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THE SHADOW OF THE ROPE

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THE SHADOW OF THE ROPE

BY

E. W. HORNUNG

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

NEW YORK::::::::::::::::1902

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TO MY FRIEND

EDWARD SHORTT

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The Shadow of the Rope

CHAPTER I

THE END OF THEIR LIFE

"It is finished," said the woman, speaking very quietly to herself. "Not another day, nor a night, if I can be ready before morning!"

She stood alone in her own room, with none to mark the white-hot pallor of the oval face, the scornful curve of quivering nostrils, the dry lustre of flashing eyes. But while she stood a heavy step went blustering down two flights of stairs, and double doors slammed upon the ground floor.

It was a little London house, with five floors from basement to attic, and a couple of rooms upon each, like most little houses in London; but this one had latterly been the scene of an equally undistinguished drama of real life, upon which the curtain was even now descending. Although a third was whispered by the world, the persons of this drama were really only two.

Rachel Minchin, before the disastrous step which gave her that surname, was a young Australian lady whose apparent attractions were only equalled by her

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absolute poverty; that is to say, she had been born at Heidelberg, near Melbourne, of English parents more gentle than practical, who soon left her to fight the world and the devil with no other armoury than a good face, a fine nature, and the pride of any heiress. It is true that Rachel also had a voice; but there was never enough of it to augur an income. At twenty, therefore, she was already a governess in the wilds, where women are as scarce as water, but where the man for Rachel did not breathe. A few years later she earned a berth to England as companion to a lady; and her fate awaited her on board.

Mr. Minchin had reached his prime in the underworld, of which he also was a native, without touching affluence until his fortieth year. Nevertheless, he was a travelled man, and no mere nomad of the bush. As a mining expert he had seen much life in South Africa as well as in Western Australia, but at last he was to see more in Europe as a gentleman of means. A wife had no place in his European scheme; a husband was the last thing Rachel wanted; but a long sea voyage, an uncongenial employ, and the persistent chivalry of a handsome, entertaining, self-confident man of the world, formed a combination as fatal to her inexperience as that of so much poverty, pride, and beauty proved to Alexander Minchin. They were married without ceremony on the very day that they arrived in England, where they had not an actual friend between them, nor a relative to whom either was per-

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sonally known. In the beginning this mattered nothing; they had to see Europe and enjoy themselves; that they could do unaided; and the bride did it only the more thoroughly, in a sort of desperation, as she realised that the benefits of her marriage were to be wholly material after all.

In the larger life of cities, Alexander Minchin was no longer the idle and good-humoured cavalier to whom Rachel had learned to look for unfailing consideration at sea. The illustrative incidents may be omitted; but here he gambled, there he drank; and in his cups every virtue dissolved. Rachel's pride did not mend matters; she was a thought too ready with her resentment; of this, however, she was herself aware, and would forgive the more freely because there was often some obvious fault on her side before all was said. Quarrels of infinite bitterness were thus patched up, and the end indefinitely delayed.

In the meantime, tired of travelling, and impoverished by the husband's follies, the hapless couple returned to London, where a pure fluke with some mining shares introduced Minchin to finer gambling than he had found abroad. The man was bitten. There was a fortune waiting for special knowledge and a little ready cash; and Alexander Minchin settled down to make it, taking for the nonce a furnished house in a modest neighbourhood. And here it was that the quarrelling continued to its culmination in the scene just ended.

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The Shadow of the Rope

"Not another day," said Rachel, "nor a night—if I can be ready before morning!"

Being still a woman with some strength of purpose, Mrs. Minchin did not stop at idle words. The interval between the slamming of doors below and another noise at the top of the house was not one of many minutes. The other noise was made by Rachel and her empty trunk upon the loftiest and the narrowest flight of stairs; one of the maids opened their door an inch.

"I am sorry if I disturbed you," their mistress said. "These stairs are so very narrow. No, thank you, I can manage quite well." And they heard her about until they slept.

It was no light task to which Rachel had set her hand; she was going back to Australia by the first boat, and her packing must be done that night. Her resolve only hardened as her spirit cooled. The sooner her departure, the less his opposition; let her delay, and the callousness of the passing brute might give place to the tyranny of the normal man. But she was going, whether or no; not another day—though she would doubtless see its dawn. It was the month of September. And she was not going to fly empty-handed, nor fly at all; she was going deliberately away, with a trunk containing all that she should want upon the voyage. The selection was not too easily made. In his better moods the creature had been lavish enough; and more than once did Rachel snatch from

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drawer or wardrobe that which remained some moments in her hand, while the incidents of purchase and the first joys of possession, to one who had possessed so little in her life, came back to her with a certain poignancy.

But her resolve remained unshaken. It might hurt her to take his personal gifts, but that was all she had ever had from him; he had never granted her a set allowance; for every penny she must needs ask and look grateful. It would be no fault of hers if she had to strip her fingers for passage-money. Yet the exigency troubled her; it touched her honour, to say nothing of her pride; and, after an unforeseen fit of irresolution, Rachel suddenly determined to tell her husband of her difficulty, making direct appeal to the capricious generosity which had been recalled to her mind as an undeniably redeeming point. It was true that he had given her hearty leave to go to the uttermost ends of the earth, and highly probable that he would bid her work her own way. She felt an impulse to put it to him, however, and at once.

She looked at her watch—it at least had been her mother's—and the final day was already an hour old. But Alexander Minchin was a late sitter, as his young wife knew to her cost, and to-night he had told her where he meant to sleep, but she had not heard him come up. The room would have been the back drawing-room in the majority of such houses, and Rachel peeped in on her way down. It was empty; moreover,

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the bed was not made, nor the curtains drawn. Rachel repaired the first omission, then hesitated, finally creeping upstairs again for clean sheets. And as she made his bed, not out of any lingering love for him, but from a sense of duty and some consideration for his comfort, there was yet something touching in her instinctive care, that breathed the wife she could have been.

He did not hear her, though the stairs creaked the smallness of the hour—or if he heard he made no sign. This discouraged Rachel as she stole down the lower flight; she would have preferred the angriest sign. But there were few internal sounds which penetrated to the little study at the back of the dining-room, for the permanent tenant was the widow of an eminent professor lately deceased, and that student had protected his quiet with double doors. The outer one, in dark red baize, made an alarming noise as Rachel pulled it open; but, though she waited, no sound came from within; nor was Minchin disturbed by the final entry of his wife, whose first glance convinced her of the cause. In the professor's armchair sat his unworthy successor, chin on waistcoat, a newspaper across his knees, an empty decanter at one elbow. Something remained in the glass beside the bottle; he had tumbled off before the end. There were even signs of deliberate preparations for slumber, for the shade was tilted over the electric light by which he had been reading, as a hat is tilted over the eyes.

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The End of Their Life

Rachel had a touch of pity at seeing him in a chair for the night; but the testimony of the decanter forbade remorse. She had filled it herself in the evening against her husband's return from an absence of mysterious length. Now she understood that mystery, and her face darkened as she recalled the inconceivable insult which his explanation had embraced. No, indeed; not another minute that she could help! And he would sleep there till all hours of the morning; he had done it before; the longer the better, this time.

She had recoiled into the narrow hall, driven by an uncontrollable revulsion; and there she stood, pale and quivering with a disgust that only deepened as she looked her last upon the shaded face and the inanimate frame in the chair. Rachel could not account for the intensity of her feeling; it bordered upon nausea, and for a time prevented her from retracing the single step which at length enabled her to shut both doors as quietly as she had opened them, after switching off the light from force of habit. There was another light still glowing in the hall, and, again from habit, Rachel put it out also before setting foot upon the stairs. A moment later she was standing terror-stricken in the dark.

It was no sound from the study, but the tiniest of metallic rattles from the flap of the letter-box in the front door. The wind might have done it, for the flap had lost its spring; and, though the noise was not repeated, to the wind Rachel put it down, as she

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mounted the stairs at last in a flutter that caused her both shame and apprehension. Her nerve was going, and she needed it so! It should not go; it should not; and as if to steady it, she opened the landing window, and spent some minutes gazing out into the cool and starry night. Not that she could see very far. The backs of houses hid half the stars in front and on either hand, making, with the back of this house and its fellows, a kind of square turned inside out. Miserable little gardens glimmered through an irregular network of grimy walls, with here and there a fair tree in autumnal tatters; but Rachel looked neither at these nor at the stars that lit them dimly. In a single window of those right opposite a single lamp had burnt all night. It was the only earthly light that Rachel could see, the only one of earth or heaven upon which she looked; and she discovered it with thanksgiving, and tore her eyes away from it with a prayer.

In time the trunk was packed, and incontinently carried downstairs, by an effort which left Rachel racked in every muscle and swaying giddily. But she could not have made much noise, for still there was no sign from the study. She scarcely paused to breathe. A latchkey closed the door behind her very softly; she was in the crisp clean air at last.

But it was no hour for finding cabs; it was the hour of the scavenger and no other being; and Rachel walked into broad sunlight before she spied a solitary

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hansom. It was then she did the strangest thing; instead of driving straight back for her trunk, when near the house she gave the cabman other directions, subsequently stopping him at one with a card in the window.

A woman answered the bell with surprising celerity, and a face first startled and then incensed at the sight of Mrs. Minchin.

"So you never came!" cried the woman, bitterly.

"I was prevented," Rachel replied coldly. "Well?"

And the monosyllable was a whisper.

"He is still alive," said the woman at the door.

"Is that all?" asked Rachel, a catch in her voice.

"It is all I'll say till the doctor has been."

"But he has got through the night," sighed Rachel, thankfully. "I could see the light in his room from hour to hour, even though I could not come. Did you sit up with him all night long?"

"Every minute of the night," said the other, with undisguised severity in her fixed red eyes. "I never left him, and I never closed a lid."

"I am so sorry!" cried Rachel, too sorry even for renewed indignation at the cause. "But I couldn't help it," she continued, "I really could not. We—I am going abroad—very suddenly. Poor Mr. Severino! I do wish there was anything I could do! But you must get a professional nurse. And when he does recover—for something assures me that he will —you can tell him——"

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Rachel hesitated, the red eyes reading hers.

"Tell him I hope he will recover altogether," she said at length; "mind, altogether! I have gone away for good, tell Mr. Severino; but, as I wasn't able to do so after all, I would rather you didn't mention that I ever thought of nursing him, or that I called last thing to ask how he was."

And that was her farewell message to the very young man with whom a hole-and-corner scandal had coupled Rachel Minchin's name; it was to be a final utterance in yet another respect, and one of no slight or private significance, as the sequel will show. Within a minute or two of its delivery, Rachel was on her own doorstep for the last time, deftly and gently turning the latch-key, while the birds sang to frenzy in a neighbouring garden, and the early sun glanced fierily from the brass knocker and letter-box. Another moment and the door had been flung wide open by a police officer, who seemed to fill the narrow hall, with a comrade behind him and both servants on the stairs. And with little further warning Mrs. Minchin was shown her husband, seated much as she had left him in the professor's chair, but with his feet raised stiffly upon another, and the hand of death over every inch of him in the broad north light that filled the room.

