul Lessingham as the greatest living force in practical politics; and which looks to him, with confidence, to carry through that great work of constitutional and social reform which he has set himself to do. I daresay that my tone, in speaking of him, savoured of laudation,—which, plainly, the man in the bed resented. What he meant by his wild words about my going through Paul Lessingham's window like a thief, I still had not the faintest notion. They sounded like the ravings of a madman.

As I continued silent, and he yet stared, there came into his tone another note,—a note of tenderness,—a note of which I had not deemed him capable.

'He is good to look at, Paul Lessingham,—is he not good to look at?'

I was aware that, physically, Mr Lessingham was a fine specimen of manhood, but I was not prepared for the assertion of the fact in such a quarter,—nor for the manner in which the temporary master of my fate continued to harp and enlarge upon the theme.

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'He is straight,—straight as the mast of a ship,—he is tall,—his skin is white; he is strong—do I not know that he is strong—how strong!—oh yes! Is there a better thing than to be his wife? his well-beloved? the light of his eyes? Is there for a woman a happier chance? Oh no, not one! His wife!—Paul Lessingham!'

As, with soft cadences, he gave vent to these unlooked-for sentiments, the fashion of his countenance was changed. A look of longing came into his face—of savage, frantic longing—which, unalluring though it was, for the moment transfigured him. But the mood was transient.

'To be his wife,—oh yes!—the wife of his scorn! the despised and rejected!'

The return to the venom of his former bitterness was rapid,—I could not but feel that this was the natural man. Though why a creature such as he was should go out of his way to apostrophise, in such a manner, a publicist of Mr Lessingham's eminence, surpassed my comprehension. Yet he stuck to his subject like a leech,—as if it had been one in which he had an engrossing personal interest.

'He is a devil,—hard as the granite rock,—cold as the snows of Ararat. In him there is none of life's warm blood,—he is accursed! He is false,—ay, false as the fables of those who lie for love of lies,—he is all treachery. Her whom he has taken to his bosom he would put away from him as if she had never been,—he would steal from her like a thief in the night,—he would forget she ever was! But the avenger follows after, lurking in the shadows, hiding among the rocks, waiting, watching, till his time shall come. And it shall come!—the day of the avenger!—ay, the day!

Raising himself to a sitting posture, he threw his arms above his head, and shrieked with a demoniac fury. Presently he became a trifle calmer. Reverting to his recumbent position, resting his head upon his hand, he eyed me steadily; then asked me a question which struck me as being, under the circumstances, more than a little singular.

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'You know his house,—the house of the great Paul Lessingham,—the politician,—the statesman?'

'I do not.'

'You lie!—you do!'

The words came from him with a sort of snarl,—as if he would have lashed me across the face with them.

'I do not. Men in my position are not acquainted with the residences of men in his. I may, at some time, have seen his address in print; but, if so, I have forgotten it.'

He looked at me intently, for some moments, as if to learn if I spoke the truth; and apparently, at last, was satisfied that I did.

'You do not know it?—Well! I will show it you,—I will show the house of the great Paul Lessingham.'

What he meant I did not know; but I was soon to learn,—an astounding revelation it proved to be. There was about his manner something hardly human; something which, for want of a better phrase, I would call vulpine. In his tone there was a mixture of mockery and bitterness, as if he wished his words to have the effect of corrosive sublimate, and to sear me as he uttered them.

'Listen with all your ears. Give me your whole attention. Hearken to my bidding, so that you may do as I bid you. Not that I fear your obedience,—oh no!'

He paused,—as if to enable me to fully realise the picture of my helplessness conjured up by his jibes.

'You came through my window, like a thief. You will go through my window, like a fool. You will go to the house of the great Paul Lessingham. You say you do not know it? Well, I will show it you. I will be your guide. Unseen, in the darkness and the night, I will stalk beside you, and will lead you to where I would have you go.—You will go just as you are, with bare feet, and head uncovered, and with but a single garment to hide your nakedness. You will be cold, your feet will be cut and bleeding,—but what better does a thief deserve? If any see you, at the least they will take you for a madman; there will be trouble. But have no fear; bear a bold heart. None shall see

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you while I stalk at your side. I will cover you with the cloak of invisibility,—so that you may come in safety to the house of the great Paul Lessingham.'

He paused again. What he said, wild and wanton though it was, was beginning to fill me with a sense of the most extreme discomfort. His sentences, in some strange, indescribable way, seemed, as they came from his lips, to warp my limbs; to enwrap themselves about me; to confine me, tighter and tighter, within, as it were, swaddling clothes; to make me more and more helpless. I was already conscious that whatever mad freak he chose to set me on, I should have no option but to carry it through.

'When you come to the house, you will stand, and look, and seek for a window convenient for entry. It may be that you will find one open, as you did mine; if not, you will open one. How,—that is your affair, not mine. You will practise the arts of a thief to steal into his house.'

The monstrosity his suggestion fought against the spell which he a u was casting upon me, and forced me into speech,— lowed me with the power to show that there still w in me something of a man; though every second th .rands of my manhood, as it seemed, were slipping faster through the fingers which were strained to clutch them.

'I will not.'

He was silent. He looked at me. The pupils of his eyes dilated,—until they seemed all pupil.

'You will.—Do you hear?—I say you will.'

'I am not a thief, I am an honest man,—why should I do this thing?'

'Because I bid you.'

'Have mercy!'

'On whom—on you, or on Paul Lessingham?—Who at any time, has shown mercy unto me, that I should show mercy unto any?'

He stopped, and then again went on,—reiterating his former incredible suggestion with an emphasis which seemed to eat its way into my brain.

'You will practise the arts of a thief to steal into his

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house; and, being in, will listen. If all be still, you will make your way to the room he calls his study.'

'How shall I find it? I know nothing of his house.'

The question was wrung from me; I felt that the sweat was standing in great drops upon my brow.

'I will show it you.'

'Shall you go with me?'

'Ay,—I shall go with you. All the time I shall be with you. You will not see me, but I shall be there. Be not afraid.'

His claim to supernatural powers, for what he said amounted to nothing less, was, on the face of it, preposterous, but, then, I was in no condition to even hint at its absurdity. He continued.

'When you have gained the study, you will go to a certain drawer, which is in a certain bureau, in a corner of the room—I see it now; when you are there you shall see it too—and you will open it.'

'Should it be locked?'

'You still will open it.'

'But how shall I open it if it is locked?'

'By those arts in which a thief is skilled. I say to you again that that is your affair, not mine.'

I made no attempt to answer him. Even supposing that he forced me, by the wicked, and unconscionable exercise of what, I presumed, were the hypnotic powers with which nature had to such a dangerous degree endowed him, to carry the adventure to a certain stage, since he could hardly, at an instant's notice, endow me with the knack of picking locks, should the drawer he alluded to be locked—which might Providence permit!—nothing serious might issue from it after all. He read my thoughts.

'You will open it,—though it be doubly and trebly locked, I say that you will open it.—In it you will find—' he hesitated, as if to reflect—'some letters; it may be two or three,—I know not just how many, —they are bound about by a silken ribbon. You will take them out of the drawer, and, having taken them, you will make the best of your way out of the house, and bear them back to me.'

'And should anyone come upon me while engaged

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in these nefarious proceedings,—for instance, should I encounter Mr Lessingham himself, what then?'

'Paul Lessingham?—You need have no fear if you encounter him.'

'I need have no fear!—If he finds me, in his own house, at dead of night, committing burglary!'

'You need have no fear of him.'

'On your account, or on my own?—At least he will have me haled to gaol.'

'I say you need have no fear of him. I say what I mean.'

'How, then, shall I escape his righteous vengeance? He is not the man to suffer a midnight robber to escape him scatheless,—shall I have to kill him?'

'You will not touch him with a finger,—nor will he touch you.'

'By what spell shall I prevent him?'

'By the spell of two words.'

'What words are they?'

'Should Paul Lessingham chance to come upon you; and find you in his house, a thief, and should seek to stay you from whatever it is you may be at, you will not flinch nor flee from him, but you will stand still, and you will say—'

Something in the crescendo accents of his voice, something weird and ominous, caused my heart to press against my ribs, so that when he stopped, in my eagerness I cried out,

'What?'

'THE BEETLE!'

As the words came from him in a kind of screech, the lamp went out, and the place was all in darkness, and I knew, so that the knowledge filled me with a sense of loathing, that with me, in the room, was the evil presence of the night before. Two bright specks gleamed in front of me; something flopped from off the bed on to the ground; the thing was coming towards me across the floor. It came slowly on, and on, and on. I stood still, speechless in the sickness of my horror. Until, on my bare feet, it touched me with slimy feelers, and my terror lest it should creep up my

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naked body lent me voice, and I fell shrieking like a soul in agony.

It may be that my shrieking drove it from me. At least, it went. I knew it went. And all was still. Until, on a sudden, the lamp flamed out again, and there, lying, as before, in bed, glaring at me with his baleful eyes, was the being whom, in my folly, or in my wisdom,—whichever it was!—I was beginning to credit with the possession of unhallowed, unlawful powers.

'You will say that to him; those two words; they only; no more. And you will see what you will see. But Paul Lessingham is a man of resolution. Should he still persist in interference, or seek to hinder you, you will say those two words again. You need do no more. Twice will suffice, I promise you.—Now go.—Draw up the blind; open the window; climb through it. Hasten to do what I have bidden you. I wait here for your return,—and all the way I shall be with you.'

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# CHAPTER VI



I WENT to the window; I drew up the blind, unlatching the sash, I threw it open, and clad, or, rather, unclad as I was, I clambered through it into the open air. I was not only incapable of resistance, I was incapable of distinctly formulating the desire to offer resistance. Some compelling influence moved me hither and hither, with completest disregard of whether I would or would not.

And yet, when I found myself without, I was conscious of a sense of exultation at having escaped from the miasmic atmosphere of that room of unholy memories. And a faint hope began to dawn within my bosom that, as I increased the distance between myself and it, I might shake off something of the nightmare helplessness which numbed and tortured me. I lingered for a moment by the window; then stepped over the short dividing wall into the street; and then again I lingered.

My condition was one of dual personality,—while, physically, I was bound, mentally, to a considerable extent, I was free. But this measure of freedom on my mental side made my plight no better. For, among other things, I realised what a ridiculous figure I must be cutting, barefooted and bareheaded, abroad, at such an hour of the night, in such a boisterous breeze, —for I quickly discovered that the wind amounted to something like a gale. Apart from all other considerations, the notion of parading the streets in such a condition filled me with profound disgust. And I do believe that if my tyrannical oppressor had only permitted me to attire myself in my own garments I should have started with a comparatively light heart

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on the felonious mission on which he apparently was sending me. I believe, too, that the consciousness of the incongruity of my attire increased my sense of helplessness, and that, had I been dressed as Englishmen are won't to be, who take their walks abroad, he would not have found in me, on that occasion, the facile instrument, which, in fact, he did.

There was a moment, in which the gravelled pathway first made itself known to my naked feet, and the cutting wind to my naked flesh, when I think it possible that, had I gritted my teeth, and strained my every nerve, I might have shaken myself free from the bonds which shackled me, and bade defiance to the ancient sinner who, for all I knew, was peeping at me through the window. But so depressed was I by the knowledge of the ridiculous appearance I presented that, before I could take advantage of it the moment passed,—not to return again that night.

I did catch, as it were, at its fringe, as it was flying past me, making a hurried movement to one side,—the first I had made, of my own initiative, for hours. But it was too late. My tormentor,—as if, though unseen, he saw—tightened his grip, I was whirled round, and sped hastily onwards in a direction in which I certainly had no desire of travelling.

