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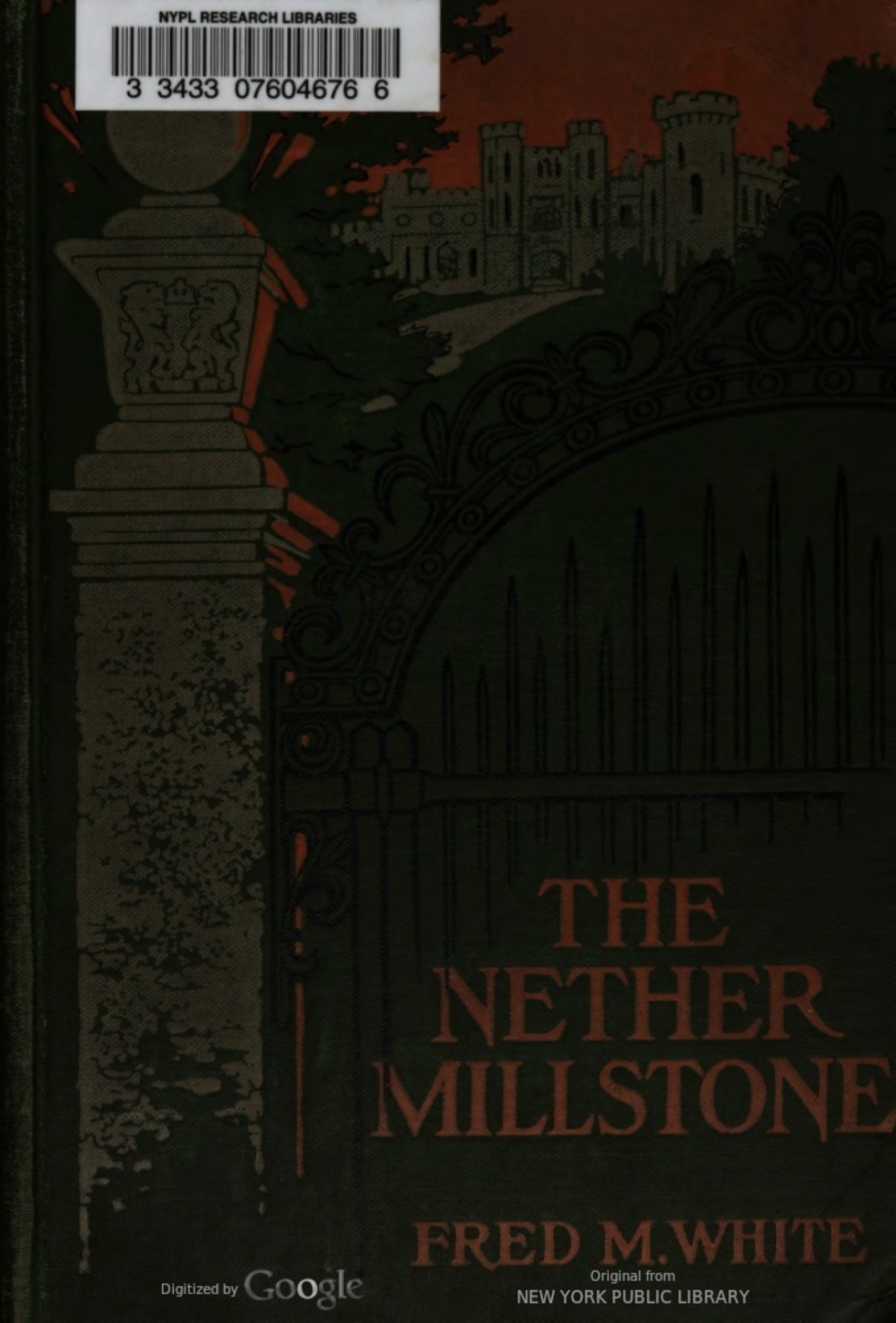

THE NETHER MILLSTONE

FRED M. WHITE

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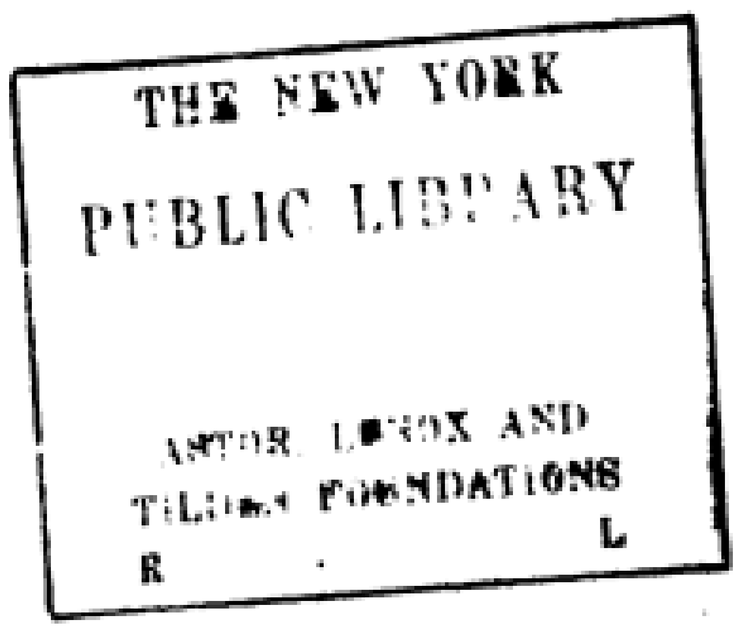

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She came slowly down the steps and stood between the two men.
(*Page* 32.) *Frontispiece*

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THE
NETHER MILLSTONE

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THE
NETHER MILLSTONE

BY

FRED M. WHITE

AUTHOR OF

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

ILLUSTRATED

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1907

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THE NETHER MILLSTONE

CHAPTER I

"THE CASTE OF VERE DE VERE"

THERE were tears in the girl's eyes — tears of futile anger and despair. The danger was so great, and yet safety was so near. If only the black horse would stumble or swerve, if only she could work the bit into that iron mouth and bring him to a standstill altogether. Her gloves were cut to ribands now; the blue veins stood out on the slender white wrists.

And still the horse flew on down the rocky path leading to the lych-gate. He would charge through the gate into the green old churchyard beyond, but no longer with his rider fighting for life on his back. The arch of the lych-gate would sweep her from the saddle with a blow that would crush the life out of her. Mary Dashwood could see that plainly enough; she knew that she had only a few more minutes to live.

She set her teeth and blinked the welling tears from her proud blue eyes. She was not afraid — no Dashwood was ever afraid — but the pity of it! She saw the great beeches rising on either side of the path, she saw the blue sky beyond, the song of the birds came to

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her ears. And she was only twenty-two, and life was very dear to her.

The moment was coming ever nearer. The black horse was thundering along the straight downward path; the lych-gate was in sight. Mary discarded the idea of throwing herself from the saddle; she would have only been dashed to pieces on the rocks on either side of the road. She had been warned, too, not to take the black horse. She bent low to escape an overhanging bough; her hat was swept away; the shining chestnut hair began to stream from her shapely head.

There was a crackling of sticks in the wood on the right; surely, a hundred yards or so ahead, a face looked over the high fence, the figure of a man was holding on to the overhanging bough of an oak tree. Mary Dashwood wondered if the man realised her danger. Perhaps he did, for he crooked a leg over the bough and hung arms downward over the roadway. He was saying something in a smooth, firm voice.

"Pull to the side of the road," said the voice. It almost sounded like a command. "Drop the reins and clear your stirrup as you near me. And have no fear."