The young widow stood gazing upon her dead, and four pairs of eyes gazed yet more closely at her. But there was little to gather from the strained profile with the white cheek and the unyielding lips. Not a

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cry had left them; she had but crossed the threshold, and stopped that instant in the middle of the worn carpet, the sharpest of silhouettes against a background of grim tomes. There was no swaying of the lissome figure, no snatching for support, no question spoken or unspoken. In moments of acute surprise the most surprising feature is often the way in which we ourselves receive the shock; a sudden and complete detachment, not the least common of immediate results, makes us sometimes even conscious of our failure to feel as we would or should; and it was so with Rachel Minchin in the first moments of her tragic freedom. So God had sundered whom God had joined together! And this was the man whom she had married for love; and she could look upon his clay unmoved! Her mind leapt to a minor consideration, that still made her shudder, as eight eyes noted from the door; he must have been dead when she came down and found him seated in shadow; she had misjudged the dead, if not the living. The pose of the head was unaltered, the chin upon the chest, the mouth closed in death as naturally as in sleep. No wonder his wife had been deceived. And yet there was something unfamiliar, something negligent and noble, and all unlike the living man; so that Rachel could already marvel that she had not at once detected this dignity and this distinction, only too foreign to her husband as she had learnt to know him best, but unattainable in the noblest save by death. And her eyes had risen to the slice of

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sky in the upper half of the window, and at last the tears were rising in her eyes, when they filled instead with sudden horror and enlightenment.

There was a jagged hole in the pane above the hasp; an upset of ink on the desk beneath the window; and the ink was drying with the dead man's blood, in which she now perceived him to be soaked, while the newspaper on the floor beside him was crisp as toast from that which it had hidden when she saw him last.

"Murdered!" whispered Rachel, breaking her long silence with a gasp. "The work of thieves!"

The policemen exchanged a rapid glance.

"Looks like it," said the one who had opened the door, "I admit."

There was a superfluous dryness in his tone; but Rachel no more noticed this than the further craning of heads in the doorway.

"But can you doubt it?" she cried, pointing from the broken window to the spilled ink. "Did you think that he had shot himself?"

And her horror heightened at a thought more terrible to her than all the rest. But the constable shook his head.

"We should have found the pistol—which we can't," said he. "But shot he is, and through the heart."

"Then who could it be but thieves?"

"That's what we all want to know," said the officer; and still Rachel had no time to think about his tone;

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for now she was bending over the body, her white hands clenched, and agony enough in her white face.

"Look! look!" she cried, beckoning to them all. "He was wearing his watch last night; that I can swear; and it has gone!"

"You are sure he was wearing it?" asked the same constable, approaching.

"Absolutely certain."

"Well, if that's so," said he, "and it can't be found, it will be a point in your favour."

Rachel sprang upright, her wet eyes wide with pure astonishment.

"In my favour?" she cried. "Will you have the goodness to explain yourself?"

The constables were standing on either side of her now.

"Well," replied the spokesman of the pair, "I don't like the way that window's broken, for one thing, and if you look at it you'll see what I mean. The broken glass is all outside on the sill. But that's not all, ma'am; and, as you have a cab, we might do worse than drive to the station before more people are about."

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CHAPTER II

THE CASE FOR THE CROWN

It was years since there had been a promise of such sensation at the Old Bailey, and never, perhaps, was competition keener for the very few seats available in that antique theatre of justice. Nor, indeed, could the most enterprising of modern managers, with the star of all the stages at his beck for the shortest of seasons, have done more to spread the lady's fame, or to excite a passionate curiosity in the public mind, than was done for Rachel Minchin by her official enemies of the Metropolitan Police.

Whether these gentry had their case even more complete than they pretended, when the prisoner was finally committed for trial, or whether the last discoveries were really made in the ensuing fortnight, is now of small account—though the point provided more than one excuse for acrimony on the part of defending counsel during the hearing of the case. It is certain, however, that shortly after the committal it became known that much new evidence was to be forthcoming at the trial; that the case against the prisoner would be found even blacker than before; and that the witnesses were so many in number, and their testimony

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so entirely circumstantial, that the proceedings were expected to occupy a week.

Sure enough, the case was accorded first place in the November Sessions, with a fair start on a Monday morning towards the latter end of the month. In the purlieus of the mean, historic court, it was a morning not to be forgotten, and only to be compared with those which followed throughout the week. The prisoner's sex, her youth, her high bearing, and the peculiar isolation of her position, without a friend to stand by her in her need, all appealed to the popular imagination, and produced a fascination which was only intensified by the equally general feeling that no one else could have committed the crime. From the judge downward, all connected with the case were pestered for days beforehand with more or less unwarrantable applications for admission. And when the time came, the successful suppliant had to elbow every yard of his way from Newgate Street or Ludgate Hill; to pass three separate barriers held by a suspicious constabulary; to obtain the good offices of the Under Sheriff, through those of his liveried lacqueys; and finally to occupy the least space, on the narrowest of seats, in a varnished stall filled with curiously familiar faces, within a few feet of the heavily veiled prisoner in the dock, and not many more from the red-robed judge upon the bench.

The first to take all this trouble on the Monday morning, and the last to escape from the foul air (shot

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by biting draughts) when the court adjourned, was a white-headed gentleman of striking appearance and stamina to match; for, undeterred by the experience, he was in like manner first and last upon each subsequent day. Behind him came and went the well-known faces, the authors and the actors with a semi-professional interest in the case; but they were not well-known to the gentleman with the white head. He heard no more than he could help of their constant whisperings, and, if he knew not at whom he more than once had occasion to turn and frown, he certainly did not look the man to care. He had a well-preserved reddish face, with a small mouth of extraordinary strength, a canine jaw, and singularly noble forehead; but his most obvious distinction was his full head of snowy hair. The only hair upon his face, a pair of bushy eyebrows, was so much darker as to suggest a dye; but the eyes themselves were black as midnight, with a glint of midnight stars, and of such a subtle inscrutability that a certain sweetness of expression came only as the last surprise in a face full of contrast and contradiction.

No one in court had ever seen this man before; no one but the Under Sheriff learnt his name during the week; but by the third day his identity was a subject of discussion, both by the professional students of the human countenance, who sat behind him (balked of their study by the prisoner's veil), and among the various functionaries who had already found him as

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free with a sovereign as most gentlemen are with a piece of silver. So every day he was ushered with ceremony to the same place, at the inner end of the lowest row; there he would sit watching the prisoner, a trifle nearer her than those beside or behind him; and only once was his attentive serenity broken for an instant by a change of expression due to any development of the case.

It was not when the prisoner pleaded clearly through her veil, in the first breathless minutes of all; it was not a little later, when the urbane counsel for the prosecution, wagging his pince-nez at the jury, thrilled every other hearer with a mellifluous forecast of the new evidence to be laid before them. The missing watch and chain had been found; they would presently be produced, and the jury would have an opportunity of examining them, together with a plan of the chimney of the room in which the murder had been committed; for it was there that they had been discovered upon a second search instituted since the proceedings before the magistrates. The effect of this announcement may be conceived; it was the sensation of the opening day. The whole case of the prosecution rested on the assumption that there had been, on the part of some inmate of the house, who alone (it was held) could have committed the murder, a deliberate attempt to give it the appearance of the work of thieves. Thus far this theory rested on the bare facts that the glass of the broken window had been found

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outside, instead of within; that no other mark of foot or hand had been made or left by the supposititious burglars; whereas a brace of revolvers had been discovered in the dead man's bureau, both loaded with such bullets as the one which had caused his death, while one of them had clearly been discharged since the last cleaning. The discovery of the missing watch and chain, in the very chimney of the same room, was a piece of ideal evidence of the confirmatory kind. But it was not the point that made an impression on the man with the white hair; it did not increase his attention, for that would have been impossible; he was perhaps the one spectator who was not, if only for the moment, perceptibly thrilled.

Thrilling also was the earlier evidence, furnished by maid-servants and police constables in pairs; but here there was no surprise. The maids were examined not only as to what they had seen and heard on the night of the murder—and they seemed to have heard everything except the fatal shot—but upon the previous relations of their master and mistress—of which they showed an equally extensive knowledge. The constables were perforce confined to their own discoveries and observations when the maids had called them in. But all four witnesses spoke to the prisoner's behaviour when shown the dead body of her husband, and there was the utmost unanimity in their several tales. The prisoner had exhibited little or no surprise; it was several minutes before she had uttered a syllable; and then

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her first words had been to point out that burglars alone could have committed the murder.

In cross-examination the senior counsel for the defence thus early showed his hand; and it was not a strong one to those who knew the game. A Queen's Counsel, like the leader for the Crown, this was an altogether different type of lawyer; a younger man, with a more engaging manner; a more brilliant man, who sought with doubtful wisdom to blind the jury with his brilliance. His method was no innovation at the Old Bailey; it was to hold up every witness in turn to the derision and contempt of the jury and the court. So both the maids were reduced to tears, and each policeman cleverly insulted as such. But the testimony of all four remained unshaken; and the judge himself soothed the young women's feelings with a fatherly word, while wigs were shaken in the well of the court. That was no road to the soft side of a decent, conscientious, hard-headed jury, of much the same class as these witnesses themselves; even the actors and authors had a sound opinion on the point, without waiting to hear one from the professional gentlemen in the well. But the man in front with the very white hair—the man who was always watching the prisoner at the bar—there was about as much expression of opinion upon his firm bare face as might be seen through the sable thickness of her widow's veil.

It was the same next day, when, for some five hours out of a possible five and a half, the attention of the

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court was concentrated upon a point of obviously secondary significance. It was suggested by the defence that the watch and chain found up the study chimney were not those worn by the deceased at the time he met his death. The contention was supported by photographs of Alexander Minchin wearing a watch-chain that might or might not be of another pattern altogether; expert opinions were divided on the point; and experts in chains as well as in photography were eventually called by both sides. Interesting in the beginning, the point was raised and raised again, and on subsequent days, until all were weary of the sight of the huge photographic enlargements, which were handed about the court upon each occasion. Even the prisoner would droop in her chair when the "chain photograph" was demanded for the twentieth time by her own unflagging counsel; even the judge became all but inattentive on the point, before it was finally dropped on an intimation from the jury that they had made up their minds about the chains; but no trace of boredom had crossed the keen alert face of the unknown gentleman with the snowy hair.

So the case was fought for Mrs. Minchin, tooth and nail indeed, yet perhaps with more asperity than conviction, and certainly at times upon points which were hardly worth the fighting. Yet, on the Friday afternoon, when her counsel at last played his masterstroke, and, taking advantage of the then new Act, put the prisoner herself in the witness-box, it was done with

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the air of a man who is throwing up his case. The truth could be seen at a glance at the clean-cut, handsome, but too expressive profile of the crushing cross-examiner of female witnesses and insolent foe to the police. As it had been possible to predict, from the mere look with which he had risen to his feet, the kind of cross-examination in store for each witness called by the prosecution, so it was obvious now that his own witness had come forward from her own wilful perversity and in direct defiance of his advice.