All the way I never met a soul. I have since wondered whether in that respect my experience was not a normal one; whether it might not have happened to any. If so, there are streets in London, long lines of streets, which, at a certain period of the night, in a certain sort of weather—probably the weather had something to do with it—are clean deserted; in which there is neither foot-passenger nor vehicle,—not even a policeman. The greater part of the route along which I was driven—I know no juster word—was one with which I had some sort of acquaintance. It led, at first, through what, I take it, was some part of Walham Green; then along the Lillie Road, through Brompton, across the Fulham Road, through the network of streets leading to Sloane Street, across Sloane Street into Lowndes Square. Who goes that way goes some distance, and goes through some important thorough-

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fares; yet not a creature did I see, nor, I imagine, was there a creature who saw me. As I crossed Sloane Street, I fancied that I heard the distant rumbling of a vehicle along the Knightsbridge Road, but that was the only sound I heard.

It is painful even to recollect the plight in which I was when I was stopped,—for stopped I was, as shortly and as sharply, as the beast of burden, with a bridle in its mouth, whose driver puts a period to his career. I was wet,—intermittent gusts of rain were borne on the scurrying wind; in spite of the pace at which I had been brought, I was chilled to the bone; and—worst of all!—my mud-stained feet, all cut and bleeding, were so painful—for, unfortunately, I was still susceptible enough to pain—that it was agony to have them come into contact with the cold and the slime of the hard, unyielding pavement.

I had been stopped on the opposite side of the square,—that nearest to the hospital; in front of a house which struck me as being somewhat smaller than the rest. It was a house with a portico; about the pillars of this portico was trelliswork, and on the trelliswork was trained some climbing plant. As I stood, shivering, wondering what would happen next, some strange impulse mastered me, and, immediately, to my own unbounded amazement, I found myself scrambling up the trellis towards the verandah above. I am no gymnast, either by nature or by education; I doubt whether, previously, I had ever attempted to climb anything more difficult than a step ladder. The result was, that, though the impulse might be given me, the skill could not, and I had only ascended a yard or so when, losing my footing, I came slithering down upon my back. Bruised and shaken though I was, I was not allowed to inquire into my injuries. In a moment I was on my feet again, and again I was impelled to climb,—only, however, again to come to grief. This time the demon, or whatever it was, that had entered into me, seeming to appreciate the impossibility of getting me to the top of that verandah, directed me to try another way. I mounted the steps leading to the front door, got on to the low parapet

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which was at one side, thence on to the sill of the adjacent window,—had I slipped then I should have fallen a sheer descent of at least twenty feet to the bottom of the deep area down below. But the sill was broad, and—if it is proper to use such language in connection with a transaction of the sort in which I was engaged—fortune favoured me. I did not fall. In my clenched fist I had a stone. With this I struck the pane of glass, as with a hammer. Through the hole which resulted, I could just insert my hand, and reach the latch within. In another minute the sash was raised, and I was in the house,—I had committed burglary.

As I look back and reflect upon the audacity of the whole proceeding, even now I tremble. Hapless slave of another's will although in very truth I was, I cannot repeat too often that I realised to the full just what it was that I was being compelled to do—a fact which was very far from rendering my situation less distressful! —and every detail of my involuntary actions was projected upon my brain in a series of pictures, whose clear-cut outlines, so long as memory endures, will never fade. Certainly no professional burglar, nor, indeed, any creature in his senses, would have ventured to emulate my surprising rashness. The process of smashing the pane of glass—it was plate glass—was anything but a noiseless one. There was, first, the blow itself, then the shivering of the glass, then the clattering of fragments into the area beneath. One would have thought that the whole thing would have made din enough to have roused the Seven Sleepers. But, here, again the weather was on my side. About that time the wind was howling wildly,—it came shrieking across the square. It is possible that the tumult which it made deadened all other sounds.

Anyhow, as I stood within the room which I had violated, listening for signs of someone being on the alert, I could hear nothing. Within the house there seemed to be the silence of the grave. I drew down the window, and made for the door.

It proved by no means easy to find. The windows were obscured by heavy curtains, so that the room

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inside was dark as pitch. It appeared to be unusually full of furniture,—an appearance due, perhaps, to my being a stranger in the midst of such Cimmerian blackness. I had to feel my way, very gingerly indeed, among the various impedimenta. As it was I seemed to come into contact with most of the obstacles there were to come into contact with, stumbling more than once over footstools, and over what seemed to be dwarf chairs. It was a miracle that my movements still continued to be unheard,—but I believe that the explanation was, that the house was well built; that the servants were the only persons in it at the time; that their bedrooms were on the top floor; that they were fast asleep; and that they were little likely to be disturbed by anything that might occur in the room which I had entered.

Reaching the door at last, I opened it,—listening for any promise of being interrupted—and—to adapt a hackneyed phrase—directed by the power which shaped my end, I went across the hall and up the stairs. I passed up the first landing, and, on the second, moved to a door upon the right. I turned the handle, it yielded, the door opened, I entered, closing it behind me. I went to the wall just inside the door, found a handle, jerked it, and switched on the electric light,—
—doing, I make no doubt, all these things, from a spectator's point of view, so naturally, that a judge and jury would have been with difficulty persuaded that they were not the product of my own volition.

In the brilliant glow of the electric light I took a leisurely survey of the contents of the room. It was, as the man in the bed had said it would be, a study,—a fine, spacious apartment, evidently intended rather for work than for show. There were three separate writing-tables, one very large and two smaller ones, all covered with an orderly array of manuscripts and papers. A typewriter stood at the side of one. On the floor, under and about them, were piles of books, portfolios, and official-looking documents. Every available foot of wall space on three sides of the room was lined with shelves, full as they could hold with books. On the fourth side, facing the door, was a

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large lock-up oak bookcase, and, in the further corner, a quaint old bureau. So soon as I saw this bureau I went for it, straight as an arrow from a bow,—indeed, it would be no abuse of metaphor to say that I was propelled towards it like an arrow from a bow.

It had drawers below, glass doors above, and between the drawers and the doors was a flap to let down. It was to this flap my attention was directed. I put out my hand to open it; it was locked at the top. I pulled at it with both hands; it refused to budge.

So this was the lock I was, if necessary, to practise the arts of a thief to open. I was no picklock; I had flattered myself that nothing, and no one, could make me such a thing. Yet now that I found myself confronted by that unyielding flap, I found that pressure, irresistible pressure, was being put upon me to gain, by any and every means, access to its interior. I had no option but to yield. I looked about me in search of some convenient tool with which to ply the felon's trade. I found it close beside me. Leaning against the wall, within a yard of where I stood, were examples of various kinds of weapons,—among them, spear-heads. Taking one of these spear-heads, with much difficulty I forced the point between the flap and the bureau. Using the leverage thus obtained, I attempted to prise it open. The flap held fast; the spear-head snapped in two. I tried another, with the same result; a third, to fail again. There were no more. The most convenient thing remaining was a queer, heavy-headed sharp-edged hatchet. This I took, brought the sharp edge down with all my force upon the refractory flap. The hatchet went through,—before I had done with it, it was open with a vengeance.

But I was destined on the occasion of my first—and, I trust, last—experience of the burglar's calling, to carry the part completely through. I had gained access to the flap itself only to find that at the back were several small drawers, on one of which my observation was brought to bear in a fashion which it was quite impossible to disregard. As a matter of course it was locked, and, once more, I had to search for something which would serve as a rough-and-ready substitute for the missing key.

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There was nothing at all suitable among the weapons, —I could hardly for such a purpose use the hatchet; the drawer in question was such a little one that to have done so would have been to shiver it to splinters. On the mantelshelf, in an open leather case, were a pair of revolvers. Statesmen, nowadays, sometimes stand in actual peril of their lives. It is possible that Mr Lessingham, conscious of continually threatened danger, carried them about with him as a necessary protection. They were serviceable weapons, large, and somewhat weighty,—of the type with which, I believe, upon occasion the police are armed. Not only were all the barrels loaded, but, in the case itself there was a supply of cartridges more than sufficient to charge them all again.

I was handling the weapons, wondering—if, in my condition, the word was applicable—what use I could make of them to enable me to gain admission to that drawer, when there came, on a sudden, from the street without, the sound of approaching wheels. There was a whirring within my brain, as if someone was endeavouring to explain to me to what service to apply the revolvers, and I, perforce, strained every nerve to grasp the meaning of my invisible mentor. While I did so, the wheels drew rapidly nearer, and, just as I was expecting them to go whirling by, stopped,—in front of the house. My heart leapt in my bosom. In a convulsion of frantic terror, again, during the passage of one frenzied moment, I all but burst the bonds that held me, and fled, haphazard, from the imminent peril. But the bonds were stronger than I,—it was as if I had been rooted to the ground.

A key was inserted in the keyhole of the front door, the lock was turned, the door thrown open, firm footsteps entered the house. If I could I would not have stood upon the order of my going, but gone at once, anywhere, anyhow; but, at that moment, my comings and goings were not matters in which I was consulted. Panic fear raging within, outwardly I was calm as possible, and stood, turning the revolvers over and over, asking myself what it could be that I was intended to do with them. All at once it came to me in an

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illuminating flash,—I was to fire at the lock of the drawer, and blow it open.

A madder scheme it would have been impossible to hit upon. The servants had slept through a good deal, but they would hardly sleep through the discharge of a revolver in a room below them,—not to speak of the person who had just entered the premises, and whose footsteps were already audible as he came up the stairs. I struggled to make a dumb protest against the insensate folly which was hurrying me to infallible destruction, without success. For me there was only obedience. With a revolver in either hand I marched towards the bureau as unconcernedly as if I would not have given my life to have escaped the dénouement which I needed but a slight modicum of common sense to be aware was close at hand. I placed the muzzle of one of the revolvers against the keyhole of the drawer to which my unseen guide had previously directed me, and pulled the trigger. The lock was shattered, the contents of the drawer were at my mercy. I snatched up a bundle of letters, about which a pink ribbon was wrapped. Startled by a noise behind me, immediately following the report of the pistol, I glanced over my shoulder.

The room door was open, and Mr Lessingham was standing with the handle in his hand;

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# CHAPTER VII

## THE GREAT PAUL LESSINGHAM

He was in evening dress. He carried a small portfolio in his left hand. If the discovery of my presence startled him, as it could scarcely have failed to do, he allowed no sign of surprise to escape him. Paul Lessingham's impenetrability is proverbial. Whether on platforms addressing excited crowds, or in the midst of heated discussion in the House of Commons, all the world knows that his coolness remains unruffled. It is generally understood that he owes his success in the political arena in no slight measure to the adroitness which is born of his invulnerable presence of mind. He gave me a taste of its quality then. Standing in the attitude which has been familiarised to us by caricaturists, his feet apart, his broad shoulders well set back, his handsome head a little advanced, his keen blue eyes having in them something suggestive of a bird of prey considering just when, where, and how to pounce, he regarded me for some seconds in perfect silence,—whether outwardly I flinched I cannot say; inwardly I know I did. When he spoke, it was without moving from where he stood, and in the calm, airy tones in which he might have addressed an acquaintance who had just dropped in.

'May I ask, sir, to what I am indebted for the pleasure of your company?'

He paused, as if waiting for my answer. When none came, he put his question in another form.

'Pray, sir, who are you, and on whose invitation do I find you here?'

As I still stood speechless, motionless, meeting his glance without a twitching of an eyebrow, nor a tremor of the hand, I imagine that he began to consider me with

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an even closer intentness than before. And that the —to say the least of it—peculiarity of my appearance, caused him to suspect that he was face to face with an adventure of a peculiar kind. Whether he took me for a lunatic I cannot certainly say; but, from his manner, I think it possible he did. He began to move towards me from across the room, addressing me with the utmost suavity and courtesy.

'Be so good as to give me the revolver, and the papers you are holding in your hand.'

As he came on, something entered into me, and forced itself from between my lips, so that I said, in a low, hissing voice, which I vow was never mine,

'THE BEETLE!'