The big horse thundered on. Despite her peril, Mary did not fail to notice how strong and brown and capable the stranger's hands looked. . . . It was all done so quickly and easily as to rob the episode of romantic danger — two hands, warm and tender, and yet firm as a steel trap, grasped the girl's slender wrists, she was floated lightly from the saddle, and in the next instant she was swaying dizzily on her feet in the road. The pride and courage of the Dashwoods availed nothing now — it was but a mere woman who fell almost fainting by the roadside.

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She opened her eyes presently to the knowledge that a strong arm was supporting her. A bright blush mounted to her proud, beautiful face. The colour deepened as she saw the look, half admiration, half amusement, on the face of her rescuer.

"Mr. Darnley," she stammered. "I — I hardly expected to see you here. A little over two years ago, in Paris, you saved my life before."

"It is good to know that you have not forgotten it," Ralph Darnley murmured. "And yet the coincidence is not so strange as it seems. I did not come to these parts moved by any unaccountable impulse — I simply had business here. And I was told that a walk through the park would repay me for my trouble. As I was making a start out, through a copse I saw your predicament and hastened to your assistance. A handy tree did the rest. The only strange part of the affair is that you should be here, too."

"Nothing strange about that," the girl smiled, "seeing that the Hall is my home."

It was a commonplace statement of facts, and yet the words seemed to hurt Ralph Darnley as if they had been lashes to sting him. The honest open brown face paled perceptibly under its tan hue. A dozen emotions changed in those clear brown eyes.

"I — I don't quite understand," he remarked. "When we met in Paris two years ago, Miss Mary Mallory ——"

"Quite so. Mary Dashwood Mallory. But, you see, the head of the family was alive then. He died nearly two years ago without any children, in fact, his only son died years ago somewhere abroad — it was a

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rather sad story — and my father came into the title and estates. He is Sir George Dashwood now. You can quite see why he changed his name."

"Of course. Only you can see that I could not possibly know this. What a grand old place it is, and what a grand old house! You must have grown very fond of it."

"I love it," Mary Dashwood cried. The look of haughty pride had faded from her face, leaving it refined and beautiful. "I love every stick and stone of it, it is part of my very life. You see, I have practically lived here always. As my father was in the Diplomatic Service, and my mother died young, it was necessary for somebody to look after me. I spent my childhood here with old Lady Dashwood, who has now gone to the dower house — such a wonderful old body!"

But Darnley did not appear to be listening. He made an effort to recover himself presently. He was like a man who dreams.

"I can quite appreciate your feelings," he said quietly. "I understand that the Dashwoods have ruled here for three hundred years. It is a fine estate; they tell me the heirlooms are almost priceless. And yet I am sorry."

The girl looked sharply up at the speaker.

"Why should you be sorry?" she demanded.

"Because it is the end of a dream," Darnley said. "I rather gathered in Paris that your father was poor. The fact levelled things up a little. It is just possible that you may remember our last evening together in Paris."

"I recollect," Mary said, the delicate colour flushing

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her cheeks again. "But I thought that we had closed that chapter finally, Mr. Darnley."

"No. That chapter can never be closed for me. I loved you from the first moment that we met, and I shall go on loving you till I die. I asked you to be my wife, and you refused me. The future mistress of Dashwood could not stoop to the son of a Californian rancher, though I happened to be an English gentleman by birth. I hope I took your refusal quietly, though it was a great blow to me. There can be no other woman for me, Mary."

"I am sorry," the girl said, "but see how impossible it is. Perhaps I am a little old-fashioned, perhaps it is the fault of my bringing up. That like must mate with like has always been the motto of the Dashwoods. These new people, with their wealth and noise and ostentation can never cross the threshold of Dashwood Hall. My father is fond of finance, but he never dreams of bringing his City friends here."

Darnley smiled to himself. He recollected the days in Paris, when Mary's father had been hand-in-glove with many a dubious French financier.

"We are wandering from the point," he said. "In any case your strictures do not touch me, for I have no money. My poor father left me comfortably off, as he thought, but my mine of silver is ruined now, ruined by a firm of City swindlers whom I was fool enough to regard as honest men. It was a very bad thing for me when I came in contact with Horace Mayfield."

It was the girl's turn to start guiltily. The beautiful face flushed once more.

"I know Mr. Mayfield," she said. "He is the only

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one of my father's business friends who comes here. We make an exception in his favour, because he is so well connected. Frankly, I do not like him, but I thought that he ——"

"That he is a cold-blooded and calculating rascal to the core," Darnley said. "I trusted him, and he left me almost penniless. Many people will tell you I am saying no more than what is actually true. And, because I am poor, I came down here thinking to find a little something that belonged to my people years ago. And so I met you, Mary, and discovered that I love you with the same old pure affection, that will go on burning in my heart till I die. It may strike you as strange that a poor man should speak to Miss Dashwood, of Dashwood, like this. Mind you, I am young, and strong, and able, and I shall come into my kingdom again. And love is worth all the rest; it is better far than money, or position, or pride of birth. If I could hear you say that you cared for me now! You are so beautiful; behind all your pride the woman's heart beats true enough. May God grant that you meet the right man when the time comes! I would give you up to him willingly and shake his hand on it. But to think of your being the wife of some brainless nonentity, of some brutal ruffian who has nothing but an old title to cover his moral wickedness, why the thought is unbearable. Mary, I think I could find it in my heart to kill that man."

The words came slowly and clear as cut steel. Calm as he was, Darnley's tones vibrated with passion. He drew the girl towards him, and laid his hands on her shoulders so that he could look down into the fathomless lake of her blue eyes. Strange as it was, Mary,

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Dashwood did not resent that which would have been insolent familiarity in anybody else. There was something so strong and dominating about this man; she thrilled with a strange tenderness and pride in the knowledge that he loved her. True, on his own confession, he was penniless, but then he treated the loss of his money in a way that only a strong man could assume.

"I love you, dear," he said, very gently and tenderly. "I love you, Mary, and no words could say more. I shall live to see the ice and pride melt from your heart, I shall live to see the beautiful womanhood within you blossom like a rose. The day will come when you will be prouder far to own a good man's heart than you will be to call yourself a Dashwood. You may frown, but I feel certain that my words will come true. And, meanwhile, I am afraid that there is no hope at all for me, my dear."

"It is impossible," Mary said coldly. Yet her voice trembled and tears came to her eyes. "Oh, I know that you are a good man and true, but you must make allowances for me. And besides, love is only a name to me. I owe my life to you, and believe me, I am too grateful for words. And if the time should ever come — oh, how selfish I am. Look at your arm. It is bruised and bleeding. It must have happened when you lifted me from the saddle. You must come up to the house and have it attended to at once."

"I don't think —" Darnley hesitated; "yes I will. It's really nothing. Let me catch your horse for you and we will walk across the path together."

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CHAPTER II

DASHWOOD HALL

THERE were the lodge-gates at last, with the arms of the Dashwoods carved in mossy stone, and the great iron gates from the cunning hand of Quentin Matsys himself. Beyond, the noble elms planted in the days of Elizabeth led to the house, a great Tudor mansion with gabled and latticed windows covered with ivy to the quaintly carved roof-tree. The gardens spread wide on either side; there was a thick hedge of crimson roses bounding the park, and in its purple shade the dappled deer reposed. Ralph Darnley drew a great breath as he took in the splendid beauty and serenity of it all. For three hundred years the reign of the Dashwoods had lasted, and not a stain had shown itself on the family escutcheon all that time. Darnley could excuse all Mary's pride.

"It is exquisitely beautiful," he said, with a queer catch in his voice. "How vividly it recalls Tennyson's line —'a haunt of ancient peace.' I am trying to make due allowances for your feelings, Miss Dashwood. If I had been brought up here, my views might be the same as yours. I love old houses."