It was a dismal afternoon, and the witness-box at the Old Bailey is so situated that evidence is given with the back to the light; thus, though her heavy veil was raised at last, and it could be seen that she was very pale, it was not yet that Rachel Minchin afforded a chance to the lightning artists of the half-penny press, or even to the students of physiognomy behind the man with the white hair. This listener did not lean forward an inch; the questions were answered in so clear a voice as to render it unnecessary. Yet it was one of these questions, put by her own counsel, which caused the white-headed man to clap a sudden hand to his ear, and to incline that ear as though the answer could not come without some momentary hesitation or some change of tone. Rachel had told sadly but firmly of her final quarrel with her husband, incidentally, but without embarrassment, revealing its cause. A neighbour was dangerously ill, whom

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she had been going to nurse that night, when her husband met her at the door and forbade her to do so.

"Was this neighbour a young man?"

"Hardly more than a boy," said Rachel, "and as friendless as ourselves."

"Was your husband jealous of him?"

"I had no idea of it until that night."

"Did you find it out then?"

"I did, indeed!"

"And where had your husband been spending the evening?"

"I had no idea of that either—until he told me he had been watching the house—and why!"

Though the man was dead, she could not rid her voice of its scorn; and presently, with bowed head, she was repeating his last words to her. A cold thrill ran through the court.

"And was that the last time you saw him alive?" inquired counsel, his face lightening in ready apprehension of the thrill, and his assurance coming back to him on the spot, as though it were he who had insisted on putting his client in the box.

But to this there was no immediate answer; for it was here that the white-haired man raised his hand to his ear; and the event was exactly as he seemed to have anticipated.

"Was that the last time you saw your husband alive?" repeated Rachel's counsel, in the winning

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accents and with the reassuring face that he could assume without an effort at his will.

"It was," said Rachel, after yet another moment's thought.

It was then that the white-headed man dropped his eyes for once; and for once the thin hard lines of his mouth relaxed in a smile that seemed to epitomise all the evil that was in his face, and to give it forth in one sudden sour quintessence.

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CHAPTER III

NAME AND NATURE

THE prisoner's evidence concluded with a perfectly simple if somewhat hesitating account of her own doings during the remainder of the night of her husband's murder. That story has already been told in greater detail than could be extracted even by the urbane but deadly cross-examiner who led for the Crown. A change had come over the manner in which Rachel was giving her evidence; it was as though her strength and nerve were failing her together, and henceforth the words had to be put into her mouth. Curiously enough, the change in Mrs. Minchin's demeanour was almost coincident with the single and rather sinister display of feeling upon the part of the white-haired gentleman who had followed every word of the case. On the whole, however, her story bore the stamp of truth; and a half-apologetic but none the less persistent cross-examination left it scarcely less convincing than before.

There was one independent witness for the defence, in addition to the experts in photography and chains. The landlady of the house at which Rachel called, in the early morning, on her way home with the cab, was

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about five minutes in the witness-box, but in those five minutes she supplied the defence with one of its strongest arguments. It was at least conceivable that a woman who had killed her husband might coolly proceed to pack her trunk, and thereafter fetch the cab which was to remove herself and her effects from the scene of the tragedy. But was it credible that a woman of so much presence of mind, to whom every minute might make the difference between life and death, would, having found her cab, actually drive out of her way to inquire after a sick friend, or even a dying lover, before going home to pick up her luggage and to ascertain whether her crime was still undetected? Suppose it were a lover, and inquire one must: would one not still leave those inquiries to the last? And having made them, last or first; and knowing the grim necessity of flight; would one woman go out of her way to tell another that she "had to go abroad very suddenly, and was going for good?"

"Inconceivable!" cried the prisoner's counsel, dealing with the point; and the word was much upon his lips during the course of a long and very strenuous speech, in which the case for the Crown was flouted from beginning to end, without, perhaps, enough of concentration on its more obvious weaknesses, or of respect for its undoubted strength. For the prisoner's proceedings on the night of the murder, however, supposing she had committed it, and still more on the morning after, it would have been difficult to find a

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better epithet; the only drawback was that this one had seen service in the cause of almost every murderer who ever went to the gallows—as counsel for the prosecution remarked in his reply, with deadly deference to his learned friend.

"On the other hand," he went on, wagging his eyeglasses with leisurely deliberation, and picking his words with a care that enhanced their effect, after the unbridled rhetoric of the defence—"on the other hand, gentlemen, if criminals never made mistakes, inconceivable or not as we may choose to consider them—if they never made those mistakes, they would never stand in that dock."

It was late on the Saturday afternoon when the judge summed up; but a pleasant surprise was in store for those who felt that his lordship must speak at greater length than either of the counsel between whom he was to hold the scales. The address from the bench was much the shortest of the three. Less exhaustive than the conventional review of a complicated case, it was a disquisition of conspicuous clearness and impartiality. Only the salient points were laid before the jury, for the last time, and in a nutshell, but with hardly a hint of the judge's own opinion upon any one of them. The expression of that opinion was reserved for a point of even greater import than the value of any separate piece of evidence. If, said the judge, the inferences and theory of the prosecution were correct; if this unhappy woman, driven to des-

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peration by her husband, and knowing where he kept his pistols, had taken his life with one of them, and afterwards manufactured the traces of a supposititious burglary; then there was no circumstance connected with the crime which could by any possibility reduce it from murder to manslaughter. The solemnity of this pronouncement was felt in the farthest corner of the crowded court. So they were to find her guilty of wilful murder, or not guilty at all! Every eye sped involuntarily to the slim black figure in the dock; and, under the gaze of all, the figure made the least little bow—a movement so slight and so spontaneous as to suggest unconsciousness, but all the more eloquent on that account.

Yet to many in court, more especially to the theatrical folk behind the man with the white hair, the gesture was but one more subtle touch in an exhibition of consummate art and nerve.

"If they do acquit her," whispered one of these wiseacres to another, "she will make her fortune on the stage!"

Meanwhile the judge was dealing at the last with the prisoner's evidence in her own behalf, and that mercifully enough, though with less reticence than had characterised the earlier portions of his address. He did not think it possible or even desirable to forget that this was the evidence of a woman upon trial for her life. It must not be discredited on that account. But it was for the jury to bear in mind that the story

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was one which admitted of no corroboration, save in unimportant details. More than that he would not say. It was for them to judge of that story as they had heard it for themselves, on its own merits, but also in relation to the other evidence. If the jury believed it, there was an end of the case. If they had any reasonable doubt at all, the prisoner was entitled to the full benefit of that doubt, and they must acquit her. If, on the other hand, the facts taken together before and after the murder brought the jury to the conclusion that it was none other than the prisoner who had committed the murder—though, of course, no one was present to see the act committed—they must, in duty to their oaths, find her guilty.

During the judge's address the short November day had turned from afternoon to night, and a great change had come over the aspect of the dim and dingy court. Opaque globes turned into flaring suns; incandescent burners revealed unsuspected brackets; the place was warmed and lighted for the first time during the week. And the effect of the light and warmth was on all the faces that rose as one while the judge sidled from the bench, and the jury filed out of their box, and the prisoner disappeared down the dock stairs for the last time in ignorance of her fate. Next moment there was the buzz of talk that you expect in a theatre between the acts, rather than in a court of justice at the solemn crisis of a solemn trial. It was like a class-room with the master called away. Hats were put on

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again in the bulging galleries; hardly a tongue was still. On the bench a red-robed magnate and another in knee-breeches exchanged views upon the enlarged photographs which had played so prominent a part in the case; in the well the barristers' wigs nodded or shook over their pink blotters and their quill pens; gentlemen of the Press sharpened their pencils and indulged in prophecy; and on their right, between the reporters and the bench, the privileged few, the literary and theatrical elect, discussed the situation with abnormal callousness, masking emotion with a childlike cynicism of sentiment and phrase.

And for once the stranger in their midst, the man with more outward distinction than any one of them, the unknown man with the snowy hair, could afford to listen to what they had to say.

"No chance, my dear man. Not an earthly!"

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Will you bet?"

"No, hang it! What a beast you are! But I thought the woman was speaking the truth."

"You heard what the judge said. Where's your corroboration? No, they ought never to have let her go into the box. I hear she insisted. But it hasn't saved anybody yet."

"The new law? Then it shows her pluck!"

"But not necessarily her innocence, dear boy."

Thus one shaven couple. Others had already exhausted the subject.

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"Yes, I finished it down at Westgate last week."

"Satisfied?"

"In a way. It depends so much on the cast."

"These actor-managers—what?"

"More or less. I must be off. Dining out."

"What! Not going to wait for the end of the fourth act?"

"No, I'm late as it is. Ta-ta!"

The white-haired man was amused. He did not turn round, nor, if he had, would he have known the retreating gentleman for the most eminent of living playwrights; but he knew the reason for his sudden retreat. A hush had fallen, and some one had whispered, "They're coming!" The light-hearted chatter had died away on the word; perhaps it was not so light-hearted after all. But the alarm was false, there was no sign of the jury, and the talk rose again, as the wind will in a storm.

"We shall want a glass when this is over," whispered one of the pair who had argued about the case.

"And we'll have it, too, old man!" rejoined his friend.

The white-haired man was grimly interested. So this was the way men talked while waiting to hear a fellow-creature sentenced to death! It was worth knowing. And this was what the newspaper men would call a low buzz—an expectant hush—this animated babble! Yet the air was charged with emotion, suppressed perhaps, but none the less distinguishable

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in every voice. Within earshot a perspiring young pressman was informing his friends that to come there comfortably you should commit the murder yourself, then they gave you the Royal Box; but his teeth could be heard chattering through the feeble felicity. The white-headed listener curled a contemptuous nostril. They could joke, and yet they could feel! He himself betrayed neither weakness, but sat waiting patiently and idly listening, with the same grim jaw and the same inscrutable eye with which he had watched the prisoner and the jury alternately throughout the week. And when the latter at last returned, and then the former, it was the same subtle stare that he again bent upon them both in turn.

The jury had been absent but forty minutes after all; and their expedition seemed as ill an omen as their nervous and responsible faces. There was a moment's hush, another moment of prophetic murmurs, and then a stillness worthy of its subsequent description in every newspaper. The prisoner was standing in the front of the dock, a female warder upon either hand. The lightning pencil of the new journalist had its will of her at last. For Mrs. Minchin had dispensed not only with the chair which she had occupied all the week, but also with the heavy veil which she had but partially lifted during her brief sojourn in the witness-box, and never once in the dock. The veil was now flung back over the widow's bonnet, peaking and falling like a sable cowl, against which the unearthly pallor of her

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face was whiter far than that of the merely dead, just as mere death was the least part of the fate confronting her. Yet she had raised her veil to look it fairly in the face, and the packed assembly marvelled as it gazed.

Was that the face that had been hidden from them all these days? It was not what they had pictured beneath the proud, defiant carriage of its concealing veil. Was that the face of a determined murderess?