Whether it was, or was not, owing, in some degree, to a trick of my imagination, I cannot determine, but, as the words were spoken, it seemed to me that the lights went low, so that the place was all in darkness, and I again was filled with the nauseous consciousness of the presence of something evil in the room. But if, in that matter, my abnormally strained imagination played me a trick, there could be no doubt whatever as to the effect which the words had on Mr Lessingham. When the mist of the blackness—real or supposititious—had passed from before my eyes, I found that he had retreated to the extremest limits of the room, and was crouching his back against the bookshelves, clutching at them, in the attitude of a man who has received a staggering blow, from which, as yet, he has had no opportunity of recovering. A most extraordinary change had taken place in the expression of his face; in his countenance amazement, fear, and horror seemed struggling for the mastery. I was filled with a most discomforting qualm as I gazed at the frightened figure in front of me, and realised that it was that of the great Paul Lessingham, the god of my political idolatry.

'Who are you?—In God's name, who are you?'

His very voice seemed changed; his frenzied, choking accents would hardly have been recognised by either friend or foe.

'Who are you?—Do you hear me ask, who are you? In the name of God, I bid you say!'

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As he perceived that I was still, he began to show a species of excitement which it was unpleasant to witness, especially as he continued to crouch against the book-shelf, as if he was afraid to stand up straight. So far from exhibiting the impassivity for which he was renowned, all the muscles in his face and all the limbs in his body seemed to be in motion at once; he was like a man afflicted with the shivering ague,—his very fingers were twitching aimlessly, as they were stretched out on either side of him, as if seeking for support from the shelves against which he leaned.

'Where have you come from? what do you want? who sent you here? what concern have you with me? is it necessary that you should come and play these childish tricks with me? why? why?'

The questions came from him with astonishing rapidity. When he saw that I continued silent, they came still faster, mingled with what sounded to me like a stream of inchoate abuse.

'Why do you stand there in that extraordinary garment,—it's worse than nakedness, yes, worse than nakedness! For that alone I could have you punished, and I will!—and try to play the fool? Do you think I am a boy to be bamboozled by every bogey a blunderer may try to conjure up? If so, you're wrong, as whoever sent you might have had sense enough to let you know. If you tell me who you are, and who sent you here, and what it is you want, I will be merciful; if not, the police shall be sent for, and the law shall take its course,—to the bitter end!—I warn you.—Do you hear? You fool! tell me who you are?'

The last words came from him in what was very like a burst of childish fury. He himself seemed conscious, the moment after, that his passion was sadly lacking in dignity, and to be ashamed of it. He drew himself straight up. With a pocket-handkerchief which he took from an inner pocket of his coat, he wiped his lips. Then, clutching it tightly in his hand, he eyed me with a fixedness which, under any other circumstances, I should have found unbearable.

'Well, sir, is your continued silence part of the business of the rôle you have set yourself to play?'

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His tone was firmer, and his bearing more in keeping with his character.

'If it be so, I presume that I, at least have liberty to speak. When I find a gentleman, even one gifted with your eloquence of silence, playing the part of burglar, I think you will grant that a few words on my part cannot justly be considered to be out of place.'

Again he paused. I could not but feel that he was employing the vehicle of somewhat cumbrous sarcasm to gain time, and to give himself the opportunity of recovering, if the thing was possible, his pristine courage. That, for some cause wholly hidden from me, the mysterious utterance had shaken his nature to its deepest foundations, was made plainer by his endeavour to treat the whole business with a sort of cynical levity.

'To commence with, may I ask if you have come through London, or through any portion of it, in that costume,—or rather, in that want of costume? It would seem out of place in a Cairene street,—would it not?—even in the Rue de Rabagas,—was it not the Rue de Rabagas?'

He asked the question with an emphasis the meaning of which was wholly lost on me. What he referred to either then, or in what immediately followed, I, of course, knew no more than the man in the moon,—though I should probably have found great difficulty in convincing him of my ignorance.

'I take it that you are a reminiscence of the Rue de Rabagas,—that, of course;—is it not of course? The little house with the blue-grey venetians, and the piano with the F sharp missing? Is there still the piano? with the tinny treble,—indeed, the whole atmosphere, was it not tinny?—You agree with me?—I have not forgotten. I am not even afraid to remember,—you perceive it?'

A new idea seemed to strike him,—born, perhaps, of my continued silence.

'You look English,—is it possible that you are not English? What are you then—French? We shall see!'

He addressed me in a tongue which I recognised as French, but with which I was not sufficiently acquainted

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to understand. Although, I flatter myself that,—as the present narrative should show—I have not made an ill-use of the opportunities which I have had to improve my, originally, modest education, I regret that I have never had so much as a ghost of a chance to acquire an even rudimentary knowledge of any language except my own. Recognising, I suppose, from my looks, that he was addressing me in a tongue to which I was a stranger, after a time he stopped, added something with a smile, and then began to talk to me in a lingo to which, in a manner of speaking, I was even stranger, for this time I had not the faintest notion what it was, —it might have been gibberish for all that I could tell. quickly perceiving that he had succeeded no better than before, he returned to English.

'You do not know French?—nor the *patois* of the Rue de Rabagas? Very good,—then what is it that you do know? Are you under a vow of silence, or are you dumb,—except upon occasion? Your face is English, —what can be seen of it, and I will take it, therefore, that English spoken words convey some meaning to your brain. So listen, sir, to what I have to say,—do me the favour to listen carefully.'

He was becoming more and more his former self. In his clear, modulated tones there was a ring of something like a threat,—a something which went very far beyond his words.

'You know something of a period which I choose to have forgotten,—that is plain; you come from a person who, probably knows, still more. Go back to that person and say that what I have forgotten I have forgotten; nothing will be gained by anyone by an endeavour to induce me to remember,—be very sure upon that point, say that nothing will be gained by anyone. That time was one of mirage, of delusion, of disease. I was in a condition, mentally and bodily, in which pranks could have been played upon me by any trickster. Such pranks were played. I know that now quite well. I do not pretend to be proficient in the *modus operandi* of the hankey-pankey man, but I know that he has a method, all the same,—one susceptible, to[illegible] of facile explanation. Go back to your friend,

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and tell him that I am not again likely to be made the butt of his old method,—nor of his new one either. —You hear me, sir?'

I remained motionless and silent,—an attitude which, plainly, he resented.

'Are you deaf and dumb? You certainly are not dumb, for you spoke to me just now. Be advised by me, and do not compel me to resort to measures which will be the cause to you of serious discomfort.—You hear me, sir?'

Still, from me, not a sign of comprehension,—to his increased annoyance.

'So be it. Keep your own counsel, if you choose. Yours will be the bitterness, not mine. You may play the lunatic, and play it excellently well, but that you do understand what is said to you is clear.—Come to business, sir. Give me that revolver, and the packet of letters which you have stolen from my desk.'

He had been speaking with the air of one who desired to convince himself as much as me,—and about his last words there was almost a flavour of braggadocio. I remained unheeding.

'Are you going to do as I require, or are you insane enough to refuse?—in which case I shall summon assistance, and there will quickly be an end of it. Pray do not imagine that you can trick me into supposing that you do not grasp the situation. I know better.—Once more, are you going to give me that revolver and those letters?'

Yet no reply. His anger was growing momentarily greater,—and his agitation too. On my first introduction to Paul Lessingham I was not destined to discover in him any one of those qualities of which the world held him to be the undisputed possessor. He showed himself to be as unlike the statesman I had conceived, and esteemed, as he easily could have done.

'Do you think I stand in awe of you?—you!—of such a thing as you! Do as I tell you, or I myself will make you,—and, at the same time, teach you a much-needed lesson.'

He raised his voice. In his bearing there was a would-be defiance. He might not have been aware

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of it, but the repetitions of the threats were, in themselves, confessions of weakness. He came a step or two forward,—then, stopping short, began to tremble. The perspiration broke out upon his brow; he made spasmodic little dabs at it with his crumpled-up handkerchief. His eyes wandered hither and thither, as if searching for something which they feared to see yet were constrained to seek. He began to talk to himself, out loud, in odd disconnected sentences,—apparently ignoring me entirely.

'What was that?—It was nothing.—It was my imagination.—My nerves are out of order.—I have been working too hard.—I am not well.—*What's that?*'

This last inquiry came from him in a half-stifled shriek,—as the door opened to admit the head and body of an elderly man in a state of considerable undress. He had the tousled appearance of one who had been unexpectedly roused out of slumber, and unwillingly dragged from bed. Mr Lessingham stared at him as if he had been a ghost, while he stared back at Mr Lessingham as if he found a difficulty in crediting the evidence of his own eyes. It was he who broke the silence,—stutteringly.

'I am sure I beg your pardon, sir, but one of the maids thought that she heard the sound of a shot, and we came down to see if there was anything the matter,—I had no idea, sir, that you were here.' His eyes travelled from Mr Lessingham towards me,—suddenly increasing, when they saw me, to about twice their previous size. 'God save us!—who is that?'

The man's self-evident cowardice possibly impressed Mr Lessingham with the conviction that he himself was not cutting the most dignified of figures. At any rate, he made a notable effort to, once more, assume a bearing of greater determination.

'You are quite right, Matthews, quite right. I am obliged by your watchfulness. At present you may leave the room—I propose to deal with this fellow myself,—only remain with the other men upon the landing, so that, if I call, you may come to my assistance.'

Matthews did as he was told, he left the room,—with,

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I fancy, more rapidity than he had entered it. Mr Lessingham returned to me, his manner distinctly more determined, as if he found his resolution reinforced by the near neighbourhood of his retainers.

'Now, my man, you see how the case stands, at a word from me you will be overpowered and doomed to undergo a long period of imprisonment. Yet I am still willing to listen to the dictates of mercy. Put down that revolver, give me those letters,—you will not find me disposed to treat you hardly.'

For all the attention I paid him, I might have been a graven image. He misunderstood, or pretended to misunderstand, the cause of my silence.

'Come, I see that you suppose my intentions to be harsher than they really are,—do not let us have a scandal, and a scene,—be sensible!—give me those letters!'

Again he moved in my direction; again, after he had taken a step or two, to stumble and stop, and look about him with frightened eyes; again to begin to mumble to himself aloud.

'It's a conjurer's trick!—Of course!—Nothing more. —What else could it be?—I'm not to be fooled.—I'm older than I was. I've been overdoing it,—that's all.'

Suddenly he broke into cries.

'Matthews! Matthews!—Help! help!'

Matthews entered the room, followed by three other men, younger than himself. Evidently all had slipped into the first articles of clothing they could lay their hands upon, and each carried a stick, or some similar rudimentary weapon.

Their master spurred them on.

'Strike the revolver out of his hand, Matthews!—knock him down!—take the letters from him!—don't be afraid!—I'm not afraid!'

In proof of it, he rushed at me, as it seemed half blindly. As he did so I was constrained to shout out, in tones which I should not have recognised as mine,

'THE BEETLE!'

And that moment the room was all in darkness, and there were screams as of someone in an agony of terror

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or of pain. I felt that something had come into the room, I knew not whence nor how,—something of horror. And the next action of which I was conscious was, that under cover of the darkness, I was flying from the room, propelled by I knew not what.

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# CHAPTER VIII

## THE MAN IN THE STREET

WHETHER anyone pursued I cannot say. I have some dim recollection, as I came out of the room, of women being huddled against the wall upon the landing, and of their screaming as I went past. But whether any effort was made to arrest my progress I cannot tell. My own impression is that not the slightest attempt to impede my headlong flight was made by anyone.

In what direction I was going I did not know. I was like a man flying through the phantasmagoric happenings of a dream, knowing neither how nor whither. I tore along what I suppose was a broad passage, through a door at the end into what, I fancy, was a drawing-room. Across this room I dashed, helter-skelter, bringing down, in the gloom, unseen articles of furniture, with myself sometimes on top, and sometimes under them. In a trice, each time I fell, I was on my feet again,—until I went crashing against a window which was concealed by curtains. It would not have been strange had I crashed through it,—but I was spared that. Thrusting aside the curtains, I fumbled for the fastening of the window. It was a tall French casement, extending, so far as I could judge, from floor to ceiling. When I had it open I stepped through it on to the verandah without,—to find that I was on the top of the portico which I had vainly essayed to ascend from below.