Mary smiled one of her rare tender smiles. Darnley's eulogy touched her. She led the way through a great flagged hall, the walls of which were a perfect

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dream of carving; from their frames dead and gone Dashwoods looked down. There was oak carving everywhere, the ceilings were panelled, in the stained glass windows masses of flowers stood. Ralph would have stopped to admire it all, but Mary hurried him on.

"We will go into the breakfast-parlour," she said. "Then I will endeavour to show you that I can be useful as well as ornamental. Excuse me one moment — I must get rid of these torn gloves. Ring the bell, please, for Slight, the butler, and ask him for warm water and towels."

Ralph laid his hand on the bell as Mary flitted away. The old butler came presently, a thin little man, pink and white, the embodiment of what an old servant should be. Ralph gave his directions clearly enough, but the man stood there shaking from head to foot. There was joy and terror and amazement on his face; the tears gathered in his rheumy eyes.

"Mr. Ralph!" he whispered, "Mr. Ralph come back from the grave! Come back after all these years! What will the master say if he knows? I'm dreaming, that's what is the matter; I've gone off my head or I'm dreaming. And after forty years!"

The speaker came forward tremblingly and touched Ralph's hand. Apparently the contact with warm flesh and blood reassured him, for the pink apple bloom came back to his cheek.

"The same and yet not the same," he went on. "Stands to reason as forty years must make a deal of difference. But you are Mr. Ralph over again all the same. I loved him, sir. I mourned for him like a child of my own. I taught him to ride; I taught him to use a gun. I had to stand between him and Sir

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Ralph when the crash came. And you are his son as sure as there is a Heaven above us."

"Not quite so loud," Ralph said. "Pull yourself together, Slight. I take it you are old Slight about whom my father talked so often. He did not forget you, Slight. On his deathbed he gave me a message for you."

"And so my dear Mr. Ralph is dead. Dear, dear. What shall I call you, sir?"

"You are to call me nothing for the present," Ralph said. "I am Mr. Darnley, Slight, and you are to be discreet and silent. I had quite left you out of my calculation when I came here to-day; in fact, I had forgotten all about you. It never occurred to me that you would discover the likeness to what my father was forty years ago. I will ask you to meet me this evening, say, at half-past ten at the lodge-gates, for I have much to say to you."

"And, meanwhile, is nobody to know anything about you, sir?"

"Not a soul. The present head of the house never saw my father. The only one likely to recognize me would be the dowager Lady Dashwood, who is at the dower house. I am placing myself and my happiness entirely in your hands, my faithful old Slight, and I ask you not to betray me. Rest assured that it will all come right in time. Meanwhile, I have hurt my arm, and I require towels and soap and hot water."

Slight went his way with the air of a man who dreams. He came back presently, followed by Mary Dashwood. She dressed Darnley's arm skilfully enough. The touch of her fingers was soft and soothing. She was a tender and feeling woman now, with-

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out the slightest suggestion of cold pride on her face.

"I think that is all," she said quietly. "How brave and strong you are: how little you make of your courage. And yet few could have done what you did for me to-day. But I am forgetting that my father will be glad to see you. Let us go to the library."

A tall figure rose from a mass of papers heaped on a table. Here in the library was the same restful air of calm repose, the same patrician silence that brooded over everything like the spirit of the place. A flood of sunlight, tempered by the amber and blue of the stained glass windows filled the room; the rays centered upon the tall figure with the thin white face and grey hair, standing by the table.

"My daughter has been telling me everything, Mr. Darnley," Sir George said. "It was well and bravely done of you. . . . I am glad to see you in my house."

Darnley murmured something appropriate; he hoped that the expression of his face was not betraying his emotions. For the change in Sir George since they had last met was startling. The old, jaunty, easy manner was gone, the straight figure was lost, the iron-grey hair was white as snow. There were deep lines of care and suffering graven on the pleasant face, a suggestion of fear, or fright, or remorse. This was a man who carried some secret in his heart. Darnley felt that he would have passed Sir George in the street unrecognized. And yet the man appeared to possess everything that made life worth living. Ralph ventured to offer some suitable comment on the house and the beauty of the surroundings. A look of infinite sadness overcame the features of Dashwood for the moment. The slen-

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der fingers clutched as if at something unseen, as the fingers of a drowning man might clutch at a straw.

"Yes, it is perfect enough," he said dreamily. "A perfect house in a perfect setting. And Mary loves it even more than I do. It seems almost impossible to connect this place with sin and suffering and the sordid cares of life — what is it, Slight?"

"A telegram for you, Sir George," the old butler murmured. "Is there any reply, sir?"

Sir George murmured that there was no reply. He dropped the telegram in an unconcerned way upon the table, but his hand was shaking again, and his features looked terribly white and worn.

"From Horace Mayfield," he said huskily. "He is coming down to-day, on a rather important piece of business, and will probably stay the night. By the way, Darnley, it would give me great pleasure if you would dine with us this evening."

Ralph would have refused. It would have been an exquisite pleasure to spend a long summer evening with Mary in that delightful old house, but then it seemed impossible to be under the same roof as Horace Mayfield. It appeared strange that that handsome, plausible, well-bred scoundrel should be a friend of Dashwood. Ralph was framing a courteous refusal when he became conscious that Mary was regarding him with a pleading glance. Her face was weary and anxious-looking, her eyes were alight with an appeal for help. She was asking Ralph to come, and yet she did not want her father to see how eager she was.

"I shall be delighted," Ralph answered. "Half-past seven, I think. And now I must be going."

Ralph turned away into the great dim hall followed

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by Mary. A ray of sunlight fell upon her beautiful face and grateful blue eyes.

"That was very good of you," she murmured. "Mr. Darnley, Ralph, if I should want a friend in the near future, I feel assured that I can rely upon you."

"I love you with my whole heart and soul," Ralph replied. "And some day you will give that love to me. I would give my life for you, if necessary, and you know it."

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CHAPTER III

THE cloth had been drawn in the old-fashioned way, so that the candles in the ancient silver branches made pools of brown light on the polished mahogany of the dining table. Here were palms and flowers, feathery fronds, rays of light streaking the sides of blushing grapes and peaches with the downy bloom on them. The candle rays glistened sombrely on deep ruby red wines in crystal decanters; the table was as a bath of silver flame in a background of sombre brown shadows. A noiseless servant or two, gliding about, ministered to the wants of the guests. How peaceful, how restful and refined it all was, Ralph thought, the only jarring note being the person opposite him, a clean-shaven, hard-featured man with a glass screwed in his left eye. And what a hard, firm mouth he had. He was quite at his ease, too, in Dashwood's presence; he chatted with glib assurance to the man whom he had robbed as deliberately as if he had picked his pocket. Actually he had met Ralph in the drawing-room an hour before, with a smile and a proffered hand, as if they had been two men taking up the threads of a desirable acquaintance.

Ralph's fingers had itched to be at the throat of the man, but he had to smile and murmur the ordinary polite commonplaces. He shut his teeth together now as

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"She playfully asked him not to be too long."

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he noted Mayfield's insolently familiar, not to say caressing, manner towards Mary Dashwood. Sir George looked on and smiled in a pained kind of way. He reminded Ralph unpleasantly of a well-broken dog in the presence of a harsh master. It was almost pathetic to see how Dashwood hung on any word of Mayfield. Surely there was some guilty knowledge between the two, some powerful hold that Mayfield had on his host. It was with a feeling of relief that Ralph saw Mary rise at length. He opened the door for her, and she playfully asked him not to be too long, it was so lovely a night.

"I'll come with you now," Ralph answered. "I don't care to smoke, and I never touch wine after dinner. I fear Sir George wants to talk business, which seems to me to be a desecration on an evening like this. Shall we go outside?"