Beautiful it was not as they saw it then, but the elements of beauty lay unmistakable beneath a white mist of horror and of pain, as a lovely landscape is still lovely at its worst. The face was a thin but perfect oval, lengthened a little by depth of chin and height of forehead, as now also by unnatural emaciation and distress. The mouth was at once bloodless, sweet, and firm; the eyes of a warm and lustrous brown, brilliant, eloquent, brave—and hopeless!

Yes, she had no hope herself! It was plain enough at the first glimpse of the deadly white, uncovered face, in the cruel glare of gas. But it became plainer still as, with sad, unflinching eyes, she watched and listened while, for the last time, the jurymen answered to their names.

Now they were done. The foreman shifted nervously in his place. In the overstrain of the last dread pause, the crowded court felt hotter and lighter than ever. It seemed to unite the glare of a gin palace with the temperature of a Turkish bath.

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"Gentlemen, are you agreed upon your verdict?"
"We are."
"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"
"Not guilty."
There was a simultaneous gasp from a hundred throats—a distinct cry from some. Then the Clerk of Arraigns was seen to be leaning forward, a hand to his ear, for the foreman's voice had broken with excitement. And every soul in court leant forward too.

But this time his feelings had a different effect upon the excited foreman.

"*Not* guilty!" he almost bawled.

Dead silence then, while the clock ticked thrice.

"And that is the verdict of you all?"

"Of every one of us!"

The judge leant back in his place, his eyes upon the desk before him, without a movement or a gesture to strike the personal note which had been suppressed with such admirable impartiality throughout the trial. But it was several moments before his eyes were lifted with his voice.

"Let her be discharged," was all he said even then; but he would seem to have said it at once gruffly, angrily, thankfully, disgustedly, with emotion, and without any emotion at all. You read the papers, and you take your choice.

So Rachel Minchin was supported from the court, before the round eyes of a hundred or two of her fel-

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low-creatures, in the pitiable state of one who has been condemned to die, and not set free to live. It was as though she still misunderstood a verdict which had filled most faces with incredulity, but none with an astonishment to equal her own. Her white face had leapt alight, but not with gladness. The pent-up emotion of the week had broken forth in an agony of tears; and so they half led, half carried her from the court. She had entered it for the last time with courage enough; but it was the wrong kind of courage; and, for the one supreme moment, sentence of life was harder to bear than sentence of death.

In a few minutes the court was empty—a singular little theatre of pale varnish and tawdry hangings, still rather snug and homely in the heat and light of its obsolete gas, and with as little to remind one of the play as any other theatre when the curtain is down and the house empty. But there was clamour in the corridors, and hooting already in the street. Nor was the house really empty after all. One white-haired gentleman had not left his place when an attendant returned to put out the lights. The attendant pointed him out to a constable at the door; both watched him a few moments. Then the attendant stepped down and touched him on the shoulder.

The gentleman turned slowly without a start. "Ah, you're the man I want to see," said he. "Was that the Chief Warder in the dock?"

"Him with the beard," said the attendant, nodding.

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"Well, give him this, and give it him quick. I'll wait up there till he can see me."

And he pressed his card into the attendant's palm, with a couple of sovereigns underneath.

"Wants to see the Chief Warder," explained the attendant to the constable at the door.

"He's been here all the week," mused the constable aloud. "I wonder who he is?"

"Name of Steel," whispered the other, consulting the card, as the gentleman advanced up the steps towards them, the gaslight gleaming in his silver hair, and throwing his firm features into strong relief.

"And not a bad name for him," said the constable at the door.

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CHAPTER IV

RACHEL fought her weakness with closed eyes, and was complete mistress of herself when those about her thought that consciousness alone was returning. She recognised the chamber at a glance; it was the one in which generations of metropolitan malefactors, and a few innocent persons like herself, had waited for the verdict of life or death. For her it was life, life, life! And she wondered whether any other of the few had ever come back to life with so little joy.

The female warders were supporting her in a chair; the prison doctor stood over her with a medicine-glass.

"Drink this," said he, kindly.

"But I have been conscious all the time."

"Never mind. You need it."

And Rachel took the restorative without more words.

It did its work. The colour came back to her face. The blood ran hot in her veins. In a minute she was standing up without assistance.

"And now," said Rachel, "I shall not trespass further on your kindness, and I am sure that you will not wish to detain me."

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"We cannot," said the doctor, with a broad smile and a bow; "you are as free as air, and will perhaps allow me to be the first to congratulate you. At the same time, my dear madam, and quite apart from your condition—which is wonderful to me after what you've been through—at the same time, and even with your fortitude, I think it would be advisable to—to wait a little while."

The doctor raised his eyes, and all at once Rachel heard. Overhead—outside—in the world—there was the brutal hooting of a thoughtless mob.

"So that is for me!"

Rachel set her teeth.

"On the contrary," said the kindly doctor, "it may be for the witnesses; but crowds are fickle things; and I should strongly urge you not to court a demonstration of one sort or the other. You are best where you are for the time being, or at all events somewhere within the precincts. And meanwhile your solicitor is waiting to add his congratulations to mine."

"Is he, indeed!" cried Rachel, in a voice as hard as her eye.

"Why, to be sure," rejoined the other, taken somewhat aback. "There must be many matters for discussion between you, and he at least seems very anxious to discuss them. In fact, I may say that he is only awaiting my permission for an immediate interview."

"Then let him await mine!" exclaimed Rachel, in

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a vindictive voice for which she was apologising in the next breath. "I owe you much," she added, "if only for your kindness and sympathy during these few minutes. But to him I owe nothing that I cannot pay in cash. He tried to keep me from telling my own story in the box—they all did—but he was the worst of all. So I certainly do not owe him my life. He came to me and he said what he liked; he may have forgotten what he said, but I never shall."

"He would be the first to admit his error now."

"Perhaps; but he believed me guilty to the very end; and I utterly refuse to see him to-night."

"Then I shall tell him so."

And the good doctor disappeared for the nonce, but was back in a couple of minutes, full of the lawyer's expostulations. What did Mrs. Minchin intend to do? Where did she propose to go? There were a hundred matters for explanation and arrangement. Her solicitor said she had no friends, and seemed himself most anxious to act in that capacity. Rachel's lips curled at the thought.

"At least," said she, "I have the friends who guaranteed his bill, if that has anything to say to his anxiety! But what I mean to do, and where I may go, are entirely my own affair. And as for the hundred matters he mentions, he might have spoken of them during the week. Perhaps he thought it would be waste of breath, but I should have appreciated the risk."

So her solicitor was beaten off, with all the spirit

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which was one of Rachel's qualities, but also with the rashness which was that quality's defect. The man was indeed no ornament to his profession, but a police-court practitioner of the pushing order, who had secured the case for notoriety and nothing else. Rachel's soul sickened when she thought of her interviews, and especially her most recent interviews, with one whom she had never seen before her trouble, and whom she devoutly hoped never to see again. She did not perceive that the time had come when the lawyer might have been really useful to her. Yet his messages left her more alive to the difficulties that lay before her as a free woman, and to the immediate necessity of acting for herself once more.

After all there had been a silver lining to the cloud under which she had lain so long. Others had acted for her. It had been a rest. But, conscious of her innocence, and serene in that consciousness, she had prepared herself rather for another life than for a new lease of this one; and, while seeking to steel her soul to the awful sequel of a conviction, in the other direction she had seldom looked beyond the consummate incident of an acquittal. Life seems a royal road when it is death that stares one in the face; but already Rachel saw the hills and the pitfalls; for indeed they began under her nose.

She had no plans, nor a single soul to help her to make any. In all the world she had no real friend. And yet, with the very independence to which this iso-

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lation was largely due, she must pick and choose, and reject, in the hour when any friend would have been better than none!

In the first ten minutes of the new life which Rachel Minchin began with her acquittal, she had refused to see her own solicitor, and an unknown gentleman whose card was brought to her by the Chief Warder himself. With the card was a message which might have inspired confidence, and the same might be said of the address. But it was enough for Rachel that she knew no one of the name. The Chief Warder, one of the kindliest mortals, displayed no little irritation under her repeated refusals; but it was the agent, and not the principal, who was so importunate; and the message was not repeated once the former could be induced to bear Mrs. Minchin's answer. The Chief Warder did indeed return, but it was not to make any further reference to the mysterious Mr. Steel who had craved an interview with Mrs. Minchin. And now the good fellow was all smiles.

"Feeling more yourself?" said he; and, when Rachel said she was, he asked her to listen now; and there was nothing to listen to. "The coast's as clear as the Criminal Court," explained this pleasant official. "A closed cab did it, with an officer on the box; and I'll call you another as soon as you like."

Rachel rose at once.

"It was kind of you to let me stay so long," she said. "But I don't think I will take a cab, thank you,

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if there's an underground station within reach, and you will kindly tell me the way."

"There's Blackfriars Bridge within five minutes. But you will have more than you can carry——"

"I have nothing worth taking away with me," said Rachel, "except the things I stand up in; but you may give what I leave to any poor woman who cares to have them. And I hope you will accept this trifle for yourself, with my deep gratitude for all your kindness."

Indeed, the man had been kind, and his kindness would have continued to the last had the trial ended differently. Nevertheless, Rachel's trifle was a piece of gold, and one of her last. Nor was this pure generosity. There was an untold joy in being able to give again. It was the first real taste of freedom; and in another minute Rachel was free.

Oh, but what a miracle to hear her feet on the now deserted pavement, to see her breath in the raw November night, and the lights of Ludgate Hill beyond! Rachel raised her veil to see them better. Who would look for her afoot so near the scene of her late ordeal? And what did it matter who saw her and who knew her now? She was innocent; she could look the whole world in the face once more. Oh, to rub shoulders with the world again!

A cab came tinkling up behind her, and Rachel half thought of hailing it, and driving through the lighted town after all; but the hansom was occupied, and the

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impulse passed. She put down her veil and turned into the stream without catching a suspicious eye. Why should they suspect her? And again, what did it matter if they did?

"Trial an' verdic'! Trial an' verdic'! Acquittal o' Mrs. Minchin! Trial an' verdic'!"

Everybody was buying the damp, pink sheets. Rachel actually bought one herself; and overheard the opinion of the man in the street without a pang. So she might think herself lucky! But she did, she did; in the reaction that had come upon her with the first mouthful of raw air, in the intoxication of treading the outer world again, she thought herself the luckiest woman in London, and revelled rather than otherwise in the very considerations which had appalled her in the precincts of the court. How good, after all, to be independent as well as free! How great to drift with the tide of innocent women and law-abiding men, once more one of themselves, and not even a magnet for morbid curiosity! That would come soon enough; the present was all the more to be enjoyed; and even the vagueness of the immediate future, even the lack of definite plans, had a glamour of their own in eyes that were yet to have their fill of street-lamps and shop-windows and omnibuses and hansom cabs.

The policeman under the bridge was a joy in himself; he refreshed Rachel's memory as to the way, without giving her an unnecessary look; and he called her "madam" into the bargain! After all, it was not

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every policeman who had been on duty at the Old Bailey, nor one in many thousands of the population who had gained admission to the court.