I tried the road down which I had tried up,—proceeding with a breakneck recklessness of which now I shudder to think. It was, probably, some thirty feet above the pavement, yet I rushed at the descent with as much disregard for the safety of life and limb as if it had been only three. Over the edge of the parapet I went, obtaining, with my naked feet, a precarious

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foothold on the latticework,—then down I commenced to scramble. I never did get a proper hold, and when I had descended, perhaps, rather more than half the distance—scraping, as it seemed to me, every scrap of skin off my body in the process—I lost what little hold I had. Down to the bottom I went tumbling, rolling right across the pavement into the muddy road. It was a miracle I was not seriously injured,—but in that sense, certainly, that night the miracles were on my side. Hardly was I down, than I was up again,—mud and all.

Just as I was getting on to my feet I felt a firm hand grip me by the shoulder. Turning I found myself confronted by a tall, slenderly built man, with a long, drooping moustache, and an overcoat buttoned up to the chin, who held me with a grasp of steel. He looked at me,—and I looked back at him.

'After the ball,—eh?'

Even then I was struck by something pleasant in his voice, and some quality as of sunshine in his handsome face.

Seeing that I said nothing he went on,—with a curious, half mocking smile.

'Is that the way to come slithering down the Apostle's pillar?—Is it simple burglary, or simpler murder?—Tell me the glad tidings that you've killed St Paul, and I'll let you go.'

Whether he was mad or not I cannot say,—there was some excuse for thinking so. He did not look mad, though his words and actions alike were strange.

'Although you have confined yourself to gentle felony, shall I not shower blessings on the head of him who has been robbing Paul?—Away with you!'

He removed his grip, giving me a gentle push as he did so,—and I was away. I neither stayed nor paused.

I knew little of records, but if anyone has made a better record than I did that night between Lowndes Square and Walham Green I should like to know just what it was,—I should, too, like to have seen it done.

In an incredibly short space of time I was once more in front of the house with the open window,—the packet of letters—which were like to have cost me so dear—gripped tightly in my hand.

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# CHAPTER IX

## THE CONTENTS OF THE PACKET

I PULLED up sharply,—as if a brake had been suddenly, and even mercilessly, applied to bring me to a standstill. In front of the window I stood shivering. A shower had recently commenced,—the falling rain was being blown before the breeze. I was in a terrible sweat,—yet tremulous as with cold; covered with mud; bruised, and cut, and bleeding,—as piteous an object as you would care to see. Every limb in my body ached; every muscle was exhausted; mentally and physically I was done; had I not been held up, willy nilly, by the spell which was upon me, I should have sunk down, then and there, in a hopeless, helpless, hapless heap.

But my tormentor was not yet at an end with me.

As I stood there, like some broken and beaten hack, waiting for the word of command, it came. It was as if some strong magnetic current had been switched on to me through the window to draw me into the room. Over the low wall I went, over the sill,—once more I stood in that chamber of my humiliation and my shame. And once again I was conscious of that awful sense of the presence of an evil thing. How much of it was fact, and how much of it was the product of imagination I cannot say; but, looking back, it seems to me that it was as if I had been taken out of the corporeal body to be plunged into the inner chambers of all nameless sin. There was the sound of something flopping from off the bed on to the ground, and I knew that the thing was coming at me across the floor. My stomach quaked, my heart melted within me,—the very anguish of my terror gave me strength to scream,—and scream! Sometimes, even now, I seem to hear these screams of mine ringing through the night, and

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I bury my face in the pillow, and it is as though I was passing through the very Valley of the Shadow.

The thing went back,—I could hear it slipping and sliding across the floor. There was silence. And, presently, the lamp was lit, and the room was all in brightness. There, on the bed, in the familiar attitude between the sheets, his head resting on his hand, his eyes blazing like living coals, was the dreadful cause of all my agonies. He looked at me with his unpitying, unblinking glance.

'So!—Through the window again!—like a thief! —Is it always through that door that you come into a house?'

He paused,—as if to give me time too digest his gibe.

'You saw Paul Lessingham,—well?—the great Paul Lessingham!—Was he, then, so great?'

His rasping voice, with its queer foreign twang, reminded me, in some uncomfortable way, of a rusty saw,—the things he said, and the manner in which he said them, were alike intended to add to my discomfort. It was solely because the feat was barely possible that he only partially succeeded.

'Like a thief you went into his house,—did I not tell you that you would? Like a thief he found you, —were you not ashamed? Since, like a thief he found you, how comes it that you have escaped,—by what robber's artifice have you saved yourself from gaol?'

His manner changed,—so that, all at once, he seemed to snarl at me.

'Is he great?—well!—is he great,—Paul Lessingham? You are small, but he is smaller,—your great Paul Lessingham!—Was there ever a man so less than nothing?'

With the recollection fresh upon me of Mr Lessingham as I had so lately seen him I could not but feel that there might be a modicum of truth in what, with such an intensity of bitterness, the speaker suggested. The picture which, in my mental gallery, I had hung in the place of honour, seemed, to say the least, to have become a trifle smudged.

As usual, the man in the bed seemed to experience

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not the slightest difficulty in deciphering what was passing through my mind.

'That is so,—you and he, you are a pair,—the great Paul Lessingham is as great a thief as you,—and greater —for, at least, than you he has more courage.'

For some moments he was still; then exclaimed, with sudden fierceness,

'Give me what you have stolen!'

I moved towards the bed—most unwillingly—and held out to him the packet of letters which I had abstracted from the little drawer. Perceiving my disinclination to his near neighbourhood, he set himself to play with it. Ignoring my outstretched hand, he stared me straight in the face.

'What ails you? Are you not well? Is it not sweet to stand close at my side? You, with your white skin, if I were a woman, would you not take me for a wife?'

There was something about the manner in which this was said which was so essentially feminine that once more I wondered if I could possibly be mistaken in the creature's sex. I would have given much to have been able to strike him across the face,—or, better, to have taken him by the neck, and thrown him through the window, and rolled him in the mud.

He condescended to notice what I was holding out to him.

'So!—that is what you have stolen! That is what you have taken from the drawer in the bureau—the drawer which was locked—and which you used the arts in which a thief is skilled to enter. Give it to me, —thief!'

He snatched the packet from me, scratching the back of my hand as he did so, as if his nails had been talons. He turned the packet over and over, glaring at it as he did so,—it was strange what a relief it was to have his glance removed from off my face.

'You kept it in your inner drawer, Paul Lessingham, where none but you could see it, —did you? You hid it as one hides treasure. There should be something here worth having, worth seeing, worth knowing,—

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yes, worth knowing!—since you found it worth your while to hide it up so closely.'

As I have said, the packet was bound about by a string of pink ribbon,—a fact on which he presently began to comment.

'With what a pretty string you have encircled it,—and how neatly it is tied! Surely only a woman's hand could tie a knot like that,—who would have guessed yours were such agile fingers?—So! An endorsement on the cover! What's this?—let's see what's written!—"The letters of my dear love, Majorie Lindon."'

As he read these words, which, as he said, were endorsed upon the outer sheet of paper which served as a cover for the letters which were enclosed within, his face became transfigured. Never did I suppose that rage could have so possessed a human countenance. His jaw dropped open so that his yellow fangs gleamed through his parted lips,—he held his breath so long that each moment I looked to see him fall down in a fit; the veins stood out all over his face and head like seams of blood. I know not how long he continued speechless. When his breath returned, it was with chokings and gaspings, in the midst of which he hissed out his words, as if their mere passage through his throat brought him near to strangulation.

'The letters of his dear love!—of his dear love!—his!—Paul Lessingham's!—So!—It is as I guessed,—as I knew,—as I saw!—Majorie Lindon!—Sweet Marjorie!—His dear love!—Paul Lessingham's dear love!—She with the lily face, the corn-hued hair!—What is it his dear love has found in her fond heart to write Paul Lessingham?'

Sitting up in bed he tore the packet open. It contained, perhaps, eight or nine letters,—some mere notes, some long epistles. But, short or long, he devoured them with equal appetite, each one over and over again, till I thought he never would have done re-reading them. They were on thick white paper, of a peculiar shade of whiteness, with untrimmed edges. On each sheet a crest and an address were stamped in gold, and all the sheets were of the same shape and size. I told myself that if anywhere, at any time, I saw writing paper

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like that again, I should not fail to know it. The caligraphy was, like the paper, unusual, bold, decided, and, I should have guessed, produced by a J pen.

All the time that he was reading he kept emitting sounds, more resembling yelps and snarls than anything more human,—like some savage beast nursing its pent-up rage. When he had made an end of reading,—for the season,—he let his passion have full vent.

'So!—That is what his dear love has found it in her heart to write Paul Lessingham!—Paul Lessingham!'

Pen cannot describe the concentrated frenzy of hatred with which the speaker dwelt upon the name,—it was demoniac.

'It is enough!—it is the end!—it is his doom! He shall be ground between the upper and the nether stones in the towers of anguish, and all that is left of him shall be cast on the accursed stream of the bitter waters, to stink under the blood-grimed sun! And for her—for Majorie Lindon!—for his dear love!—it shall come to pass that she shall wish that she was never born,—nor he!—and the gods of the shadows shall smell the sweet incense of her suffering!—It shall be! it shall be! It is I that say it,—even I!'

In the madness of his rhapsodical frenzy I believe that he had actually forgotten I was there. But, on a sudden, glancing aside, he saw me, and remembered,—and was prompt to take advantage of an opportunity to wreak his rage upon a tangible object.

'It is you!—you thief!—you still live!—to make a mock of one of the children of the gods!'

He leaped, shrieking, off the bed, and sprang at me, clasping my throat with his horrid hands, bearing me backwards on to the floor; I felt his breath mingle with mine * * * and then God, in His mercy, sent oblivion.

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# BOOK II

# THE HAUNTED MAN

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*The Story according to Sydney Atherton, Esquire*

## CHAPTER X

### REJECTED

It was after our second waltz I did it. In the usual quiet corner,—which, that time, was in the shadow of a palm in the hall. Before I had got into my stride she checked me,—touching my sleeve with her fan, turning towards me with startled eyes.

'Stop, please!'

But I was not to be stopped. Cliff Challoner passed, with Gerty Cazell. I fancy that, as he passed, he nodded. I did not care. I was wound up to go, and I went it. No man knows how he can talk till he does talk,—to the girl he wants to marry. It is my impression that I gave her recollections of the Restoration poets. She seemed surprised,—not having previously detected in me the poetic strain, and insisted on cutting in.

'Mr Atherton, I am so sorry.'

Then I did let fly.

'Sorry that I love you!—why? Why should you be sorry that you have become the one thing needful in any man's eyes,—even in mine? The one thing precious,—the one thing to be altogether esteemed! Is it so common for a woman to come across a man

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who would be willing to lay down his life for her that she should be sorry when she finds him ?'

'I did not know that you felt like this, though I confess that I have had my—my doubts.'

'Doubts !—I thank you.'

'You are quite aware, Mr Atherton, that I like you very much.'

'Like me !—Bah !'

'I cannot help liking you,—though it may be "bah."'

'I don't want you to like me,—I want you to love me.'

'Precisely,—that is your mistake.'

'My mistake !—in wanting you to love me !—when I love you—'

'Then you shouldn't,—though I can't help thinking that you are mistaken even there.'

'Mistaken !—in supposing that I love you !—when I assert and reassert it with the whole force of my being ! What do you want me to do to prove I love you,—take you in my arms and crush you to my bosom, and make a spectacle of you before every creature in the place ?"

'I'd rather you wouldn't, and perhaps you wouldn't mind not talking quite so loud. Mr Challoner seems to be wondering what you're shouting about.'

'You shouldn't torture me.'

She opened and shut her fan,—as she looked down at it I am disposed to suspect that she smiled.

'I am glad we have had this little explanation, because, of course, you are my friend.'

'I am not your friend.'