"I think it would be nice," Mary said. "No, I shall not need a wrap."

She stepped through the double French window that led to the lawn. The full light of the moon flashed on her ivory shoulders and played in gilded shadows on her hair. As she looked upwards, Ralph could catch the exquisite symmetry of her face. A desire to speak possessed him, a desire to tell the girl strange and wonderful things. Here was his heart's object standing pale and beautiful by his side; he had only to stretch out his hands and the flowers were his for the plucking. It only needed a few words and the whole situation would be changed. But Ralph was silent, he was too strong and masterful a man for that. What he won he would win by sheer merit, by intrinsic worth alone. He could have purchased the kisses and caresses for

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which his heart hungered, but he knew that they would be no more than Dead Sea fruit on his lips.

"You are very silent," Mary said at length. "What are you thinking about?"

"About you," Ralph said boldly. "I was thinking how beautiful you looked with the fuller moonlight on your face. It is only when you recollect that you are Miss Dashwood, of Dashwood Hall, that I like your expression least. And you are not always happy."

"What do you mean by that?" Mary asked. There was a startled look in her eyes. "Why should I not be happy?"

"Why, indeed! But the fact remains that you are not. I do not want to appear inquisitive, but there is a worm in the heart of the rose somewhere. Mary, why do you allow your father to ask Mayfield here when you dislike him so much? Though you are exclusive and can show your pride, yet you allow that man to be insolently familiar with you. He laid his hand on your arm to-night, and I could have struck him for it. It is not as if you cared for him ——"

"Oh, no, no," Mary said with a shudder. "I detest him. He is so cold and calculating, you cannot chock him off. I thought that when I refused to marry him ——"

"Ha! I expected something of the kind. Mayfield is not the man to take 'No' for an answer once he has set his heart upon a thing. I told you before that he was a scoundrel, and I am in a position to prove it. Not that the fellow has done anything to bring himself within the grip of the law — your City rascal is too clever for that. And your father is afraid of him; he watches him as a dog watches his master. If he is in

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the power of that man he must get out without delay. He must raise money on the property ——"

"He can't," Mary said sadly. "My father has not taken me into his confidence. But you can see how much he has aged and altered lately, and you looked quite shocked when you met this morning. I don't know what it is, but I feel that some evil is impending over him. That is why I asked you to be my friend. You see my father is not really a rich man. He has the income of this fine estate, it is true. I believe he could get rid of Horace Mayfield if he could raise money on the property, but that is impossible. Old Sir Ralph, my great uncle, had a serious quarrel with his wife — that is the present dowager Lady Dashwood, you understand. It must have been all Sir Ralph's fault, for she is the dearest old lady. The heir to the property took the side of his mother when the separation came, and left Dashwood Hall, declaring that he would never see the place again. There is only one man living who knows the whole facts of the case, and that is Slight. But his lips are sealed. The old man loved young Ralph Dashwood as if he had been his own child. Ralph the younger went off to America, and has never been heard of again. That was forty years ago. When old Sir Ralph died two years ago, and my father came into the property, no will could be found. So my father, being next of kin, succeeded to the property and the rents of the estate. It is a settled estate, and each possessor has only what is called a life-interest in it. Now it is just possible that some day an heir will turn up. It is more than likely that young Ralph Dashwood married in America, and left a family. Or he may be still alive, and is waiting to claim, for his son, that

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which he declined to touch himself. Most people know this, and that is why my father could never raise a penny on the family property. If he could, he would not long remain under the heel of Horace Mayfield. Oh, if we could only find a way!"

"I begin to understand," Ralph said thoughtfully. "If old Sir Ralph had died leaving a will, things might have been very different. Is that what you mean?"

"Partly. Sir Ralph died leaving a good deal of ready money. That will no doubt come to us in time, but for the present we cannot touch it in the absence of proof of the death of the youngest Ralph Dashwood. I mean the one who went to America. Old Lady Dashwood says she is sure that her husband did leave a will, and that he had divided all his money, with certain provisions. If that will could be found, we should be in a position to get rid of Mayfield. What a hateful thing this money is, and what misery it seems to bring everybody. But I am afraid that I am very selfish and exacting. Why should I worry you with our troubles?"

"My shoulders are broad, and I have very few of my own," Ralph smiled. "Indeed, I am more interested than you imagine. As I told you to-day, I am a poor man, thanks to one who is a guest here at the present moment. But, still, don't forget the fable of the mouse and the lion. I may find a means of freeing you from the net yet. But here come the others."

Mayfield emerged from the window on to the lawn. His cigar seemed to pollute the sweet-scented night; he was talking loudly to Sir George.

"We shall know presently," he said. "The worst of living buried in the country is that one is out of touch with telegrams and telephones. I told my secretary to

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wire directly he heard from Worham and his partner."

"Don't let us talk about it," said Sir George in a voice that shook a little. "Let us enjoy the beauty of the night . . . I began to wonder what had become of you, Darnley. So you and Mary have been communing with Nature together. You will have a cigar before you go?"

Darnley declined the offer. He did not care to stay any longer in Mayfield's presence. And it was getting on to half-past ten, when he had promised to meet Slight. He made his excuses and passed across the lawn in the direction of the avenue. At the end of the rose garden he paused to look back.

He saw the picture of the grand old house standing out in the moonlight; he could see Mary, pale and silent, a dainty figure in white and amber. He saw Mayfield bend familiarly to her, and the girl draw coldly away. There was a fierce tumult in his heart, a desire to go back and proclaim his story. He could stretch out a hand, and put an end to all that without delay. But he preferred to wait. He was going to win Mary, and wear her like a white rose on the shield of a knight. He was going to bend down the barrier of her pride, and win her for himself alone, *as* himself, and not as a man who had the advantages of fortune on his side.

These thoughts filled his mind as he walked down the avenue. He knew that he had far to go before the goal was in sight. He almost walked over a figure standing just inside the lodge gates, and his thoughts came tumbling to earth again.

"I beg your pardon, Slight," he said. "I was miles away just now. Let us sit on this tree stump in sight of the old house and talk things over."

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CHAPTER IV.

THE old man stood there in the moonlight, his face agitated and his lips quivering.

"I can hear the master's voice again," he murmured. "Time seems to have gone back with me. It is as if you had come like a ghost from the grave, Mr. Ralph. And it was close here that your father stood, after the great quarrel, and swore that Dashwood Hall should see him no more. . . . And so you have come back to claim your own, sir?"

"I must be very like my father, or what my father was like forty years ago," Ralph said thoughtfully. "Sit down, Slight, please don't stand looking at me like that. I did not expect to be recognized in this way, and I am not here to claim my own, at least, not in the fashion that you mean. My father chose deliberately to forfeit his inheritance. My grandfather gave him the chance of coming into his own again. But he always refused, as you know, Slight. And now Sir George Dashwood reigns in his stead."

"The estate, the title — everything is yours, Sir Ralph," Slight said doggedly.

"No, no. Forty years ago there was a great upheaval here. It was a quarrel that could never be patched up or healed. At the bottom of it was family pride, the accursed kind of pride that stifles every feel-

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ing of humanity and turns hearts into flints as hard as the nether millstone. The upshot of that quarrel was a permanent separation between my grandfather and the present dowager Lady Dashwood; it drove my father into exile. It broke the heart of one of the best and truest women that ever lived. And all this to keep from so-called contamination the blood of the Dashwoods. Before my father went away he took steps to make his sacrifice complete. He executed a deed cutting off the entail of the estate, so that the late Sir Ralph could do what he pleased with it."

"I don't quite understand that, Sir Ralph," Slight said.