Yet if Rachel had relieved the tedium of her trial by using her eyes a little more; if, for example, she had condescended to look twice at the handful of mere spectators beyond the reporters on her right; she could scarcely have failed to recognise the good-looking elderly man who was at her heels when she took her ticket at Blackfriars Bridge. His white hair was covered by his hat, but the face itself was not one to be forgotten, with its fresh colour, its small grim mouth, and the deep-set glitter beneath the bushy eyebrows. Rachel, however, neither recognised nor looked again.

In a few minutes she had a better chance, when, having entered an empty compartment in the first class, she was joined by this gentleman as the train began to move.

Rachel hid herself behind the newspaper which she had bought, not that she had looked twice at her companion, but because at such close quarters, and in the comparatively fierce light of the first-class compartment, she was terribly afraid that he might look once too often at her. But this fear passed from her in the matchless fascination of reading and re-reading five words in the stop-press column:—" MINCHIN CASE —Verdict, Not guilty."

Not guilty! Not guilty! And to see it in print!

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Her eyes filled at the sight, and she dried them to gloat again. There were columns and columns about the case, embellished with not unskilful sketches of counsel addressing the jury, and of the judge in the act of summing up. But Rachel had listened to every word from all three; and the professional report was less full and less accurate than the one which she carried in her brain and would carry to her grave. Not that the speeches mattered now. It was no speech that had saved her; it was her own story, from her own lips, that the lawyers would have closed! Rachel forgave them now; she was almost grateful to them for having left it to her to save herself in spite of them all: so should her perfect innocence be impressed upon the whole country as on those twelve fair minds. And once more she pored upon the hurriedly added and ill-printed line which gave their verdict to the world, while the train stopped and started, only to stop and start again.

"And what do you think of it, madam?"

The voice came from the opposite corner of the compartment, and Rachel knew it for that of the gentleman who had jumped in at the last moment at Blackfriars Bridge. It was Charing Cross that they were leaving now, and the door had not opened at that station or the last. Rachel sat breathless behind her evening paper. Not to answer might be to fasten suspicion upon her widow's weeds; and, for all her right to look mankind in the face, she shrank instinctively from im-

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mediate recognition. Then in a clap came the temptation to discuss her own case with the owner of a voice at once confident and courtly, and subtly reminiscent of her native colony, where it is no affront for stranger to speak to stranger without introduction or excuse.

Rachel's hesitation lasted perhaps a couple of seconds, and then her paper lay across her lap.

"Of what?" she asked, with some presence of mind, for she had never an instant's doubt that the question referred to the topic of the hour.

"We were reading the same paper," replied the questioner, with perfect courtesy; "it only struck me that we might both be reading the same thing, and feeling equally amazed at the verdict."

"You mean in the Minchin case," said Rachel steadily, and without the least interrogation in her tone. "Yes, I was reading it, as I suppose everybody is. But I disagree with you about the verdict."

The young widow's manner was as downright as her words. There was a sudden raising of the bushy eyebrows in the opposite corner, a brief opening of the black eyes underneath.

"Pardon me," said the gentleman, breaking into a smile; "I was not aware that I had expressed an opinion on that point."

"I understood you were amazed," said Rachel, dryly.

"And are not you?" cried the other point-blank.

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"Do you mean to tell me that you were prepared for an acquittal?"

"I was prepared for anything," replied Rachel, returning a peculiarly penetrating stare with one at least as steady, and yet holding her breath for very fear lest this stranger had found her out, until his next words allayed the suspicion.

"Madam, have you followed the case?"

"Indeed I have," sighed honest Rachel.

"And as a woman you believe this woman innocent?"

"I do."

It was hard enough to say no more than that; but Rachel was very fresh from her great lesson in self-control.

"It is easy to see that you do not," she merely permitted herself to add.

"On the contrary," said he, with great precision; "on the contrary, my dear madam, I believe this poor lady to be as innocent as yourself."

Again their eyes were locked; again Rachel drew the only inference from so pointed a pronouncement, and yet again was the impression shaken by her companion's next words.

"But I really have no right to an opinion," said he; "since, unlike you, I cannot claim to have read the case. Nor is that the interesting thing now." The stations had come and gone, until now they were at Victoria. The speaker looked out of the window until

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they were off again, and off by themselves as before. "The interesting thing, to me, is not what this poor lady has or has not done, but what on earth she is going to do now!"

He looked at her again, and now Rachel was sure. But there was a kindness in his look that did away both with resentment and regret.

"They say she has literally no friends in England," he went on, with unconcealed concern. "That is incredible; and yet, if there be any truth in it, what a terrible position! I fear that everybody will not share your conviction, and, I may add, my own. If one can judge thus early, by what one has heard and seen for oneself, this verdict is a personal disappointment to the always bloodthirsty man in the street. Then God help the poor lady if he spots her! I only hope she will not give him a chance."

And now Rachel not only knew that he knew, but that he wished to apprise her of his knowledge without confessing it in so many words. So he would spare her that embarrassment, and would help her if he could, this utter stranger! Yet she saw it in his face, she heard it in his voice; and becoming gradually alive to his will to help, as she instinctively was to his power, she had herself the will to consult one whose good intention and better tact were alike obvious. Mystery there was in her meeting with this man; something told her that it was no accident on his side; she began to wonder whether she had not seen him before; and

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while she wondered he came and sat opposite to her, and went on speaking in a lower voice, his dark eyes fixed on hers.

"If Mrs. Minchin wants a friend—and to-night I think she must—if ever she did or will! Well, if she does, I for one would be her friend—if she would trust me!"

The last words were the lowest of all; and in the tone of them there was a timbre which thrilled Rachel as the dark eyes fascinated her. She began to feel a strange repugnance—a yet more strange attraction. But to the latter her independence gave instant battle—a battle the easier to fight since the next station was Rachel's destination.

"Do you think she would trust me?" he almost whispered, leaning towards her. "As a woman—don't you think she might?"

As Rachel hesitated the carriages began to groan beneath the brake; and her hesitation was at an end. So also was her limited capacity for pretence. She sat more upright in her corner, her shoulders fell in angles, and beneath the veil, which she had raised to read her paper, her eyes carried the war of interrogation into the enemy's country.

"I seem to have seen you before," said Rachel, cool of tongue but hot at heart.

"I think it very possible that you have."

"Were you at the trial?"

"From first to last!"

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The pause that followed was really broken by the lights of Sloane Square station.

"You know me," said Rachel hurriedly; "I have seen that for some time. May I ask if you are Mr. Steel?"

"I am."

"The Mr. Steel who sent me his card after the trial?"

Steel bowed.

"As a perfect stranger?"

"As a perfect stranger who had watched you for a whole long week in court."

Rachel ignored the relative clause.

"And because I would not see you, Mr. Steel, you have followed me, and forced yourself upon me!"

The train stopped, and Rachel rose.

"You will gather my motives when you recall our conversation," observed Steel; and he opened the door for her. But Rachel turned to him before alighting.

"Mr. Steel," said she, "I am quite sure that you mean kindly and well, and that I above all women should feel supremely grateful; but I cannot help thinking that you are unjust to the man in the street!"

"Better give him a trial," said Steel, coldly enough in his turn.

"I should prefer to," rejoined Rachel, getting out; and there was no little sting in the intonation of the verb; but Mr. Steel was left smiling and nodding very confidently to himself.

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CHAPTER V

THE MAN IN THE STREET

RACHEL'S perturbation was only the greater from her success in concealing, or at least suppressing it, during the actual process of this singular interview. You may hold your breath without moving a muscle, but the muscles will make up for it when their turn comes, and it was so with Rachel and her nerves; they rose upon her even on the platform, and she climbed the many stairs in a tremor from head to foot. And at the top, in the open night, and at all the many corners of a square that is nothing of the kind, from hoarse throat and on fluttering placard, it was "Trial and Verdict," or "Sensational Verdict at the Old Bailey," here as at the other end of the town.

But now all Rachel's thoughts were of this mysterious Mr. Steel; of his inexplicable behaviour towards her, and of her own attitude towards him. Yet, when all was said, or when all that had been said could be remembered, would his behaviour be found so very inexplicable? Rachel was not devoid of a proper vanity, albeit that night she had probably less than most women with a tithe of her personal attractions; and

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yet upon reflection she could conceive but one explanation of such conduct in an elderly man.

"There is no fool like an old fool," quoted Rachel to herself; and it was remarkable that until this moment she had never thought of Mr. Steel as either elderly or old. His eyes were young; his voice was young; she could hear him and see him still, so the strong impression was not all on one side. No more, it would seem, was the fascination. Rachel, indeed, owned to no such feeling, even in her inmost heart. But she did begin to blame herself, alike for her reception of advances which might well have been dictated by mere eccentric benevolence, and for her readiness now to put another construction upon them. And all this time she was threading the streets of Chelsea at a pace suggestive of a destination and a purpose, while in her mind she did nothing but look back.

Impulsive by nature, Rachel had also the courage of each impulse while it lasted; on the other hand, if quick to act, she was only too ready to regret. Like many another whose self-reliance is largely on the surface, an achievement of the will and not the gift of a temperament, she usually paid for a display of spirit with the most dispiriting reaction; and this was precisely the case in point. Rachel was ashamed alike of her rudeness and her vanity; the latter she traced to its source. It was inspired by vague memories of other women who had been through the same ordeal as herself. One had been handed a bouquet in the

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dock; another had been overwhelmed by proposals of marriage. Rachel herself had received letters of which the first line was enough. But there had been no letter from Mr. Steel. Ah! but he had attended her trial; she remembered him now, his continual presence had impressed itself very subtly upon her mind, without the definite memory of a single glance; and after the trial he sent her his card, he dogged her in the train! What was she to think? There was the voice in which he had offered her his aid; there was the look in his eyes; there was the delicate indirectness of that offer.

A year or two ago, with all her independence, Rachel would not have been so ready to repel one whose advances, however unwarrantable in themselves, were yet marked by so many evidences of sympathy and consideration. She had not always been suspicious and repellent; and she sighed to think how sadly she must have changed, even before the nightmare of the last few weeks.

But a more poignant reminder of her married life was now in store for Rachel Minchin. She had come to Chelsea because it was the only portion of the town in which she had the semblance of a friend; but there did live in Tite Street a young couple with whom the Minchins had at one time been on friendly terms. That was in the day of plenty and extravagance; and the acquaintance, formed at an hotel in the Trossachs, had not ripened in town as the two wives could have

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wished. It was Mrs. Carrington, however, who had found the Minchins their furnished house, while her husband certainly interested himself in Rachel's defence. Carrington was a barrister, who never himself touched criminal work, but he had spoken to a friend who did, to wit the brilliant terror of female witnesses, and caustic critic of the police, to whom Rachel owed so little. But to Carrington himself she owed much—more indeed than she cared to calculate—for he was not a man whom she liked. She wished to thank him for his kindness, to give certain undertakings and to ask his advice, but it was Mrs. Carrington whom she really hoped to see. There was a good heart, or Rachel was much mistaken. They would have seen more of each other if Mrs. Carrington had had her way. Rachel remembered her on the occasion of the solitary visit she had received at Holloway—for Mrs. Carrington had been the visitor.