'Pardon me, you are.'

'I say I'm not,—if I can't be something else, I'll be no friend.'

She went on,—calmly ignoring me,—playing with her fan.

'As it happens, I am, just now, in rather a delicate position, in which a friend is welcome.'

'What's the matter ? Who's been worrying you,—your father ?'

'Well,—he has not,—as yet ; but he may be soon.'

'What's in the wind ?'

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'Mr Lessingham.'

She dropped her voice,—and her eyes. For the moment I did not catch her meaning.

'What?'

'Your friend, Mr Lessingham.'

'Excuse me, Miss Lindon, but I am by no means sure that anyone is entitled to call Mr Lessingham a friend of mine.'

'What!—Not when I am going to be his wife?'

That took me aback. I had had my suspicions that Paul Lessingham was more with Marjorie than he had any right to be, but I had never supposed that she could see anything desirable in a stick of a man like that. Not to speak of a hundred and one other considerations,—Lessingham on one side of the House, and her father on the other; and old Lindon girding at him anywhere and everywhere—with his high-dried Tory notions of his family importance,—to say nothing of his fortune.

I don't know if I looked what I felt,—if I did, I looked uncommonly blank.

'You have chosen an appropriate moment, Miss Lindon, to make to me such a communication.'

She chose to disregard my irony.

'I am glad you think so, because now you will understand what a difficult position I am in.'

'I offer you my hearty congratulations.'

'And I thank you for them, Mr Atherton, in the spirit in which they are offered, because from you I know they mean so much.'

I bit my lip,—for the life of me I could not tell how she wished me to read her words.

'Do I understand that this announcement has been made to me as one of the public?'

'You do not. It is made to you, in confidence, as my friend,—as my greatest friend; because a husband is something more than friend.' My pulses tingled. 'You will be on my side?'

She had paused,—and I stayed silent.

'On your side,—or Mr Lessingham's?'

'His side is my side, and my side is his side;—you will be on our side?'

'I am not sure that I altogether follow you.'

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'You are the first I have told. When papa hears it is possible that there will be trouble,—as you know. He thinks so much of you and of your opinion; when that trouble comes I want you to be on our side,—on my side.

'Why should I?—what does it matter? You are stronger than your father,—it is just possible that Lessingham is stronger than you; together, from your father's point of view, you will be invincible."

'You are my friend,—are you not my friend?'

'In effect, you offer me an Apple of Sodom.'

'Thank you;—I did not think you so unkind.'

'And you,—are you kind? I make you an avowal of my love, and, straightway, you ask me to act as chorus to the love of another.'

'How could I tell you loved me,—as you say! I had no notion. You have known me all your life, yet you have not breathed a word of it till now.'

'If I had spoken before?'

I imagine that there was a slight movement of her shoulders,—almost amounting to a shrug.

'I do not know that it would have made any difference. —I do not pretend that it would. But I do know this, I believe that you yourself have only discovered the state of your own mind within the last half-hour.'

If she had slapped my face she could not have startled me more. I had no notion if her words were uttered at random, but they came so near the truth they held me breathless. It was a fact that only during the last few minutes had I really realised how things were with me,—only since the end of that first waltz that the flame had burst out in my soul which was now consuming me. She had read me by what seemed so like a flash of imspiration that I hardly knew what to say to her. I tried to be stinging.

'You flatter me, Miss Lindon, you flatter me at every point. Had you only discovered to me the state of your mind a little sooner I should not have discovered to you the state of mine at all.'

'We will consider it *terra incognita*.'

'Since you wish it.' Her provoking calmness stung me,—and the suspicion that she was laughing at me in

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her sleeve. I gave her a glimpse of the cloven hoof.

'But, at the same time, since you assert that you have so long been innocent, I beg that you will continue so no more. At least, your innocence shall be without excuse. For I wish you to understand that I love you, that I have loved you, that I shall love you. Any understanding you may have with Mr Lessingham will not make the slightest difference. I warn you, Miss Lindon, that, until death, you will have to write me down your lover.'

She looked at me, with wide open eyes,—as if I almost frightened her. To be frank, that was what I wished to do.

'Mr Atherton!'

'Miss Lindon?'

'That is not like you at all.'

'We seem to be making each other's acquaintance for the first time.'

She continued to gaze at me with her big eyes,—which, to be candid, I found it difficult to meet. On a sudden her face was lighted by a smile,—which I resented.

'Not after all these years,—not after all these years! I know you, and though I daresay you're not flawless, I fancy you'll be found to ring pretty true.'

Her manner was almost sisterly,—elder-sisterly. I could have shaken her. Hartridge coming to claim his dance gave me an opportunity to escape with such remnants of dignity as I could gather about me. He dawdled up,—his thumbs, as usual, in his waistcoat pockets.

'I believe, Miss Lindon, this is our dance.'

She acknowledged it with a bow, and rose to take his arm. I got up, and left her, without a word.

As I crossed the hall I chanced on Percy Woodville. He was in his familiar state of fluster, and was gaping about him as if he had mislaid the Koh-i-noor, and wondered where in the thunder it had got to. When he saw it was I he caught me by the arm.

'I say, Atherton, have you seen Miss Lindon?'

'I have.'

'No!—Have you?—By Jove!—Where? I've been looking for her all over the place, except in the cellars

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and the attics,—and I was just going to commence on them. This is our dance.'

'In that case; she's shunted you.'

'No!—Impossible!' His mouth went like an O,—and his eyes ditto, his eyeglass clattering down on to his shirt front. 'I expect the mistake's mine. Fact is, I've made a mess of my programme. It's either the last dance, or this dance, or the next, that I've booked with her, but I'm hanged if I know which. Just take a squint at it, there's a good chap, and tell me which one you think it is.'

I 'took a squint'—since he held the thing within an inch of my nose I could hardly help it; one 'squint,' and that was enough—and more. Some men's ball programmes are studies in impressionism, Percy's seemed to me to be a study in madness. It was covered with hieroglyphics, but what they meant, or what they did there anyhow, it was absurd to suppose that I could tell,—I never put them there!—Proverbially, the man's a champion hasher.

'I regret, my dear Percy, that I am not an expert in cuneiform writing. If you have any doubt as to which dance is yours, you'd better ask the lady,—she'll feel flattered.'

Leaving him to do his own addling I went to find my coat.—I panted to get into the open air; as for dancing I felt that I loathed it. Just as I neared the cloak-room someone stopped me. It was Dora Grayling.

'Have you forgotten that this is our dance?'

I had forgotten,—clean. And I was not obliged by her remembering. Though as I looked at her sweet, grey eyes, and at the soft contours of her gentle face, I felt that I deserved well kicking. She is an angel,—one of the best!—but I was in no mood for angels. Not for a very great deal would I have gone through that dance just then, nor, with Dora Grayling, of all women in the world, would I have sat it out.—So I was a brute and blundered.

'You must forgive me, Miss Grayling, but—I am not feeling very well, and—I don't think I m up to any more dancing.—Good-night.'

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# CHAPTER XI

## A MIDNIGHT EPISODE

THE weather out of doors was in tune with my frame of mind,—I was in a deuce of a temper, and it was a deuce of a night. A keen north-east wind, warranted to take the skin right off you, was playing catch-who-catch-can with intermittent gusts of blinding rain. Since it was not fit for a dog to walk, none of your cabs for me,—nothing would serve but pedestrian exercise.

So I had it.

I went down Park Lane,—and the wind and rain went with me,—also, thoughts of Dora Grayling. What a bounder I had been,—and was! If there is anything in worse taste than to book a lady for a dance, and then to leave her in the lurch, I should like to know what that thing is,—when found it ought to be made a note of. If any man of my acquaintance allowed himself to be guilty of such a felony in the first degree, I should cut him. I wished someone would try to cut me,—I should like to see him at it.

It was all Marjorie's fault,—everything! past, present, and to come! I had known that girl when she was in long frocks—I had, at that period of our acquaintance, pretty recently got out of them; when she was advanced to short ones; and when, once more, she returned to long. And all that time,—well, I was nearly persuaded that the whole of the time I had loved her. If I had not mentioned it, it was because I had suffered my affection, 'like the worm, to lie hidden in the bud,'—or whatever it is the fellow says.

At any rate, I was perfectly positive that if I had had the faintest notion that she would ever seriously consider such a man as Lessingham I should have loved her long ago. Lessingham! Why, he was old enough to be

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her father,—at least he was a good many years older than I was. And a wretched Radical! It is true that on certain points I, also, am what some people would call a Radical,—but not a Radical of the kind he is. Thank Heaven, no! No doubt I have admired traits in his character, until I learnt this thing of him. I am even prepared to admit that he is a man of ability,—in his way! which is, emphatically, not mine. But to think of him in connection with such a girl as Marjorie Lindon,—preposterous!—Why, the man's as dry as a stick,—drier! And cold as an iceberg. Nothing but a politician, absolutely. He a lover!—how I could fancy such a stroke of humour setting all the benches in a roar. Both by education, and by nature, he was incapable of even playing such a part; as for being the thing,—absurd! If you were to sink a shaft from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, you would find inside him nothing but the dry bones of parties and of politics.

What my Marjorie—if everyone had his own, she is mine, and, in that sense, she always will be mine—what my Marjorie could see in such a dry-as-dust out of which even to construct the rudiments of a husband was beyond my fathoming.

Suchlike agreeable reflections were fit company for the wind and the wet, so they bore me company all down the lane. I crossed at the corner, going round the hospital towards the square. This brought me to the abiding-place of Paul the Apostle. Like the idiot I was, I went out into the middle of the street, and stood awhile in the mud to curse him and his house,—on the whole, when one considers that that is the kind of man I can be, it is, perhaps, not surprising that Marjorie disdained me.

'May your following,' I cried,—it is an absolute fact that the words were shouted!—' both in the House and out of it, no longer regard you as a leader! May your party follow after other gods! May your political aspirations wither, and your speeches be listened to by empty benches! May the Speaker persistently and strenuously refuse to allow you to catch his eye, and,

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at the next election, may your constituency reject you ! —Jehoram !—what's that ? '

I might well ask. Until that moment I had appeared to be the only lunatic at large, either outside the house or in it, but, on a sudden, a second lunatic came on the scene, and that with a vengeance. A window was crashed open from within,—the one over the front door, and someone came plunging through it on to the top of the portico. That it was a case of intended suicide I made sure,—and I began to be in hopes that I was about to witness the suicide of Paul. But I was not so assured of the intention when the individual in question began to scramble down the pillar of the porch in the most extraordinary fashion I ever witnessed,—I was not even convinced of a suicidal purpose when he came tumbling down, and lay sprawling in the mud at my feet.

I fancy, if I had performed that portion of the act I should have lain quiet for a second or two, to consider whereabouts I was, and which end of me was uppermost. But there was no nonsense of that sort about that singularly agile stranger,—if he was not made of indiarubber he ought to have been. So to speak, before he was down he was up,—it was all I could do to grab at him before he was off like a rocket.

Such a figure as he presented is seldom seen,—at least, in the streets of London. What he had done with the rest of his apparel I am not in a position to say,—all that was left of it was a long, dark cloak which he strove to wrap round him. Save for that,—and mud !—he was bare as the palm of my hand. Yet it was his face that held me. In my time I have seen strange expressions on men's faces, but never before one such as I saw on his. He looked like a man might look who, after living a life of undiluted crime, at last finds himself face to face with the devil. It was not the look of a madman,—far from it ; it was something worse.

It was the expression on the man's countenance, as much as anything else, which made me behave as I did. I said something to him,—some nonsense, I know not what. He regarded me with a silence which was supernatural. I spoke to him again ;—not a word issued

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from those rigid lips ; there was not a tremor of those awful eyes,—eyes which I was tolerably convinced saw something which I had never seen, or ever should. Then I took my hand from off his shoulder, and let him go. I know not why,—I did.