"Don't address me by that title," Darnley replied. "Let me explain. Most people believe that a family estate like ours cannot be left elsewhere. But if the heir likes to execute a deed for the purpose of cutting off the entail as it is called, why, the holder for the time being can do what he likes with the property. My father did this with his eyes wide open, and you witnessed the deed, Slight."

"I recollect it," Slight said slowly. He made the admission grudgingly. "It was my task to deliver it into the hands of old Sir Ralph. If I had only known!"

"You would have destroyed it. You would have carried your loyalty to my father so far. But the deed was delivered to my grandfather and subsequently he made his will. For twenty years there was silence between father and son, a silence which was broken at length by the father, who wrote to the son and asked him to return. Then Sir Ralph wrote once more to my father and said that he would give the latter twenty

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years to decide. He had made a will at the same date as that of the second letter, leaving everything to my father, provided that within twenty years of that date he claimed his patrimony. If the date passed, then everything was to go to the man nominated in that will. I need not say that the man so indicated was Sir George Dashwood. In other words, if I make no sign for six months, the property becomes his irrevocably. I can claim the property as my father's heir, and I can produce that will as proof of my claim."

"But the will was never found," Slight said eagerly. "We looked for a will everywhere."

"It was hidden away. In old Sir Ralph's last letter to my father he explained the hiding-place. I have only to let Sir George know where the will is, and he is safe. For the will directs the finder to the repository of the deed cutting off the entail, so that Sir George can prove his claim then to everything. At present he has no more than the income of the estate, and I have ascertained that he has many old debts to pay off. In addition to this he is under the thumb of a scoundrel."

"Ay, that he is," Slight muttered. "We servants learn a great deal more than you gentlemen give us credit for. That Mayfield means mischief. They say that he's rich. But riches don't content him. He wants to marry Miss Mary. And she can't bear the look of him. If only he can ruin Sir George, his path will be clear. Miss Mary would break her heart if she had to leave this place. From a child she was brought up here, she loves every stick and stone. And she was always led to believe that some day it would belong to her, because her father was the last of the old race, seeing that we all regarded Master Ralph as dead and

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buried. And Miss Mary had dreams of being mistress here some day, and, maybe, dreams, too, of a good husband and children of her own. Ay, it's a terrible weapon this Mayfield has in his hands."

"So it seems," Ralph replied. "I know the rascal well, for he ruined my father two years ago. Mind you, at that time, I had never heard of Dashwood Park. I was merely the son of a Mr. Darnley who had done well silver mining in California. Mayfield came to us in London and we trusted him, trusted him to such an extent that nearly all we had passed into his hands. It was only on his death-bed that my father told me everything, told me what my birthright was, and how I could secure it, if I did not wait too long. So I came down here to look about me, and to my surprise I found that I had met Miss Mary before in Paris. Is she a favourite here, Slight?"

"Ay, indeed she is, sir," Slight replied. There was a ring of passionate sincerity in his speech. "We all love her dearly. Strangers think that she is cold and distant. It may be so. But we all know the heart of gold that beats under that placid breast. It is in times of sickness and trouble that we know of the angel in our midst. I'm not denying that Miss Mary is tainted with the curse of family pride. But still. . . . Ah, sir, if you ever looked out for a wife, why there is the very one for you. You the head, and she the mistress. It would be a happy day for me."

"That is just what I mean," Ralph said quietly. "Slight, I have been in love with your mistress for two long years. And I am going to marry her some day. But I have my own idea and my own way of leading up to that happiness. She must care for me for my

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own sake, and not because I am Sir Ralph Dashwood, of Dashwood Hall, and she a — pauper. No, no. My lady shall stoop to me, she shall tell me with her own sweet lips that a good man's love is worth all the pride of place, worth a dozen old families and a score of houses like this. *Then* she shall know everything, but not before."

"And that will be too late," sighed Slight. "Before that Mr. Mayfield will have ruined Sir George, and Miss Mary will marry him to save the old house. She would make any sacrifice and face any degradation for the sake of her pride. Though every fibre of her body may call out against the pollution of that man's touch, she would smile at him before the world and pretend to be happy. It's a dangerous experiment, Mr. Ralph, and don't you try it. I haven't lived in the world for nigh on four-score years for nothing. If you love Miss Mary, and if she comes to care for you, she'll care none the less because you are master of this good old place. And if her father is ruined ——"

"My good Slight, her father is not going to be ruined. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he is exceedingly anxious to be rid of Horace Mayfield. I presume it is a mere matter of money, and for the sake of argument call it £50,000. Sir George owes Mayfield that sum. In the present circumstances he could not hope to repay it. A disgraceful bankruptcy may follow, a criminal collapse even, for Mayfield would not hesitate where his desires and interests are concerned. But suppose I could show Sir George a way to get this money? In that case he could rid himself of that scoundrel at any sacrifice. I have only to let Sir George know where the will is hidden and he is free."

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"It would be wrong, sir, cruelly wrong to yourself," Slight cried. "You could never appear after that and claim your own. Sir George would be no more than an innocent impostor. And you, the real master of Dashwood, would be compelled to earn your bread."

"I don't see it exactly," Ralph smiled. "My father never intended to claim his inheritance. He cut himself off from England deliberately. And after all these years, would it not be a cruel thing to deprive Miss Mary of a home which she has come to regard as her own? But I have made up my mind, Slight, and nothing shall deter me from it. You may call me a visionary and a dreamer if you like, but my hands are strong and capable, and I have been taught to use my head. I want you to be discreet and silent; I want you to be my witness when the time comes. I should not have taken you into my confidence, but that you recognized me at once. All day I have been wandering about the dear old place. I have studied all its ancient beauties. We can't wonder that Miss Mary has come to regard it as part of her life. It has cost me more than a passing effort to restrain my covetousness."

Ralph stifled a sigh as he looked about him. He could see the fine old house clear cut against the sky; in the park the oaks and beeches hung like great sentinels guarding the home of the ages. And it was so still and peaceful, so suggestive of all that is worth having in life. A cry from somewhere broke the perfect silence, the bleat of a sheep from distant pastures.

"It shall be as you wish, sir," Slight said at length. "I could never refuse your father anything, and I can refuse you nothing when you look at me out of the past

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with his eyes. But sorrow and trouble will come of this; you mark my words."

"No, no," Ralph cried as he rose to his feet. "True and sterling happiness, the death and destruction of the family pride which has been our curse for many generations. I am going my own way to work and you are going to help me. Now come and show me the big window in the staircase that my father used when he wanted to leave the house late at night to visit poor Maria Edgerton, the child-wife, the child of the people, who was killed by our family pride as surely as if she had been murdered. My mother was a good woman, Slight, she had her husband's respect and affection, but his heart was always with the girl who suffered so much to become his wife. I hope that her grave has never been neglected, Slight."

"No, sir," Slight said huskily. "We have seen to that — her ladyship and myself between us. That is the window, sir, the big stained glass one with the light behind it. You can get up on to the leads with the aid of the ivy. At the bottom of the window is a brass knob. If you press it, the window opens inwards, and there you are. But I hope you don't need to burgle your own house, seeing that you are a welcome guest there. And, as I was saying just now ——"

The speaker paused, for the soft, rich silence of the night was broken by a cry. The long drawing-room window leading to the lawn was still open; the lamplight flooded on pictures and china and flowers. A figure came to the window, a tall figure with upraised hands and hair wild and dishevelled.

"You scoundrel," the figure cried. "You have done this to ruin me!"

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CHAPTER V

THE speaker's tones rang out with passionate vehemence. He stumbled down the steps, into the garden, and repeated his accusation loudly. It all seemed strangely out of place there, Ralph thought; it was no spot for sordid emotions, and angry passions. The words rang clear and loud to the startled vault of heaven; a blackbird started from her nest and flew across the lawn with nervous twitter. Then another figure came from the drawing-room, the trim, immaculate figure of Horace Mayfield.