"Don't tell Jim," she had said, "when you get off and come to see us."

And she had kissed her captive sister in a way that made poor Rachel sometimes think she had a friend in England after all; but that was before her committal; and thereafter from that quarter not a word. It was not Mrs. Carrington whom Rachel blamed, however, and those last words of hers implied an invitation which had never been withdrawn. But invitation or no invitation, friend or no friend, Mrs. Carrington she would have to see. And even he would be different now that

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he knew she was innocent; and if it was easy to see what he had believed of her before, well, so much the more credit to him for what he had done.

So Rachel had decided before quitting the precincts of the Old Bailey; but her subsequent experiences in street and train so absorbed her that she was full of the interview that was over when she ought to have been preparing for the one still before her. And, in her absence of mind, the force of habit had taken advantage of her; instead of going on to Tite Street, she turned too soon, and turned again, and was now appalled to find herself in the very street in which her husband had met his death.

The little street was as quiet as ever; Rachel stood quite still, and for the moment she was the only person in it. She stole up to the house. The blinds were down, and it was in darkness, otherwise all was as she remembered it only too well. Her breath came quickly. It was a strange trick her feet had played her, bringing her here against her will! Yet she had thought of coming as a last resort. The furnished house should be hers for some months yet; it had been taken for six months from July, and this was only the end of November. At the worst—if no one would take her in——

She shuddered at the unfinished thought; and yet there was something in it that appealed to Rachel. To go back there, if only for the shortest time—to show her face openly where it was known—not to slink

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and hide as though she were really guilty! That might give her back her self-respect; that might make others respect her too. But could she do it, even if she would? Could she bring herself to set foot inside that house again?

Rachel felt tremulously in her pocket; there had been more keys than one, and that which had been in her possession when she was arrested was in it still. Nobody had asked her for it; she had kept it for this; dare she use it after all? The street was still empty; it is the quietest little street in Chelsea. There would never be a better chance.

Rachel crept up the steps. If she should be seen!

She was not; but a footstep rang somewhere in the night, and on that the key was fitted and the door opened without another moment's hesitation. Rachel entered, the door shut noisily behind her, and then her own step rang in turn upon the floor. It was bare boards; and as Rachel felt her way to the electric switches, beyond the dining-room door, her fingers missed the pictures on the walls. This prepared her for what she found when the white light sprang out above her head. The house had been dismantled; not a stick in the rooms, not so much as a stair-rod on the stairs, nor a blind to the window at their head.

The furniture removed while the use of it belonged legally to her! Had they made so sure of her conviction as all that? Rachel's blood came straight from zero to the boil; this was monstrous, this was illegal and

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wicked. The house was hers for other two months; and there were things of hers in it, she had left everything behind her. If they had been removed, then this outrage was little short of felony, and she would invoke the law from whose clutches she herself had escaped. Rachel had expected to be terrified in the house; she was filled instead with anger and indignation.

It was as she expected; not a trunk had been left; and the removal had taken place that very week. This would account for the electric light being still intact. Rachel discovered it by picking up a crumpled newspaper, which seemed to have contained bread and cheese; it did contain a report of the first day of the trial. They might have waited till her trial was over; they should suffer for their impatience, it was their turn. So angry was Rachel that her own room wounded her with no memories of the past. It was an empty room, and nothing more; and only on her return to the lower floor did that last dread night come back to her in all its horror and all its pitifulness.

The double doors of the late professor! Rachel forgot her grudge against his widow; she pulled the outer door, and pushed the inner one, just as she had done in the small hours of that fatal morning, but this time all was darkness within. She had to put on the electric light for herself. The necessity she could not have explained, but it existed in her mind; she must see the room again. And the first thing she saw was that the window was broken still.

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Rachel looked at it more closely than she had done on the morning when she had given her incriminating opinion to the police, and the longer she looked the less reason did she see to alter that opinion. The broken glass might have been placed upon the sill in order to promote the very theory which had been so gullibly adopted by the police, and the watch and chain hidden in the chimney for the same purpose. They might have hanged the man who kept them; and surely this was not the first thief who had slunk away empty-handed after the committal of a crime infinitely greater than the one contemplated.

Rachel had never wavered in these ideas, but neither had she dwelt on them to any extent, and now they came one instant only to go the next. Her husband was dead—that was once more the paramount thought—and she his widow had been acquitted on a charge of murdering him. But for the moment she was thinking only of him, and her eyes hung over the spot where she had seen him sitting dead—once without dreaming it—and soon they filled. Perhaps she was remembering all that had been good in him, perhaps all that had been evil in herself; her lips quivered, and her eyes filled. But it was hard to pity one who was at rest, hard for her with the world to face afresh that night, without a single friend. The Carringtons? Well, she would see; and now she had a very definite point upon which to consult Mr. Carrington. That helped her, and she went, quietly and unseen as she had come.

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The Shadow of the Rope

There was still a light in the ground-floor windows of the Tite Street house, strong lights and voices; it was the dining-room, for the Minchins had dined there once; and the voices did not include a feminine one that Rachel could perceive. If there were people dining with them, the ladies must have gone upstairs, and Mrs. Carrington was the woman to see Rachel for five minutes, and the one woman in England to whom she could turn. It was an opportunity not to miss—she had not the courage to let it pass—and yet it required almost as much to ring the bell. And even as she rang —but not until that moment—did Rachel recognise and admit to herself the motive which had brought her to that door. It was not to obtain the advice of a clever man; it was the sympathy of another woman that she needed that night more than anything else in all the world.

She was shown at once into the study behind the dining-room, and immediately the voices in the latter ceased. This was ominous; it was for Mrs. Carrington that Rachel had asked; and the omen was instantly fulfilled. It was Mr. Carrington who came into the room, dark, dapper, and duskily flushed with his own hospitality, but without the genial front which Rachel had liked best in him. His voice also, when he had carefully shut the door behind him, was unnaturally stiff.

"I congratulate you," he said, with a bow but nothing more; and Rachel saw there and then how it was

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to be; for with her at least this man had never been stiff before, having indeed offended her with his familiarity at the time when her husband and he were best friends.

"I owe it very largely to you," faltered Rachel. "How can I thank you?"

Carrington said it was not necessary.

"Then I only hope," said Rachel, on one of her impulses, "that you don't disagree with the verdict?"

"I didn't read the case," replied Carrington, glibly, and with neither more nor less of the contemptuous superiority with which he would have referred to any other Old Bailey trial; but the man himself was quick to see the brutality of such a statement, and quicker yet to tone it down.

"It wasn't necessary," he added, with a touch of the early manner which she had never liked; "you see, I knew you."

The insincerity was so obvious that Rachel could scarcely bring herself to confess that she had come to ask his advice. "What was the point?" he said to that, so crisply that the only point which Rachel could think of was the fresh, raw grievance of the empty house.

"Didn't your solicitor tell you?" asked Carrington. "He came to me about it; but I suppose——"

Rachel knew well what he supposed.

"He should have told you to-night," added Carrington, "at any rate. The rent was only paid for half

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the term—quite right—the usual way. The permanent tenant wanted to be done with the house altogether, and that entitled her to take her things out. No, I'm afraid you have no grievance there, Mrs. Minchin."

"And pray," demanded Rachel, "where are my things?"

"Ah, your solicitor will tell you that—when you give him the chance! He very properly would not care to bother you about trifles until the case against you was satisfactorily disposed of. By the way, I hope you don't mind my cigar? We were smoking in the next room."

"I have taken you from your guests," said Rachel, miserably. "I know I ought not to have come at such an hour."

Carrington did not contradict her.

"But there seemed so much to speak about," she went desperately on. "There are the money matters and—and——"

"If you will come to my chambers," said Carrington, "I shall be delighted to go into things with you, and to advise you to the best of my ability. If you could manage to come at half-past nine on Monday morning, I would be there early and could give you twenty minutes."

He wrote down the address, and, handing it to Rachel, rang the bell. This drove her to despair; evidently it never occurred to him that she was faint with weariness and hunger, that she had nowhere to go for

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the night, and not the price of a decent meal, much less a bed, in her purse. And even now her pride prevented her from telling the truth; but it would not silence her supreme desire.

"Oh!" she cried; "oh, may I not speak to your wife?"

"Not to-night, if you don't mind," replied Carrington, with his bow and smile. "We can't both desert our guests."

"Only for a minute!" pleaded Rachel. "I wouldn't keep her more!"

"Not to-night," he repeated, with a broader smile, a clearer enunciation, and a decision so obviously irrevocable that Rachel said no more. But she would not see the hand that he could afford to hold out to her now; and as for going near his chambers, never, never, though she starved!

"No, I wouldn't have kept her," she sobbed in the street; "but she would have kept me! I know her! I know her! She would have had pity on me, in spite of him; but now I can never go near either of them again!"

Then where was she to go? God knew! No respectable hotel would take her in without luggage or a deposit. What was she to do?

But while she wondered her feet were carrying her once more in the old direction, and as she walked an idea came. She was very near the fatal little street at the time. She turned about, and then to the left. In

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a few moments she was timorously knocking at the door of a house with a card in the window.

"It's you!" cried the woman who came, almost shutting the door in Rachel's face, leaving just space enough for her own.

"You have a room to let," said Rachel, steadily.

"But not to you," said the woman, quickly; and Rachel was not surprised, the other was so pale, so strangely agitated.

"But why?" she asked. "I have been acquitted—thanks partly to your own evidence—and yet you of all women will not take me in! Do you mean to tell me that you actually think I did it still?"

Rachel fully expected an affirmative. She was prepared for that opinion now from all the world; but for once a surprise was in store for her. The pale woman shifted her eyes, then raised them doggedly, and the look in them brought a sudden glow to Rachel's heart.

"No, I don't think that, and never did," said the one independent witness for the defence. "But others do, and I am too near where it happened; it might empty my house and keep it empty."

Rachel seized her hand.

"Never mind, never mind," she whispered. "It is better, ten thousand times, that you should believe in me, that any woman should! Thank you, and God bless you, for that!"

She was turning away, when she faced about upon

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the steps, gazing past the woman who believed in her, along the passage beyond, an unspoken question beneath the tears in her eyes.

"He is not here," said the landlady, quickly.

"But he did get over it?"

"So we hope; but he was at death's door that morning, and for days and weeks. Now he's abroad again —I'm sure I don't know where."

Rachel said good-night, and this time the door not only shut before she had time to change her mind again, but she heard the bolts shot as she reached the pavement. The fact did not strike her. She was thinking for a moment of the innocent young foreigner who had brought matters to a crisis between her husband and herself. On the whole she was glad that he was not in England—yet there would have been one friend.

And now her own case was really desperate; it was late at night; she was famished and worn out in body and mind, nor could she see the slightest prospect of a lodging for the night.