He had remained as motionless as a statue while I held him,—indeed, for any evidence of life he gave, he might have been a statue ; but, when my grasp was loosed, how he ran ! He had turned the corner and was out of sight before I could say, ' How do ! '

It was only then,—when he had gone, and I had realised the extra-double-express-flash-of-lightning rate at which he had taken his departure—that it occurred to me of what an extremely sensible act I had been guilty in letting him go at all. Here was an individual who had been committing burglary, or something very like it, in the house of a budding cabinet minister, and who had tumbled plump into my arms, so that all I had to do was to call a policeman and get him quodded,—and all that I had done was something of a totally different kind.

" You're a nice type of an ideal citizen ! ' I was addressing myself. ' A first chop specimen of a low-down idiot,—to connive at the escape of the robber who's been robbing Paul. Since you've let the villain go, the least you can do is to leave a card on the Apostle, and inquire how he's feeling.'

I went to Lessingham's front door and knocked,—I knocked once, I knocked twice, I knocked thrice, and the third time, I give you my word, I made the echoes ring,—but still there was not a soul that answered.

' If this is a case of a seven or seventy-fold murder, and the gentleman in the cloak had made a fair clearance of every living creature the house contains, perhaps it's just as well I've chanced upon the scene,—still I do think that one of the corpses might get up to answer the door. If it is possible to make noise enough to waken the dead, you bet I'm on to it.'

And I was,—I punished that knocker ! until I warr.. it the pounding I gave it was audible on the other side of Green Park. And, at last, I woke the dead,—or, rather, I roused Matthews to a consciousness that

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something was going on. Opening the door about six inches, through the interstice he protruded his ancient nose.

'Who's there?'

'Nothing, my dear sir, nothing and no one. It must have been your vigorous imagination which induced you to suppose that there was,—you let it run away with you.'

Then he knew me,—and opened the door about two feet.

'Oh, it's you, Mr Atherton. I beg your pardon, sir, —I thought it might have been the police.'

'What then? Do you stand in terror of the minions of the law,—at last?'

A most discreet servant, Matthews,—just the fellow for a budding cabinet minister. He glanced over his shoulder,—I had suspected the presence of a colleague at his back, now I was assured. He put his hand up to his mouth,—and I thought how exceedingly discreet he looked, in his trousers and his stockinged feet, and with his hair all rumpled, and his braces dangling behind, and his nightshirt creased.

'Well, sir, I have received instructions not to admit the police.'

'The deuce you have!—From whom?'

Coughing behind his hand, leaning forward, he addressed me with an air which was flatteringly confidential.

'From Mr Lessingham, sir.'

'Possibly Mr Lessingham is not aware that a robbery has been committed on his premises, that the burglar has just come out of his drawing-room window with a hop, skip, and a jump, bounded out of the window like a tennis-ball, flashed round the corner like a rocket.'

Again Matthews glanced over his shoulder, as if not clear which way discretion lay, whether fore or aft.

'Thank you, sir. I believe that Mr Lessingham [illegible]aware of something of the kind.' He seemed to come to a sudden resolution, dropping his voice to a whisper 'The fact is, sir, that I fancy Mr Lessingham's a good deal upset.'

'Upset?' I stared at him. There was something

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in his manner I did not understand. 'What do you mean by upset? Has the scoundrel attempted violence?'

'Who's there?'

The voice was Lessingham's, calling to Matthews from the staircase, though, for an instant, I hardly recognised it, it was so curiously petulant. Pushing past Matthews, I stepped into the hall. A young man, I suppose a footman, in the same undress as Matthews, was holding a candle,—it seemed the only light about the place. By its glimmer I perceived Lessingham standing halfway up the stairs. He was in full war paint,—as he is not the sort of man who dresses for the House, I took it that he had been mixing pleasure with business.

'It's I, Lessingham,—Atherton. Do you know that a fellow has jumped out of your drawing-room window?'

It was a second or two before he answered. When he did, his voice had lost its petulance.

'Has he escaped?'

'Clean,—he's a mile away by now.'

It seemed to me that in his tone, when he spoke again, there was a note of relief.

'I wondered if he had. Poor fellow! more sinned against than sinning! Take my advice, Atherton and keep out of politics. They bring you into contact with all the lunatics at large. Good night! I am much obliged to you for knocking us up. Matthews, shut the door.'

Tolerably cool, on my honour,—a man who brings news big with the fate of Rome does not expect to receive such treatment. He expects to be listened to with deference, and to hear all that there is to hear, and not to be sent to the rightabout before he has had a chance of really opening his lips. Before I knew it—almost!—the door was shut, and I was on the doorstep. Confound the Apostle's impudence! next time he might have his house burnt down—and him in it!—before I took the trouble to touch his dirty knocker.

What did he mean by his allusion to lunatics in politics,—did he think to fool me? There was more in the business than met the eye,—and a good deal more than

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he wished to meet mine,—hence his insolence. The creature.

What Marjorie Lindon could see in such an opusculum surpassed my comprehension; especially when there was a man of my sort walking about who adored the very ground she trod upon.

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# CHAPTER XII

## A MORNING VISITOR

ALL through the night, waking and sleeping, and in my dreams, I wondered what Marjorie could see in him! In those same dreams I satisfied myself that she could, and did, see nothing in him, but everything in me,—oh the comfort! The misfortune was that when I awoke I knew it was the other way round,—so that it was a sad awakening. An awakening to thoughts of murder.

So, swallowing a mouthful and a peg, I went into my laboratory to plan murder—legalised murder—on the biggest scale it ever has been planned. I was on the track of a weapon which would make war not only an affair of a single campaign, but of a single half-hour. It would not want an army to work it either. Once let an individual, or two or three at most, in possession of my weapon-that-was-to-be, get within a mile or so of even the largest body of disciplined troops that ever yet a nation put into the field, and—pouf!—in about the time it takes you to say that they would be all dead men. If weapons of precision, which may be relied upon to slay, are preservers of the peace—and the man is a fool who says that they are not!—then I was within reach of the finest preserver of the peace imagination ever yet conceived.

What a sublime thought to think that in the hollow of your own hand lies the life and death of nations,—and it was almost in mine.

I had in front of me some of the finest destructive agents you could wish to light upon—carbon-monoxide, chlorine-trioxide, mercuric-oxide, conine, potassamide, potassium-carboxide, cyanogen—when Edwards entered. I was wearing a mask of my own invention, a thing that

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covered ears and head and everything, something like a diver's helmet—I was dealing with gases a sniff of which meant death ; only a few days before, unmasked, I had been doing some fool's trick with a couple of acids —sulphuric and cyanide of potassium—when, somehow, my hand slipped, and, before I knew it, minute portions of them combined. By the mercy of Providence I fell backwards instead of forwards ;—sequel, about an hour afterwards Edwards found me on the floor, and it took the remainder of that day, and most of the doctors in town, to bring me back to life again.

Edwards announced his presence by touching me on the shoulder,—when I am wearing that mask it isn't always easy to make me hear.

' Someone wishes to see you, sir.'

' Then tell someone that I don't wish to see him.'

Well-trained servant, Edwards,—he walked off with the message as decorously as you please. And then I thought there was an end,—but there wasn't.

I was regulating the valve of a cylinder in which I was fusing some oxides when, once more, someone touched me on the shoulder. Without turning I took it for granted it was Edwards back again.

' I have only to give a tiny twist to this tap, my good fellow, and you will be in the land where the bogies bloom. Why will you come where you're not wanted ? ' Then I looked round. ' Who the devil are you ? '

For it was not Edwards at all, but quite a different class of character.

I found myself confronting an individual who might almost have sat for one of the bogies I had just alluded to. His costume was reminiscent of the ' Algerians ' whom one finds all over France, and who are the most persistent, insolent and amusing of pedlars. I remember one who used to haunt the *répétitions* at the Alcazar at Tours,—but there ! This individual was like the originals, yet unlike,—he was less gaudy and a good deal dingier, than his Gallic prototypes are apt to be. Then he wore a burnoose,—the yellow, grimy-looking article of the Arab of the Soudan, not the spick and span Arab of the boulevard. Chief difference of all his face was clean shaven,—and whoever saw an Algerian

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of Paris whose chiefest glory was not his well-trimmed moustache and beard?

I expected that he would address me in the lingo which these gentlemen call French,—but he didn't.

'You are Mr Atherton?'

'And you are Mr— Who?—how did you come here? Where's my servant?'

The fellow held up his hand. As he did so, as if in accordance with a pre-arranged signal, Edwards came into the room looking excessively startled. I turned to him.

'Is this the person who wished to see me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Didn't I tell you to say that I didn't wish to see him?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then why didn't you do as I told you?'

'I did, sir.'

'Then how comes he here?'

'Really, sir,'—Edwards put his hand up to his head as if he was half asleep—'I don't quite know.'

'What do you mean by you don't know? Why didn't you stop him?'

'I think, sir, that I must have had a touch of sudden faintness, because I tried to put out my hand to stop him, and—I couldn't.'

'You're an idiot.—Go!' And he went. I turned to the stranger. 'Pray, sir, are you a magician?'

He replied to my question with another.

'You, Mr Atherton,—are you also a magician?'

He was staring at my mask with an evident lack of comprehension.

'I wear this because, in this place, death lurks in so many subtle forms, that, without it, I dare not breathe.' He inclined his head,—though I doubt if he understood. 'Be so good as to tell me, briefly, what it is you wish with me.'

He slipped his hand into the folds of his burnoose, and, taking out a slip of paper, laid it on the shelf by which we were standing. I glanced at it, expecting to find on it a petition, or a testimonial, or a true statement of his sad case; instead it contained two words only

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—'Marjorie Lindon.' The unlooked-for sight of that well-loved name brought the blood into my cheeks.

'You come from Miss Lindon?'

He narrowed his shoulders, brought his finger-tips together, inclined his head, in a fashion which was peculiarly Oriental, but not particularly explanatory, —so I repeated my question.

'Do you wish me to understand that you do come from Miss Lindon?'

Again he slipped his hand into his burnoose, again he produced a slip of paper, again he laid it on the shelf, again I glanced at it, again nothing was written on it but a name,—'Paul Lessingham.'

'Well?—I see,—Paul Lessingham.—What then?'

'She is good,—he is bad,—is it not so?'

He touched first one scrap of paper, then the other. I stared.

'Pray how do you happen to know?'

'He shall never have her,—eh?'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Ah!—what do I mean!'

'Precisely, what do you mean? And also, and at the same time, who the devil are you?"

'It is as a friend I come to you.'

'Then in that case you may go; I happen to be overstocked in that line just now.'

'Not with the kind of friend I am!'

'The saints forefend!'

'You love her,—you love Miss Lindon! Can you bear to think of him in her arms?'

I took off my mask,—feeling that the occasion required it. As I did so he brushed aside the hanging folds of the hood of his burnoose, so that I saw more of his face. I was immediately conscious that in his eyes there was, in an especial degree, what, for want of a better term, one may call the mesmeric quality. That his was one of those morbid organisations which are oftener found, thank goodness, in the east than in the west, and which are apt to exercise an uncanny influence over the weak and the foolish folk with whom they come in contact,—the kind of creature for whom it is always just as well to keep a seasoned rope close

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handy. I was, also, conscious that he was taking advantage of the removal of my mask to try his strength on me,—than which he could not have found a tougher job. The sensitive something which is found in the hypnotic subject happens, in me, to be wholly absent.

'I see you are a mesmerist.'

He started.

'I am nothing,—a shadow!'

'And I'm a scientist. I should like, with your permission—or without it!—to try an experiment or two on you.'

He moved further back. There came a gleam into his eyes which suggested that he possessed his hideous power to an unusual degree,—that, in the estimation of his own people, he was qualified to take his standing as a regular devil-doctor.

'We will try experiments together, you and I,—on Paul Lessingham.'

'Why on him?'

'You do not know?'

'I do not.'

'Why do you lie to me?'

'I don't lie to you,—I haven't the faintest notion what is the nature of your interest in Mr Lessingham.'