"For goodness' sake, control yourself Dashwood," he said curtly. "There is nothing in the world to make all this ridiculous fuss about. It is all the fortune of war. We tried to get the best of these fellows, and they looted us instead. It was no fault of mine that these cablegrams miscarried. My manager has sold me — a thing that sometimes happens in the City. All we have to do is to pay and look pleasant."

"But I can't pay, and you know it. Nobody understands the tenure on which I hold the property better than you do. If I wait for the money, what happens?"

"I am afraid it will be very awkward," Mayfield said. "People will refuse to believe that you have been a victim of a fraud. They will actually regard the

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fraud as your own. Whereas, if you pay up cheerfully, nothing can be said. Personally, I am all right. I kept my name out of the business so that you could have all the credit. Unfortunately, you will get all the blame as well. There may not be a prosecution; of course, it is not an easy matter to get the Public Prosecutor to interfere in these cases. The only thing for it is to take the bull by the horns and get out of all by paying."

Sir George laughed in a bitter kind of way. He stood with his back to the house, facing the man who had brought all this about. He seemed to be almost beside himself with fury. The whole man was transformed.

"I have no money," he said, "and you know it. You have deliberately brought me to this pass for purposes of your own. You have traded upon my love of gambling to get me into your hands. And I might have been happy and comfortable here. I was getting rid of my millstone of debt so nicely when you came along once more. But for you, I should not stand here now outside my own home, an honoured house for three centuries, a ruined and desperate man with a vision of a prisoner's dock before me. You are a rich man ——"

"Possibly, Dashwood. At any rate, I am in a position to find money. But there is no kind of friendship or sentiment when one comes to business. You are not a child that you can accuse me of luring you to your ruin. Still, I am not disposed to take offence. I will undertake to settle the matter for you in time. But you must have a joint guarantee and I want another person to become security for you. You under-

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stand what I mean. If Miss Mary will be so good as to give me her word ——"

A sudden cry of passion broke from the older man. He seemed to lose all control of himself. He dashed forward and smote Mayfield with fury on the mouth. The latter staggered back a thin streak of blood trickling from his under lip.

There was no outbreak, no display of passion, on the part of Mayfield. He was surprised and shaken by the impetuosity of the attack, but he stood there calmly, as he wiped the blood from his face. His features might have been carved out of solid marble, and the full light of the moon heightened the effect. In spite of his knowledge of the man, Ralph could not but admire him at that moment. One who could keep his feelings under such control would prove a dangerous foe.

It was a strange, weird scene altogether, terrible and repulsive by very force of contrast. The environment was so quiet and peaceful, so exalted and refined. Ralph stood as if rooted to the spot. He saw Sir George advance again, he saw the hand upraised once more. All the pride of rank and place had fallen from the man; he was transformed for the moment to a savage. Then Mayfield caught the uplifted arm and held it in a grip like a vice.

"You will gain nothing by this," he said quietly. "You seem to forget that I am a guest under your roof. Would you alarm your servants, would you have them know what their master is, when all his passions are aroused? Come, sir, this is not what one has a right to expect from the owner of Dashwood Park. You owe me an apology ——"

The words were lost on Sir George. He wrenched

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himself free, he turned and faced the house with uplifted arms. The demon of anger still possessed him.

"I owe you nothing," he cried. "But for you I should be one of the happiest men alive. If I had been content to pay off old debts by degrees nothing would have happened. But I listened to you, with what result you know. You are a trickster and a cheat, a liar and a knave. You have laid a trap for me, and I have tumbled into it with my eyes open. What you mean to say in as many words is this — unless I can procure the sum of £50,000 in a few days I stand every chance of a criminal prosecution. You know exactly how I am situated, you know that I am helpless."

"You are not in the least helpless," Mayfield said sternly. "To a certain extent the fault is mine, and I am prepared to do all that is in my power. You have only to say the word and the money is yours. Promise me that your daughter shall become my wife, get her to say the word, and the situation is absolutely changed. I neither admit nor deny your accusations. You could not prove them — a jury would give a verdict against you, if you tried to do so. And if Miss Mary does me the honour to become my wife ——"

"Never," Dashwood cried. "Never in this world. Our women only wed honourable men."

"Is that really so? And what manner of man will the world call you if I fail to come to your assistance? Control yourself — listen to me for a moment. Do you realise what will happen to you if I go away without coming to some understanding? The police will come here and arrest you, it may be when you are entertaining friends. They will take you away, with handcuffs on your wrists. You will stand in the dock charged

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with a vulgar conspiracy to defraud innocent shareholders, *and the charge will be proved.* And if you ever come out of gaol again, it will be as a broken and dispirited man. It will be useless, when it is too late, to look for any consideration from me. I am not likely to forget the blow you dealt me just now. And, whilst you are raving like a lunatic, we might be settling the matter comfortably over a cigar. You are a man of the world; at least you will be once more when this fit of midsummer madness has passed. Explain everything to your daughter if you like, put any face upon it that you please. Agree to my conditions and you can sleep in peace to-night, and every other night, for the matter of that. Listen to the voice of reason, and I will forget the treatment I have had at your hands."

But Sir George was not listening. Apparently a terrible struggle was going on in his breast. He could see now, how neatly and cleverly he had been trapped, he could see that he had no remedy against the man who had schemed for this position. And he was innocent himself of anything dishonourable. And now to give his daughter to this man! The mere idea was horrible. The meanest hound on the estate was far better off than Sir George at this moment.

"Do your worst," he shouted. His voice rang out on the startled silence. "Do your worst. If I could kill you now, I would do so. You are not fit to live, your presence is an insult to any honest man. I can see nothing, I am going blind. . . . "

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CHAPTER VI

A CRUEL MISUNDERSTANDING

SIR GEORGE clasped his hands to his eyes; everything for the moment had faded from his sight. The blood was rushing wildly through his head; there was a din like the clang of hammers in his brain. He was beside himself with grief and passion. His voice uprose again and broke the stillness of the night horribly. What were his title and his old family worth now? It was all as nothing, in the presence of this threatened calamity.

"Mary, Mary," he cried, "come to me. Come, whilst I have the strength left to tell you the truth. To-morrow I shall be too weak, to-morrow I shall not dare to give all this up. Come, and tell him that you will have none of him."

The speech ended in a yearning scream. It was a strange setting for so peaceful a scene. Ralph Darnley made a step forward, with the impulse to interfere, strong upon him. Then a figure came between the light and the window, and Mary appeared. She stood there, tall and stately in her white dress; her eyes were filled with stern disapproval. She came slowly down the steps and stood between the two men. She did not fail to notice Mayfield's cut lip and the spot or two of blood on his gleaming shirt front.

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"What is the meaning of this?" she asked. "Father, you don't mean to say ——"

"Ay, but I do," Dashwood said doggedly. "I struck him. Would that I had killed him! There would be far less disgrace for the family in the end. I struck him, and he took it quietly like the cur and craven that he is!"

"I hardly think that I deserve that," Mayfield said. "Whatever my failings may be, you will not find a lack of physical courage amongst them. Sir George has been very unfortunate in his speculations, and he chooses to blame me for it. We only got the news late to-night. A man in whom we trusted has played the knave, and Sir George is likely to suffer for it. To put the matter quite plainly, unless your father can find a very large sum of money in a few days he will probably be prosecuted. One can make any allowance for his feelings in the circumstances, but that is no reason why he should accuse one of deliberately laying a plot to ruin him. As to the assault upon me, why let it pass. In the excitement of the moment ——"

"Pardon me," Mary said quietly, "I heard my name mentioned. My father's voice was raised so loudly that I could not help hearing something of what passed. You did me the honour to say that I might avert the catastrophe."