And that she would have had in the condemned cell, with food and warmth and rest, and the blessed certainty of a speedy issue out of all her afflictions.

It was a bitter irony, after all, this acquittal!

There was but one place for her now. She would perish there of cold and horror; but she might buy something to eat, and take it with her; and at least she could rest, and would be alone, in the empty house,

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the house of misery and murder, that was yet the one shelter that she knew of in all London.

She crept to the King's Road, and returned with a few sandwiches, walking better in her eagerness to break a fast which she had only felt since excitement had given place to despair. But now it was making her faint and ill. And she hurried, weary though she was.

But in the little street itself she stood aghast. A crowd filled it; the crowd stood before the empty house of sorrow and of crime; and in a moment Rachel saw the cause.

It was her own fault. She had left the light burning in the upper room, the bedroom on the second floor.

Rachel joined the skirts of the crowd—drawn by an irresistible fascination—and listened to what was being said. All eyes were upon the lighted window of the bedroom—watching for herself, as she soon discovered—and this made her doubly safe where she stood behind the press.

"She's up there, I tell yer," said one.

"Not her! It's a ghost."

"Her 'usband's ghost, then."

"But vere's a chap 'ere wot sore 'er fice to fice in the next street; an' followed 'er and 'eard the door go; an' w'en 'e come back wiv 'is pals, vere was vat light."

"Let's 'ave 'er aht of it."

"Yuss, she ain't no right there."

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The Man in the Street

"No; the condemned cell's the plice for 'er!"

"Give us a stone afore the copper comes!"

And Rachel saw the first stone flung, and heard the first glass break; and within a very few minutes there was not a whole pane left in the front of the house; but that was all the damage which Rachel herself saw done.

A hand touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Do you still pin your faith to the man in the street?" said a voice.

And, though she had heard it for the first time that very evening, it was a voice that Rachel seemed to have known all her life.

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CHAPTER VI

A PERIPATETIC PROVIDENCE

"Do you still pin your faith to the man in the street?"

It was Mr. Steel who stood at Rachel's elbow, repeating his question word for word; but he did not repeat it in the same tone. There was an earnest note in the lowered voice, an unspoken appeal to her to admit the truth and be done with proud pretence. And indeed the pride had gone out of Rachel at sight of him; a delicious sense of safety filled her heart instead. She was as one drowning, and here was a strong swimmer come to her rescue in the nick of time. What did it matter who or what he was? She felt that he was strong to save. Yet, as the nearly drowned do struggle with their saviours, so Rachel must fence instinctively with hers.

"I never did pin my faith to him," said she.

"Yet see the risk that you are running! If he turns round—if any one of them turns round and recognises you—listen to that!"

It was only the second window, but a third and a fourth followed like shots from the same revolver. Rachel winced.

"For God's sake, come away!" he whispered, sternly.

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A Peripatetic Providence

And Rachel did come a few yards before a flicker of her spirit called a halt.

"Why should I run away?" she demanded, in sudden tears of mortification and of weakness combined. "I am innocent—so why should I?"

"Because they don't like innocent people; and there appear to be no police in these parts; and if you fall into their hands—well, it would be better for you if you had been found guilty and were safe and sound in Newgate now!"

That was exactly what Rachel had felt herself; she took a few steps more, but still with reluctance and irresolution; and once round the nearest corner, and out of that hateful street for ever, she turned to her companion in unconcealed despair.

"But what am I to do?" she cried. "But where am I to turn?"

"Mrs. Minchin," said Steel, "can you not really trust me yet?"

He stood before her under a street lamp, handsome still, upright for all his years, strong as fate itself, and surely kinder than any fate which Rachel Minchin had yet met with in the course of her short but chequered life. And yet—and yet—she trusted and distrusted him too!

"I can and I cannot," she sighed; and even with the words one reason occurred to her. "You have followed me, you see, after all!"

"I admit it," he replied, "and without a particle

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of shame. My dear lady, I was not going to lose sight of you to-night!"

"And why not?"

"Because I foresaw what might happen, and may happen still! Nay, madam, it will, if you continue to let your pride sit upon your common sense. Do you hear them now? That means the police, and when they're dispersed they'll come this way to King's Road. Any moment they may be upon us. And there's a hansom dropped from heaven!"

He raised his umbrella, the bell tinkled, the two red eyes dilated and widened in the night, then with a clatter the horse was pulled up beside the curb, and Steel spread his hand before the muddy wheel.

"Be sensible," he whispered, "and jump in! In a hansom you can see where you are going; in a hansom you can speak to the driver or attract the attention of any decent person on the sidewalk. Ah! you will trust me so far at last—I thank you from my heart!"

"Where to, sir?" asked the cabman through the roof.

And Rachel listened with languid curiosity; but that was all. She had put herself in this man's hands; resistance was at an end, and a reckless indifference to her fate the new attitude of a soul as utterly over-taxed and exhausted as its tired tenement of clay.

"Brook Street," said Steel, after a moment's pause —"and double-quick for a double fare. We shall be there in a quarter of an hour," he added reassuringly

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as the trap-door slammed, "and you will find everything ready for you, beginning with something to eat. I, at all events, anticipated the verdict; if you don't believe me, you will when we get there, for they have been ready for you all day. Do you know Claridge's Hotel, by the way?"

"Only by name," said Rachel, wearily.

"I'm glad to hear it," pursued Mr. Steel, "for I think you will be pleased. It is not like the ordinary run of hotels. Your rooms are your castle—a regular self-contained flat—and you needn't see another soul if you don't like. I am staying in the hotel myself, for example, but you shall not set eyes on me for a week, unless you wish to."

"But I don't understand," began Rachel, roused a little from her apathy. She was not suffered to proceed.

"Nor are you to attempt to do so," said her companion, "until to-morrow morning. If you feel equal to it then, I shall crave an audience, and you shall hear what I have got to say. But first, let me beg of you, an adequate supper and a good night's rest!"

"One thing is certain," said Rachel, half to herself: "they can't know who I am, or they never would have taken me in. And no luggage!"

"That they are prepared for," returned Steel; "and in your rooms you will find a maid who is also prepared and equipped for your emergency. As to their not knowing who you are at the hotel, there you are

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right; they do not know; it would have been inexpedient to tell them."

"Then at least," said Rachel, "I ought to know who I am supposed to be."

And she smiled, for interest and curiosity were awakened within her, with the momentary effect of stimulants; but Mr. Steel sat silent at her side. The cab was tinkling up Park Lane. The great park on the left, the great houses on the right, the darkness on the one hand, the lights on the other, had all the fascination of sharp contrasts—that very fascination which was Mr. Steel's. Rachel already discovered it in his face, and divined it in his character, without admitting to herself that there was any fascination at all. Yet otherwise she would have dropped rather than have done what she was doing now. The man had cast a spell upon her; and for the present she did feel safe in his hands. But with that unmistakable sense of immediate security there mingled a subtler premonition of ultimate danger, to which Rachel had felt alive from the first. And this was the keenest stimulus of all.

What was his intention, and what his object? To draw back was to find out neither; and to say the truth, even if she had not been friendless and forlorn, Rachel would have been very sorry to draw back now.

The raw air in her face had greatly revived her; the sights and lights of the town were still new and dear to her; she had come back to the world with a ven-

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geance, to a world of incident and interest, with an adventure ready waiting to take her out of her past self!

But it was only her companion's silence which enabled Rachel to realise her strange fortune at this stage, and she had to put her question point-blank before she obtained any answer at all.

"If you insist upon hearing all the little details to-night," said Steel, with a good-humoured shrug, "well, I suppose you must hear them; but I hope you will not insist. I have had to make provisions which you may very possibly resent, but I thought it would be time enough for us to quarrel about them in the morning. To-night you need rest and sustenance, but no excitement; of that God knows you have had enough! No one will come near you but the maid of whom I spoke; no questions will be put to you; everything is arranged. But to-morrow, if you feel equal to it, you shall hear all about me, and form your own cool judgment of my behaviour towards you. Meanwhile won't you trust me—implicitly—until then?"

"I do," said Rachel, "and I will—until to-morrow."

"Then there are one or two things that I can promise you," said Steel, with the heartiness of a man who has gained his point. "You will not be compromised in any sort or kind of way; your self-respect shall not suffer; nothing shall vex or trouble you, if I can help it, while you remain at this hotel. And this I guarantee—whether you like it or not—unless you tell

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them, not a single soul in the place shall have the faintest inkling as to who you are. Now, only keep your why and wherefore till to-morrow," he concluded cheerily, "and I can promise you almost every satisfaction. But here we are at the hotel."

He thrust his umbrella outside, pointing to a portico and courtyard on the right; and in another moment Rachel was receiving the bows of powdered footmen in crimson plush, while Steel, hat in hand, his white hair gleaming in the electric light, led the way to the lift.

Rachel's recollection of that night was ever afterwards disjointed and involved as that of any dream; but there were certain features that she never forgot. There was the beautiful suite of rooms, filled with flowers that must have cost a small fortune at that time of year, and in one of them a table tastefully laid. Rachel remembered the dazzle of silver and the glare of napery, the hot plates, the sparkling wine, the hothouse fruit, and the deep embarrassment of sitting down to all this in solitary state. Mr. Steel had but peeped in to see that all was in accordance with his orders; thereafter not even a waiter was allowed to enter, but only Rachel's attendant, to whose charge she had been committed; a gentle and assiduous creature, quiet of foot and quick of hand, who spoke seldom but in a soothing voice, and with the delicate and pretty accent of the French-Swiss.

Rachel used to wonder whether she had shocked this mannerly young woman by eating very ravenously;

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she remembered a nervous desire to be done with that solitary repast, and to get to bed. Yet when she was there, in the sweetest and whitest of fine linen, with a hot bottle at her feet, and a fire burning so brightly in the room that the brass bed-stead seemed here and there red-hot, then the sound sleep that she sorely needed seemed further off than ever, for always she dreamt she was in prison and condemned to die, till at length she feared to close her eyes. But nothing had been forgotten; and Rachel's last memory of that eventful day, and not less eventful night, was of a mild, foreign face bending over her with a medicine-glass and a gentle word.

And the same good face and the same soft voice were waiting for her when she awoke after many hours; the fire still burned brightly, also the electric-light, though the blind was up and the window filled with a dull November sky. It was a delicious awakening, recollection was so slow to come. Rachel might have been ill for days. She experienced the peace that is left by illness of sufficient gravity. But all she ailed was a slight headache, quickly removed by an inimitable cup of tea, that fortified her against the perplexing memories which now came swarming to her mind. This morning, however, enlightenment was due, and meanwhile Rachel received a hint, though a puzzling one, from the Swiss maid, as to the new identity which had been thrust upon her for the time being in lieu of her own.

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"It was very sad for madame to lose all her things," cooed the girl, as she busied herself about the room.

"It was irritating," Rachel owned, beginning to wonder how much the other knew.

"But it was better than losing your life, madame!" the girl added with a smile.