'My interest?—that is another thing; it is your interest of which we are speaking.'

'Pardon me,—it is yours.'

'Listen! you love her,—and he! But at a word from you he shall not have her,—never! It is I who say it,—I!'

'And, once more, sir, who are you?'

'I am of the children of Isis!'

'Is that so?—It occurs to me that you have made a slight mistake,—this is London, not a dog-hole in the desert.'

'Do I not know?—what does it matter?—you shall see! There will come a time when you will want me,—you will find that you cannot bear to think of him in her arms,—her whom you love! You will call to me, and I shall come, and of Paul Lessingham there shall be an end.'

While I was wondering whether he was really as mad

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as he sounded, or whether he was some impudent charlatan who had an axe of his own to grind, and thought that he had found in me a grindstone, he had vanished from the room. I moved after him.

'Hang it all!—stop!' I cried.

He must have made pretty good travelling, because, before I had a foot in the hall, I heard the front door slam, and, when I reached the street, intent on calling him back, neither to the right nor to the left was there a sign of him to be seen.

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# CHAPTER XIII



'I WONDER what that nice-looking beggar really means, and who he happens to be?' That was what I said to myself when I returned to the laboratory. 'If it is true that, now and again, Providence does write a man's character on his face, then there can't be the slightest shred of a doubt that a curious one's been written on his. I wonder what his connection has been with the Apostle,—or if it's only part of his game of bluff.'

I strode up and down,—for the moment my interest in the experiments I was conducting had waned.

'If it was all bluff I never saw a better piece of acting, —and yet what sort of finger can such a precisian as St Paul have in such a pie? The fellow seemed to squirm at the mere mention of the rising-hope-of-the-Radical's name. Can the objection be political? Let me consider,—what has Lessingham done which could offend the religious or patriotic susceptibilities of the most fanatical of Orientals? Politically, I can recall nothing. Foreign affairs, as a rule, he has carefully eschewed. If he has offended—and if he hasn't the seeming was uncommonly good!—the cause will have to be sought upon some other track. But, then, what track?'

The more I strove to puzzle it out, the greater the puzzlement grew.

'Absurd!—The rascal has had no more connection with St Paul than St Peter. The probability is that he's a crack-pot; and if he isn't, he has some little game on foot—in close association with the hunt of the oof-bird!—which he tried to work off on me, but couldn't. As for—for Marjorie—my Marjorie!—only she isn't

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mine, confound it!—if I had had my senses about me, I should have broken his head in several places for daring to allow her name to pass his lips,—the unbaptised Mohammedan!—Now to return to the chase of splendid murder!'

I snatched up my mask—one of the most ingenious inventions, by the way, of recent years; if the armies of the future wear my mask they will defy my weapon!—and was about to re-adjust it in its place, when someone knocked at the door.

'Who's there?—Come in!'

It was Edwards. He looked round him as if surprised.

'I beg your pardon, sir,—I thought you were engaged. I didn't know that—that gentleman had gone.'

'He went up the chimney, as all that kind of gentlemen do.—Why the deuce did you let him in when I told you not to?'

'Really, sir, I don't know. I gave him your message, and—he looked at me, and—that is all I remember till I found myself standing in this room.'

Had it not been Edwards I might have suspected him of having had his palm well greased,—but, in his case, I knew better. It was as I thought,—my visitor was a mesmerist of the first class; he had actually played some of his tricks, in broad daylight, on my servant, at my own front door,—a man worth studying. Edwards continued:

'There is someone else, sir, who wishes to see you,—Mr Lessingham.'

'Mr Lessingham!' At that moment the juxtaposition seemed odd, though I daresay it was so rather in appearance than in reality. 'Show him in.'

Presently in came Paul.

I am free to confess,—I have owned it before!—that, in a sense, I admire that man,—so long as he does not presume to thrust himself into a certain position. He possesses physical qualities which please my eye—speaking as a mere biologist. I like the suggestion conveyed by his every pose, his every movement, of a tenacious hold on life,—of reserve force, of a repository of bone and gristle on which he can fall back at pleasure.

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The fellow's lithe and active; not hasty, yet agile; clean built, well hung,—the sort of man who might be relied upon to make a good recovery. You might beat him in a sprint,—mental or physical—though to do that you would have to be spry!—but in a staying race he would see you out. I do not know that he is exactly the kind of man whom I would trust,—unless I knew that he was on the job,—which knowledge, in his case, would be uncommonly hard to attain. He is too calm; too self-contained; with the knack of looking all round him even in moments of extremest peril,—and for whatever he does he has a good excuse. He has the reputation, both in the House and out of it, of being a man of iron nerve,—and with some reason; yet I am not so sure. Unless I read him wrongly his is one of those individualities which, confronted by certain eventualities, collapse,—to rise, the moment of trial having passed, like Phœnix from her ashes. However it might be with his adherents, he would show no trace of his disaster.

And this was the man whom Marjorie loved. Well, she could show some cause. He was a man of position,—destined, probably, to rise much higher; a man of parts,—with capacity to make the most of them; not ill-looking; with agreeable manners,—when he chose; and he came within the lady's definition of a gentleman, 'he always did the right thing, at the right time, in the right way.' And yet—! Well, I take it that we are all cads, and that we most of us are prigs; for mercy's sake do not let us all give ourselves away.

He was dressed as a gentleman should be dressed,—black frock coat, black vest, dark grey trousers, stand-up collar, smartly-tied bow, gloves of the proper shade, neatly brushed hair, and a smile, which if it was not childlike, at any rate was bland.

'I am not disturbing you?'

'Not at all.'

'Sure?—I never enter a place like this, where a man is matching himself with nature, to wrest from her her secrets, without feeling that I am crossing the threshold of the unknown. The last time I was in this room was just after you had taken out the final patents for

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your System of Telegraphy at Sea, which the Admiralty purchased,—wisely—What is it, now ? '

'Death.'

'No ?—really ?—what do you mean ? '

'If you are a member of the next government, you will possibly learn ; I may offer them the refusal of a new wrinkle in the art of murder.'

'I see,—a new projectile. How long is this race to continue between attack and defence ? '

'Until the sun grows cold.'

'And then ? '

'There'll be no defence,—nothing to defend.'

He looked at me with his calm, grave eyes.

'The theory of the Age of Ice towards which we are advancing is not a cheerful one.' He began to finger a glass retort which lay upon a table. 'By the way, it was very good of you to give me a look in last night. I am afraid you thought me peremptory,—I have come to apologise.'

'I don't know that I thought you peremptory ; I thought you—queer.'

'Yes.' He glanced at me with that expressionless look upon his face which he could summon at will, and which is at the bottom of the superstition about his iron nerve. 'I was worried, and not well. Besides, one doesn't care to be burgled, even by a maniac.'

'Was he a maniac ? '

'Did you see him ? '

'Very clearly.'

'Where ? '

'In the street.'

'How close were you to him ? '

'Closer than I am to you.'

'Indeed. I didn't know you were so close to him as that. Did you try to stop him ? '

'Easier said than done,—he was off at such a rate.'

'Did you see how he was dressed,—or, rather, undressed ? '

'I did.'

'In nothing but a cloak on such a night. Who but a lunatic would have attempted burglary in such a costume ? '

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'Did he take anything?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

'It seems to have been a curious episode.'

He moved his eyebrows,—according to members of the House the only gesture in which he has been known to indulge.

'We become accustomed to curious episodes. Oblige me by not mentioning it to anyone,—to anyone.' He repeated the last two words, as if to give them emphasis. I wondered if he was thinking of Marjorie. 'I am communicating with the police. Until they move I don't want it to get into the papers,—or to be talked about. It's a worry,—you understand?'

I nodded. He changed the theme.

'This that you're engaged upon,—is it a projectile or a weapon?'

'If you are a member of the next government you will possibly know; if you aren't you possibly won't.'

'I suppose you have to keep this sort of thing secret?'

'I do. It seems that matters of much less moment you wish to keep secret.'

'You mean that business of last night? If a trifle of that sort gets into the papers, or gets talked about,—which is the same thing!—you have no notion how we are pestered. It becomes an almost unbearable nuisance. Jones the Unknown can commit murder with less inconvenience to himself than Jones the Notorious can have his pocket picked,—there is not so much exaggeration in that as there sounds.—Good-bye,—thanks for your promise.' I had given him no promise, but that was by the way. He turned as to go,—then stopped. There's another thing,—I believe you're a specialist on questions of ancient superstitions and extinct religions.'

'I am interested in such subjects, but I am not a specialist.'

'Can you tell me what were the exact tenets of the worshippers of Isis?'

'Neither I nor any man,—with scientific certainty. As you know, she had a brother; the cult of Osiris and Isis was one and the same. What, precisely, were its dogmas, or its practices, or anything about it, none,

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now, can tell. The Papyri, hieroglyphics, and so on, which remain are very far from being exhaustive, and our knowledge of those which do remain, is still less so.'

'I suppose that the marvels which are told of it are purely legendary?'

'To what marvels do you particularly refer?'

'Weren't supernatural powers attributed to the priests of Isis?'

'Broadly speaking, at that time, supernatural powers were attributed to all the priests of all the creeds.'

'I see.' Presently he continued. 'I presume that her cult is long since extinct,—that none of the worshippers of Isis exist to-day.'

I hesitated,—I was wondering why he had hit on such a subject; if he really had a reason, or if he was merely asking questions as a cover for something else,—you see, I knew my Paul.

'That is not so sure.'

He looked at me with that passionless, yet searching glance of his.

'You think that she still is worshipped?'

'I think it possible, even probable, that, here and there, in Africa—Africa is a large order!—homage is paid to Isis, quite in the good old way.'

'Do you know that as a fact?'

'Excuse me, but do you know it as a fact?—Are you aware that you are treating me as if I was on the witness stand?—Have you any special purpose in making these inquiries?'

He smiled.

'In a kind of a way I have. I have recently come across rather a curious story; I am trying to get to the bottom of it.'

'What is the story?'

'I am afraid that at present I am not at liberty to tell it you; when I am I will. You will find it interesting,—as an instance of a singular survival.—Didn't the followers of Isis believe in transmigration?'

'Some of them,—no doubt.'

'What did they understand by transmigration?'

'Transmigration.'

'Yes,—but of the soul or of the body?'

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'How do you mean?—transmigration is transmigration. Are you driving at something in particular? If you'll tell me fairly and squarely what it is I'll do my best to give you the information you require; as it is, your questions are a bit perplexing.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter,—as you say, "transmigration is transmigration."' I was eyeing him keenly; I seemed to detect in his manner an odd reluctance to enlarge on the subject he himself had started. He continued to trifle with the retort upon the table. 'Hadn't the followers of Isis a—what shall I say?—a sacred emblem?'

'How?'

'Hadn't they an especial regard for some sort of a—wasn't it some sort of a—beetle?'

'You mean *Scarabæus sacer*,—according to Latreille, *Scarabæus Egyptiorum?* Undoubtedly,—the scarab was venerated throughout Egypt,—indeed, speaking generally, most things that had life, for instance, cats, as you know, Orisis continued among men in the figure of Apis the bull.'

'Weren't the priests of Isis—or some of them—supposed to assume, after death, the form of a—scarabæus?'

'I never heard of it.'

'Are you sure?—think!'

'I shouldn't like to answer such a question positively, offhand, but I don't, on the spur of the moment, recall any supposition of the kind.'

'Don't laugh at me—I'm not a lunatic!—but I understand that recent researches have shown that even in some of the most astounding of the ancient legends there was a substratum of fact. Is it absolutely certain that there could be no shred of truth in such a belief?'

'In what belief?'

'In the belief that a priest of Isis—or anyone—assumed after death the form of a scarabæus?'

'It seems to me, Lessingham, that you have lately come across some uncommonly interesting data, of a kind, too, which it is your bounden duty to give to the world,—or, at any rate, to that portion of the world which is represented by me. Come,—tell us all about it!—what are you afraid of?'