"That is so," Mayfield retorted in the same self-contained manner. "In certain circumstances I am prepared to stand by your father. I can say that it is a misunderstanding so far as he is concerned, and that I am prepared to take over the venture as it stands, and pay everybody who has lost confidence in it. I could write to the Press and vindicate the honour of the man

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who stood in the light of prospective father-in-law to me."

The girl's face whitened in the moonlight. Ralph could see the heaving of her breast. She had taken in the situation like a flash of inspiration. There was none of the grinning triumph of the successful rogue on Mayfield's face; it was all being quietly and decorously done, but the grip of iron was there all the same, the iron hand in the velvet glove. Mary essayed to speak, but words failed her for the moment. Sir George stood between the man and his prey with trembling hands outstretched as if to keep them apart. His lips opened, he gabbled something too incoherent for understanding, then he collapsed like a heap of black cloth on the grass. Something seemed to snap in his brain, then a blank came over him.

Mary forgot everything else in the dictates of humanity. With a cry she knelt on the grass by the side of the stricken man. Ralph came forward, slowly followed by Slight. It seemed natural that he should be there at that moment. Mary turned towards him instantly. Here was the friend in need that she so sorely prayed for.

"It is some kind of seizure," she said. "My father had one two years ago in Paris. He was warned then to avoid any undue excitement. Will you please help me to carry him to his room? Slight, call a groom up and send him to Longtown for a doctor."

"No occasion," Mayfield remarked. "Give me the key of the stables, and I will take my car into Longtown and bring the doctor back with me. It will take less time."

It was a weary two hours that passed before the doc-

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tor arrived. Still, his account was a fairly cheerful one when it came. It was merely a case of rest and quietness and careful nursing. Sir George had fallen into a kind of troubled sleep.

Ralph turned to go. Mayfield had volunteered to take the doctor home again. Slight was sitting with his master till Mary was ready to return. She stood by the window leading to the lawn; that means of exit was as good as any other, Ralph said.

"What were you doing outside to-night?" the girl asked keenly.

"We will go into that another time," Ralph suggested. "I did not mean to listen, but I heard everything. Did I not tell you that Mayfield was a villain?"

"I have felt it before now. Without any apparent cause for it, I have detested that man. And he has always acted as if he had only to say the word and I would consent to be his wife. On two occasions I have refused him. To think that men should be such villains where innocent girls are concerned! Of course, he has led my father into a terrible position, and my hand is to be the price of his freedom. Ralph, I am so dreadfully, horribly afraid of that man! How wonderfully he must have controlled himself when my father struck him! And how cleverly he insinuated that he might be allowed to appear as my future husband. I tell you I would give up everything to be free of this tangle. What is my pride, what is my home here, so long as the happiness of a lifetime is at stake!"

"That is a lesson that I have tried to teach you before," Ralph said quietly. "Mary, I love you. The time will come when you will love me. If ever you

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needed a friend in your life, you need one at this moment. I could show you a way out, but after that I should never dare to claim my reward, because the obligation in your eyes would be too great. I want you to care for me for my own sake. Still, you need have no anxiety. Within the next few hours Mayfield will be powerless to harm you."

"Ralph, you speak in enigmas. I pray you to be plain. Can't you trust me?"

"My dear, in this matter I cannot trust anybody; by Heaven, I can hardly trust myself. Ah, if you only knew how I love you and how great the temptation is! But the reward that I am working for will be all the sweeter when the time comes. Go sleep now with a calm mind, for I pledge my honour that things shall be as I say."

Mary's two hands had fluttered out to Ralph. She was moved by the deep sincerity of his words, for a broken smile, half respect and half affection, quivered on her face. With an impulse that he could not resist, Ralph drew the girl to him and laid his lips on hers. Then, with a sigh, he put her from him and turned towards the window.

"There," he said, "I ask no pardon for my audacity. I could not help it. And that kiss was as pure as if it came from your mother's lips."

"The first from any man," Mary murmured, a pink flush on her face. "You are a good man, Ralph, and it is a pity I did not meet you before the curse of the family pride fell upon me. Good night, and God bless you for all your kindness to me."

The window closed and the blind fell, the lights in the house began to vanish one by one, and still Ralph

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lingered there on the grass. He saw Mayfield return, he saw the last ray extinguished, save for the solitary glow in Sir George's bedroom. A clock over the stables struck the hour of two, and still Ralph stood there oblivious of the flight of time.

He was thinking of the dramatic scene of the evening. More than once he mourned his lost opportunities. He had all the strings in his own hand, the game was entirely his, and he felt, too, that in spite of her fateful pride, Mary was beginning to care for him. If not, why had she taken his kiss so sweetly? Ralph had only to proclaim his identity, he had merely to prove his title to the estate, and at once he would be in the position to free the present occupier of Dashwood Hall of his peril. And Mary would not refuse to marry the man whose blood was as pure as hers. But Ralph had made up his mind what to do. He would win her love as Ralph Darnley, afterwards the truth could be told. Why not to-night? he asked himself. There was no time like the present. He would go and find the will, he would let Sir George know where it was.

The house was still now, and Ralph knew the way . . . . He was in the long corridor presently, here was the old oak dower-chest and the panel below it. Here was the spring by which the panel was released. The thing was ridiculously easy.

Ralph pressed in the spring and the panel came away. Within it was a long manuscript written on thick white paper. Ralph thrilled as he read the endorsement. Beyond doubt, here was the will of his grandfather, Sir Ralph Dashwood. All this was quite plain in the moonlight. It only needed now to put

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the will at the bottom of the dower-chest and write a letter to Sir George anonymously, and tell him where to seek for it. And Ralph had only to be silent henceforth, and the deception would pass for all time. Verily Mayfield's triumph was likely to be a very short one, and . . .

Somebody was speaking to Ralph: Mary, with her hair over her shoulders, and a candle in her hand. Her face was cold and set, her eyes filled with stern displeasure.

"Thief in the night," she said. "What is the meaning of this, Mr. Darnley?"

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CHAPTER VII

THE ONLY WAY

A SENSE of blinding, unreasonable anger held Ralph for the moment. He was doing nothing wrong. He was acting entirely for the best, and here he was taken under the most shameful conditions — a miserable, degraded thief in the night. From the coldness of Mary's voice, from the scorn in her eyes, he could read the reflection of her thoughts. And yet he was acting from the highest and most honourable motives. Surely no man was ever impelled by a loftier idea of self-sacrifice.

"I ask what you are doing," Mary repeated. "Do not tax my patience too far."

There was no mistaking the menace in those clear-cut tones. Thus would the daughter of the house of Dashwood address a buglar or other midnight intruder. Ralph felt that she would have been not in the least afraid to face a felon of that type; his face tingled as he felt himself set down in the same category. He cudgelled his brains for some plausible explanation which should be anything but the right one. The edge of the failing moon still left a shaft of pallid light shining through the great stained glass window; it flung into high relief the arms and motto of the family of Dashwood. And those arms and that motto be-

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longed to the man who stood there with the shamefaced air of a boy caught in a fault.

"I am still waiting for you to speak," Mary went on. "It is possible that there may be some explanation of this amazing conduct of yours."

The cold, proud voice seemed to doubt it all the same. And yet one word would have swept all the clouds of suspicion away. Ralph knew that it lay in his power to bring that white, haughty figure to her knees; one inkling of the truth and the whole situation was changed. For all this belonged to Ralph; Mary was no more than an honoured guest in the house. Yes, it all belonged to him, the grand old house, the matchless pictures, the furniture from the time of Elizabeth, the great sweeps of upland country, and the farms lying snug under their red roofs.