And now Rachel lay silent. Could this amiable young woman know all? In one way Rachel rather hoped it was the case; it would be something to have received so much kindness and attention, even though bought and paid for, from one of her own sex who knew all there was to know, and yet did not shrink from her. But the young woman's next words dismissed this idea.

"When so many poor people were drowned!" said she. And the mystification increased.

Presently there was a knock at the outer door, which the maid answered, returning with Mr. Steel's card.

"Is he there?" asked Rachel, hastily.

"No, madame, but one of the servants is waiting for an answer. I think there is something written on the back, madame."

Rachel read the harmless request on the back of the card; nothing could have been better calculated to turn away suspicion of one sort or another, and there was obvious design in the absence of an envelope. But Rachel was not yet in the secret, and she was determined not to wait an hour longer than she need.

"What is the time, please?"

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A Peripatetic Providence

"I will see, madame."

The girl glided out and in.

"Well?"

"A quarter to ten, madame."

"Then order my breakfast for a quarter past, and let Mr. Steel be told that I shall be delighted to see him at eleven o'clock."

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CHAPTER VII

A MORNING CALL

"THE way to conceal one's identity," observed Mr. Steel, "is to assume another as distinctive as one's own."

This oracular utterance was confidentially delivered from the leathern chair at the writing-table, in an inner recess of Rachel's sumptuous sitting-room. The chair had been wheeled aloof from the table, on which were Steel's hat and gloves, and such a sheaf of book-stall literature as suggested his immediate departure upon no short journey, unless, indeed, the magazines and the Sunday newspapers turned out to be another offering to Mrs. Minchin, like the nosegay of hothouse flowers which she still held in her hand. Rachel herself had inadvertently taken the very easy-chair which was a further feature of the recess; in its cushioned depths she already felt at a needless disadvantage, with Mr. Steel bending over her, his strong face bearing down, as it were, upon hers, and his black eyes riddling her with penetrating glances. But to have risen now would have been to show him what she felt. So she trifled with his flowers without looking up, though her eyebrows rose a little on their own account.

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"I know what you are thinking," resumed Steel; "that you had no desire to assume any new identity, or for a single moment to conceal your own, and that I have taken a great deal upon myself. That I most freely admit. And I think you will forgive me when you see the papers!"

"Is there so much about me, then?" asked Rachel, with a sigh of apprehension.

"A leading article in every one of them. But they will keep. Indeed, I would much rather you never saw them at all."

"Was that why you brought them in, Mr. Steel?"

The question was irresistible, its satire unconcealed; but Steel's disregard of it steered admirably clear of contempt.

"That was why I bought them, certainly," he admitted. "But I brought them with me for quite a different purpose, for which one would indeed have been enough. I was saying, however, that the best way to sink one's identity is to assume another, provided that the second be as distinctive as the first. We will leave for a moment the question of my officiousness in the matter, and we'll suppose, for the sake of argument, that I was authorised by you to do what in fact I have done. All last week the papers were literally full of your trial, but on Saturday there was a second sensation as well, and this morning it is hard to say which is first and which second; they both occupy so many columns. You may not know it, but

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the Cape liner due on Saturday was lost with scores of lives, off Finisterre, on Friday morning last."

Rachel failed to see the connection, and yet she felt vaguely that there was one, if she could but recall it; meanwhile she said nothing, but listened with as much attention as a mental search would permit.

"I heard of it first," continued Steel, "late on Friday afternoon, as I came away from the Old Bailey. Now, it was on Friday afternoon, if you recollect, that you gave evidence yourself in your own defence. When you left the witness-box, Mrs. Minchin, and even before you left it, I knew that you were saved!"

Rachel remembered the Swiss maid's remark about the loss of her clothes and the number of persons who had fared so much worse and lost their lives. But Steel's last words dismissed every thought but that of their own import. And in an instant she was trembling upright in the easy-chair.

"You believed me!" she whispered. "You believed me at the time!"

And for nothing had he earned such gratitude yet; her moist eyes saw the old-fashioned courtesy of his bow in answer, but not the subtlety of the smile that bore it company in the depths of the dark eyes: it was a smile that did not extend to the short tight mouth.

"What is more to the point, my dear lady," he went on in words, "the jury believed you, and I saw that they did. You made a tremendous impression upon them. The lawyer against you was too humane to

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try very hard to remove it, and the judge too just—though your own man did his best. But I saw at once that it would never be removed. It was between you and the jury—human being to human beings—and no third legal party intervening. That was where you scored; you went straight as a die to those twelve simple hearts. And I saw what you had done—what the lawyers between them could not undo—and took immediate measures."

Rachel looked up with parted lips, only to shut them firmly without a word.

"And who was I to take measures on your behalf?" queried Steel, putting the question for her. "What right or excuse had I to mix myself up in your affairs? I will tell you, for this morning is not last night, and at least you have one good night's rest between you and the past. My dear Mrs. Minchin, I had absolutely no right at all; but I had the excuse which every man has who sees a woman left to stand alone against the world, and who thrusts himself, no matter how officiously, into the breach beside her. And then for a week I had seen you all day and every day, upon your trial!"

At last there was something with a ring of definite insincerity, something that Rachel could take up; and she gazed upon her self-appointed champion with candid eyes.

"Do you mean to say that you never saw me before—my trouble, Mr. Steel?"

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"Never in my life, my dear lady."

"Then you knew something about me or mine!"

"What one read in the newspapers—neither more nor less—upon my most solemn word—if that will satisfy you."

And it did; for if there had been palpable insincerity in his previous protestations, there was sincerity of a still more obvious order in Mr. Steel's downright assurances on these two points. He had never even seen her before. He knew nothing whatever about her up to the period of notoriety; he had no special and no previous knowledge of his own. It might not be true, of course; but there was that in the deep-set eyes which convinced Rachel once and for all. There was a sudden light in them, a light as candid as that which happened to be shining in her own, but a not too kindly one, rather a glint of genuine resentment. It was his smooth protestations that Rachel distrusted and disliked. If she could ruffle him, she might get at the real man; and with her questions she appeared to have done so already.

"I am more than satisfied, in one way," replied Rachel, "and less in another. I rather wish you had known something about me; it would have made it more natural for you to come to my assistance. But never mind. What were these immediate measures?"

"I took these rooms; I had spoken of taking them earlier in the week."

"For me?"

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"Yes, on the chance of your getting off."

"But you did not say they were for me!"

"No; and I was vague in what I had said until then. I had a daughter—a widow—whom I rather expected to arrive from abroad towards the end of the week. But I was quite vague."

"Because you thought I had no chance!"

"I had not heard your evidence. The very afternoon I did hear it, and had no longer any doubt about the issue in my own mind, I also heard of this wreck. The very thing! I waited till next morning for the list of the saved; luckily there were plenty of them; and I picked out the name of a married woman travelling alone, and therefore very possibly a widow, from the number. Then I went to the manager. The daughter whom I expected had been wrecked, but she was saved, and would arrive that night. As a matter of fact, the survivors were picked up by a passing North German Lloyd, and they did reach London on Saturday night. Meanwhile I had impressed it upon the manager to keep the matter as quiet as possible, for many excellent reasons, which I need not go into now."

"But the reason for so elaborate a pretence?"

And the keen dark face was searched with a scrutiny worthy of itself. Steel set his mouth in another visible resolution to tell the truth.

"I thought you might not be sorry to cease being Mrs. Minchin—the Mrs. Minchin who had become so cruelly notorious through no fault of her own—if only

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for a day or two, or a single night. That was most easily to be effected by your arriving here minus possessions, and plus a very definite story of your own."

"You made very sure of me!" said Rachel, dryly.

"I trusted to my own powers of persuasion, and it was said you had no friends. I will confess," added Steel, "that I hoped the report was true."

"Did it follow that I could have no pride?"

"By no means; on the contrary, I knew that you were full of pride; it is, if I may venture to say so, one of your most salient characteristics. Nothing was more noticeable at your trial; nothing finer have I ever seen! But," added Steel, suppressing a burst of enthusiasm that gained by the suppression, "but, madam, I hoped and prayed that you would have the sense to put your pride in the second place for once."

"Well," said Rachel, "and so far I have done so, Heaven knows!"

"And that is something," rejoined Steel, impressively. "Even if it ends at this—even if you won't hear me out—it is something that you have had one night and one morning free from insult, discomfort, and annoyance."

Rachel felt half frightened and half indignant. Steel was standing up, looking very earnestly down upon her. And something that she had dimly divined in the very beginning—only to chide herself for the mere thought—that thing was in his face and in his voice.

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A Morning Call

Rachel made a desperate attempt to change the subject, but, as will be seen, an unlucky one.

"So I am supposed to be your daughter!" she exclaimed nervously. "May I ask my new name?"

"If you like; but I am going to suggest to you a still newer name, Mrs. Minchin."

Rachel tried to laugh, though his quietly determined and serious face made it more than difficult.

"Do you mean that I am not to be your daughter any longer, Mr. Steel?"

"Not if I can help it. But it will depend upon yourself."

"And what do you want to make me now?"

"My wife!"

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CHAPTER VIII

RACHEL was bereft of speech; and yet a certain sense of relief underlay the natural embarrassment caused by a proposal so premature and so abrupt. Nor was the deeper emotion very difficult to analyse. Here at last was a logical explanation of the whole behaviour of this man; it was the first that had occurred to her, and, after all, it was the only possible one.

"I want you to be my wife," repeated Mr. Steel, with enough of respect in his tone, yet none the less with the air of a man who is accustomed to obtain what he wants.

And Rachel, looking at the wiry, well-knit, upright figure, and at the fresh, elderly, but virile face, with its sombre eyes and its snowy hair, thought once again of the ancient saw which she had quoted to herself the night before, only to dismiss it finally from her mind. This man was no fool, nor was he old. He might be eccentric, but he was eminently sane; he might be elderly, in the arbitrary matter of mere years; but an old man he was not, and never would be with those eyes.

She tried to tell him it was absurd, but before the

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word would come she saw that it was the last one to apply; he was so confident, so quiet, so sure of himself, if not of Rachel. At last she told him she could not think of it, he had seen nothing of her, and could not possibly care for her, even supposing that she cared for him.

"By 'caring,'" said he, "do you mean being 'in love,' as they say, and all that?"

"Naturally," said Rachel, with great ease and irony, but with a new misgiving every moment.

"And have I said I was in love with you?" inquired Mr. Steel, with a smile as indulgent as his tone. "It might, perhaps, be no more than the truth; but have I had the insolence to tell you so?"

"It is a greater insult if you are not," returned Rachel, speaking hotly and quickly, but with lowered eyes.

"What! To offer to marry a person whom one does not—as yet—pretend to love?"

Rachel vouchsafed no reply.

"Whom one only—but tremendously—admires?"

Rachel felt bound to answer him, for at least there was no insult in his tone. She raised her candid eyes, a sweet brown blush upon her face.

"Yes," she said, "I think there is absolutely no excuse for a proposal of marriage, if it is not founded upon love and nothing else!"

"Or its pretence and nothing else," amended Steel, with a bow and a smile of some severity. "That is

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