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'I am afraid of nothing,—and some day you shall be told,—but not now. At present, answer my question.'

'Then repeat your question,—clearly.'

'Is it absolutely certain that there could be no foundation of truth in the belief that a priest of Isis—or anyone—assumed after death the form of a beetle?'

'I know no more than the man in the moon,—how the dickens should I? Such a belief may have been symbolical. Christians believe that after death the body takes the shape of worms—and so, in a sense, it does,—and, sometimes, eels.'

'That is not what I mean.'

'Then what do you mean?'

'Listen. If a person, of whose veracity there could not be a vestige of a doubt, assured you that he had seen such a transformation actually take place, could it conceivably be explained on natural grounds?'

'Seen a priest of Isis assume the form of a beetle?'

'Or a follower of Isis?'

'Before, or after death?'

He hesitated. I had seldom seen him wear such an appearance of interest,—to be frank, I was keenly interested too!—but, on a sudden there came into his eyes a glint of something that was almost terror. When he spoke, it was with the most unwonted awkwardness.

'In—in the very act of dying.'

'In the very act of dying?'

'If—he had seen a follower of Isis in—the very act of dying, assume—the form of a—a beetle, on any conceivable grounds would such a transformation be susceptible of a natural explanation?'

I stared,—as who would not? Such an extraordinary question was rendered more extraordinary by coming from such a man,—yet I was almost beginning to suspect that there was something behind it more extraordinary still.

'Look here, Lessingham, I can see you've a capital tale to tell,—so tell it, man! Unless I'm mistaken, it's not the kind of tale in which ordinary scruples can have any part or parcel,—anyhow, it's hardly fair of you to set my curiosity all'agog, and then to leave it unappeased.'

He eyed me steadily, the appearance of interest fading

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more and more, until, presently, his face assumed its wonted expressionless mask,—somehow I was conscious that what he had seen in my face was not altogether to his liking. His voice was once more bland and self-contained.

'I perceive you are of opinion that I have been told a tarradiddle. I suppose I have.'

'But what is the tarradiddle?—don't you see I'm burning?'

'Unfortunately, Atherton, I am on my honour. Until I have permission to unloose it, my tongue is tied.' He picked up his hat and umbrella from where he had placed them on the table. Holding them in his left hand, he advanced to me with his right outstretched. 'It is very good of you to suffer my continued interruption; I know, to my sorrow, what such interruptions mean,—believe me, I am not ungrateful. What is this?'

On the shelf, within a foot or so of where I stood, was a sheet of paper,—the size and shape of half a sheet of post note. At this he stooped to glance. As he did so, something surprising occurred. On the instant a look came on to his face which, literally, transfigured him. His hat and umbrella fell from his grasp on to the floor. He retreated, gibbering, his hands held out as if to ward something off from him, until he reached the wall on the other side of the room. A more amazing spectacle than he presented I never saw.

'Lessingham!' I exclaimed. 'What's wrong with you?'

My first impression was that he was struck by a fit of epilepsy,—though anyone less like an epileptic subject it would be hard to find. In my bewilderment I looked round to see what could be the immediate cause. My eye fell upon the sheet of paper. I stared at it with considerable surprise. I had not noticed it there previously, I had not put it there,—where had it come from? The curious thing was that, on it, produced apparently by some process of photogravure, was an illustration of a species of beetle with which I felt that I ought to be acquainted, and yet was not. It was of a dull golden green; the colour was so well brought out, —even to the extent of seeming to scintillate, and the

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whole thing was so dexterously done that the creature seemed alive. The semblance of reality was, indeed, so vivid that it needed a second glance to be assured that it was a mere trick of the reproducer. Its presence there was odd,—after what we had been talking about it might seem to need explanation; but it was absurd to suppose that that alone could have had such an effect on a man like Lessingham.

With the thing in my hand, I crossed to where he was, —pressing his back against the wall, he had shrunk lower inch by inch till he was actually crouching on his haunches.

'Lessingham!—come, man, what's wrong with you?'

Taking him by the shoulder, I shook him with some vigour. My touch had on him the effect of seeming to wake him out of a dream, of restoring him to consciousness as against the nightmare horrors with which he was struggling. He gazed up at me with that look of cunning on his face which one associates with abject terror.

'Atherton?—Is it you?—It's all right,—quite right. —I'm well,—very well.'

As he spoke, he slowly drew himself up, till he was standing erect.

'Then, in that case, all I can say is that you have a queer way of being very well.'

He put his hand up to his mouth, as if to hide the trembling of his lips.

'It's the pressure of overwork,—I've had one or two attacks like this,—but it's nothing, only—a local lesion.'

I observed him keenly; to my thinking there was something about him which was very odd indeed.

'Only a local lesion!—If you take my strongly-urged advice you'll get a medical opinion without delay,—if you haven't been wise enough to have done so already.'

'I'll go to-day;—at once; but I know it's only mental overstrain.'

'You're sure it's nothing to do with this?'

I held out in front of him the photogravure of the beetle. As I did so he backed away from me, shrieking, trembling as with palsy.

'Take it away! take it away!' he screamed.

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I stared at him, for some seconds, astonished into speechlessness. Then I found my tongue.

'Lessingham!—It's only a picture!—Are you stark mad?'

He persisted in his ejaculations.

'Take it away! take it away!—Tear it up!—Burn it!'

His agitation was so unnatural,—from whatever cause it arose!—that, fearing the recurrence of the attack from which he had just recovered, I did as he bade me. I tore the sheet of paper into quarters, and, striking a match, set fire to each separate piece. He watched the process of incineration as if fascinated. When it was concluded, and nothing but ashes remained, he gave a gasp of relief.

'Lessingham,' I said, 'you're either mad already, or you're going mad,—which is it?'

'I think it's neither. I believe I am as sane as you. It's—it's that story of which I was speaking; it—it seems curious, but I'll tell you all about it—some day. As I observed, I think you will find it an interesting instance of a singular survival.' He made an obvious effort to become more like his usual self. 'It is extremely unfortunate, Atherton, that I should have troubled you with such a display of weakness,—especially as I am able to offer you so scant an explanation. One thing I would ask of you,—to observe strict confidence. What has taken place has been between ourselves. I am in your hands, but you are my friend, I know I can rely on you not to speak of it to anyone, —and, in particular, not to breathe a hint of it to Miss Lindon.'

'Why, in particular, not to Miss Lindon?'

'Can you not guess?'

I hunched my shoulder.

'If what I guess is what you mean is not that a cause the more why silence would be unfair to her?'

'It is for me to speak, if for anyone. I shall not fail to do what should be done.—Give me your promise that you will not hint a word to her of what you have so unfortunately seen?'

I gave him the promise he required.

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There was no more work for me that day. The Apostle, his divagations, his example of the coleoptera, his Arabian friend,—these things were as microbes which, acting on a system already predisposed for their reception, produced high fever; I was in a fever,—of unrest. Brain in a whirl!—Marjorie, Paul, Isis, beetle, mesmerism, in delirious jumble. Love's upsetting!—in itself a sufficiently severe disease; but when complications intervene, suggestive of mystery and novelties. so that you do not know if you are moving in an atmosphere of dreams or of frozen facts—if, then, your temperature does not rise, like that rocket of M. Verne's, —which reached the moon, then you are a freak of an entirely genuine kind, and if the surgeons do not preserve you, and place you on view, in pickle, they ought to for the sake of historical doubters, for no one will believe that there ever was a man like you, unless you yourself are somewhere around to prove them Thomases.

Myself,—I am not that kind of man. When I get warm I grow heated, and when I am heated there is likely to be a variety show of a gaudy kind. When Paul had gone I tried to think things out, and if I had kept on trying something would have happened—so I went on the river instead.

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# CHAPTER XIV

## THE DUCHESS' BALL

THAT night was the Duchess of Datchet's ball—the first person I saw as I entered the dancing-room was Dora Grayling.

I went straight up to her.

'Miss Grayling, I behaved very badly to you last night. I have come to make to you my apologies,—to sue for your forgiveness!'

'My forgiveness?' Her head went back,—she has a pretty bird-like trick of cocking it a little on one side. 'You were not well. Are you better?'

'Quite.—You forgive me? Then grant me plenary absolution by giving me a dance for the one I lost last night.'

She rose. A man came up,—a stranger to me; she's one of the best hunted women in England,—there's a million with her.

'This is my dance, Miss Grayling.'

She looked at him.

'You must excuse me. I am afraid I have made a mistake. I had forgotten that I was already engaged.'

I had not thought her capable of it. She took my arm, and away we went, and left him staring.

'It's he who's the sufferer now,' I whispered, as we went round,—she can waltz!

'You think so? It was I last night,—I did not mean, if I could help it, to suffer again. To me a dance with you means something.' She went all red,—adding, as an after thought, 'Nowadays so few men really dance. I expect it's because you dance so well.'

'Thank you.'

We danced the waltz right through, then we went to an impromptu shelter which had been rigged up on a

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balcony. And we talked. There's something sympathetic about Miss Grayling which leads one to talk about one's self,—before I was half aware of it I was telling her of all my plans and projects,—actually telling her of my latest notion which, ultimately, was to result in the destruction of whole armies as by a flash of lightning. She took an amount of interest in it which was surprising.

'What really stands in the way of things of this sort is not theory but practice,—one can prove one's facts on paper, or on a small scale in a room; what is wanted is proof on a large scale, by actual experiment. If, for instance, I could take my plant to one of the forests of South America, where there is plenty of animal life but no human, I could demonstrate the soundness of my position then and there.'

'Why don't you?'

'Think of the money it would cost.'

'I thought I was a friend of yours.'

'I had hoped you were.'

'Then why don't you let me help you?'

'Help me?—How?'

'By letting you have the money for your South American experiment;—it would be an investment on which I should expect to receive good interest.'

I fidgeted.

'It is very good of you, Miss Grayling, to talk like that.'

She became quite frigid.

'Please don't be absurd!—I perceive quite clearly that you are snubbing me, and that you are trying to do it as delicately as you know how.'

'Miss Grayling!'

'I understand that it was an impertinence on my part to volunteer assistance which was unasked; you have made that sufficiently plain.'

'I assure you—'

'Pray don't. Of course, if it had been Miss Lindon it would have been different; she would at least have received a civil answer. But we are not all Miss Lindon.'

I was aghast. The outburst was so uncalled for,—I had not the faintest notion what I had said or done

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to cause it ; she was in such a surprising passion—and it suited her !—I thought I had never seen her look prettier,—I could do nothing else but stare. So she went on,—with just as little reason.

'Here is someone coming to claim this dance,—I can't throw all my partners over. Have I offended you so irremediably that it will be impossible for you to dance with me again ?'

'Miss Grayling !—I shall be only too delighted.' She handed me her card. 'Which may I have ?'

'For your own sake you had better place it as far off as you possibly can.'

'They all seem taken.'

'That doesn't matter ; strike off any name you please, anywhere and put your own instead.'

It was giving me an almost embarrassingly free hand. I booked myself for the next waltz but two,—who it was who would have to give way to me I did not trouble to inquire.

'Mr Atherton !—Is that you ?'

It was,—it was also she. It was Marjorie ! And so soon as I saw her I knew that there was only one woman in the world for me,—the mere sight of her sent the blood tingling through my veins. Turning to her attendant cavalier, she dismissed him with a bow.

'Is there an empty chair ?'

She seated herself in the one Miss Grayling had just vacated. I sat down beside her. She glanced at me, laughter in her eyes. I was all in a stupid tremblement.

'You remember that last night I told you that I might require your friendly services in diplomatic intervention ?' I nodded,—I felt that the allusion was unfair. 'Well, the occasion's come,—or, at least, it's very near.' She was still,— and I said nothing to help her. 'You know how unreasonable papa can be.'

I did,—never a more pig-headed man in England than Geoffrey Lindon,—or, in a sense, a duller. But, just then, I was not prepared to admit it to his child.

'You know what an absurd objection he has to—
—Paul.'

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