A few words spoken, and what a difference there would be! Those words meant that Ralph would have held out his hands and asked Mary to come and help him to reign here. Ay, and she would have come, too. Her point of view would be entirely changed. And she must love him. Indeed, he had more than a feeling that she loved him now, without being aware of the state of her affections. Her heart would go out to him, and there would be peace and happiness for evermore.

The temptation was great, so great that the beads of perspiration stood out on Ralph's forehead. But he crushed the temptation down; his pride came to his assistance. No, when Mary came to love, she should love the man for his own sake, she should tell him so, and Dashwood should be as nothing in comparison.

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"I came here to look for something," Ralph said at length.

"Indeed! Judging by what you hold in your hand I should say that you have found it. How did you manage to obtain entrance to the house?"

"Quite a simple matter," Ralph replied. "I climbed on to the leads outside the big window. By pressing a knob outside, the window can be made to open."

"Really! I have lived here practically all my life, and I was not aware of that fact. For an absolute stranger, your knowledge of the house is exceedingly comprehensive. May I ask if you have found what you were looking for?"

"I have," Ralph said huskily. "Permit me to replace it in the old chest. To-morrow, if your father is well enough, I will see him and explain. I beg to assure you that I have what criminal lawyers call a perfect answer to the charge."

"And you ask me to believe this?" Mary burst out passionately. "How do I know that you are not one of those who are in league against us? How do I know that your indignation against Horace Mayfield is not all assumed?"

"How do you know that I am a gentleman?" Ralph retorted. "You cannot explain why."

"Indeed I cannot," Mary said bitterly. "I trusted you, I regarded you as a friend. I asked for your assistance and you promised it to me. In my heart I thanked God that I had a friend that I could rely upon. Actually, you caused me to forget the difference between our stations in life. And now!"

The girl paused, with something like tears in her

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voice. She looked very sweet and womanly at that moment, Ralph thought. He could afford to ignore the suggestion of the social gulf between them. The temptation to tell the truth came over him again, but once more he fought the impulse and conquered it.

"In spite of your distressful pride, you are a very woman," he said. "I am your friend and more than your friend. For your sake, there is nothing that I would not do. It is for your sake that I am here to-night, strange as it may seem. A little time ago, fate placed me in possession of certain information closely touching on the fortunes of your house. Please do not ask me to explain, for I cannot do so without spoiling everything. Call me a sentimentalist, if you like — perhaps the air of the grand old place has affected me. Anyway, there it is. I came here to-night to place you in possession of certain information that would for ever have rid you of the hateful presence of the man who calls himself Horace Mayfield. I did not want to place you under any kind of obligation, so I chose this method ——"

"But why?" Mary exclaimed. "Why? Have you not saved my life twice? Could a million obligations like this increase the burden of my debt of gratitude to you?"

"That is right," Ralph admitted. "Call me a Quixote if you like. I am. The day will come when your eyes will be no longer blind, when love will come before everything. I have my own way of getting my ends, and am too proud to rely upon anything but myself. I am going to make you happy, and you are going to be the mainspring of that happiness."

Ralph spoke almost with the spirit of prophecy upon

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him. It would all come right some day, but he little dreamed of the trouble and tribulation that were near at hand. All he could see now was that Mary's eyes were growing dim and softer.

"My knowledge is going to save you," Ralph went on. "But I did not wish you to know that I had any hand in the business. As I said before, you must not ask me to explain. I want you to give me your hand, and to say that you regard me as being still beyond suspicion. Oh, I know that it is a deal to ask. But a long pedigree and the possession of a grand old house are not necessary to the honour of a man. I admit that I crept here like a thief in the night. If you charged me, I should have nothing to say, my character would be forever ruined. If you ——"

Ralph paused, and his face flushed with annoyance. A petulant voice calling for Mary broke the silence — shuffling feet came along the corridor. Dishevelled and dazed, Sir George Dashwood stood there, candle in hand, looking from the glorious white figure with the rippling golden hair to the faint outline of Darnley. The old man was haggard and trembling, yet a certain dignity sustained him.

"I have called you three times," he said. "I needed you, my child. I woke up with my head better and a raging thirst upon me. Then I thought that I heard voices here and I came out. The situation, Mr. Darnley, is singular. Permit me to remind you that it is not the usual thing ——"

The speaker paused. He seemed to be struggling for words to express his feelings.

"Quite so, Sir George," Ralph said eagerly. "I — came back for something. I helped you into the

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house after your illness overcame you. Forgive me if I seem to have stayed a little too long in my anxiety to be of assistance. If you will take my advice you will go back to your room without delay."

Sir George muttered something to the effect that he was very tired. He babbled about cool springs in the woods, he accepted Mary's arm as a weary child might do. It seemed almost impossible to believe that this was the sprightly, gallant figure that Ralph had known in Paris so short a time ago. But when Ralph had gone by the way in which he had come, and once more Sir George was in his bedroom, a change came over him. He eagerly drank the soda-water that Mary had procured for him.

"No, no," he cried, "tired as I am, I cannot sleep yet. I was half asleep, I was between waking and dreaming, and I was dying of thirst. I came out into the corridor and saw you standing there with Ralph Darnley. There were certain words that seemed to be burned into my brain with letters of fire. You were angry with him, and yet he was going to be a friend to us. That was no common thief in the night, Mary. What was it he found? What was it that was going to rid us of the hateful presence of Horace Mayfield? Don't tell me that I was dreaming, don't say that it was all a cruel delusion on my part. The secret, the secret, girl."

The words came like a torrent. Out of his white and haggard face, Dashwood's eyes gleamed like restless stars on a windy night. The clutch on the girl's arm was almost painful in its intensity. Mary wondered why she was trembling so.

"Hush," she said. "You must sleep now, or you

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will be really ill again. Leave it till the morning, when you will be better able to understand. I cannot tell you now; indeed, I know no more than you do yourself. But now you must go to sleep!"

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CHAPTER VIII

FOUND!

SIR GEORGE lay back on the bed with weary eyelids closed. His last effort had cost him more than he knew. Mary's will had conquered for the moment, and he felt disposed to obey. All the same the strange thread of logical reason was going on in his mind. The only thing that could save him and preserve the proud traditions of the Dashwoods must be something in the way of papers or documents of some kind. He lay there, allowing Mary to make him comfortable for the night. He lay there long after the girl had departed to her own room and the house was wrapped in close slumber. But the quietness was soothing to Sir George's brain. His mind was growing stronger and more logical; the dazed dream of the scene in the corridor began to shape itself into concrete facts.

What had Ralph Darnley been saying? Yes, it was all coming back now. Darnley had learned certain facts somewhere, bearing on the fortunes of the house of Dashwood. Surely there was nothing so wildly improbable in this, seeing that Ralph Darnley had passed the best part of his life in America. The late Ralph Dashwood, the original heir to the property, had lived in America, too. Of course, America was a large continent, but that was no reason why Ralph Dash-

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wood and Darnley's father should not have been friends. Had not Ralph Darnley admitted that he had business in the neighbourhood of Dashwood Hall? Perhaps he had come to make money out of his information. But then the young fellow was a gentleman, and would not stoop to that kind of thing.

Still, he knew there was no getting away from the fact, for had not Dashwood heard it from the younger man's lips? A means whereby it was possible to get rid of Horace Mayfield for ever! The mere idea sent the blood throbbing through the sick man's veins, and brought him in a sitting position in bed. That meant documents or papers of some kind; it could really mean nothing else. Dashwood remembered vividly now that Ralph had been standing by the old dower-chest in the corridor and that he had had a paper in his hand. So far as Dashwood knew, the old chest had not been opened for years. It was by no means a bad hiding-place. Perhaps ——

Slowly the sick man dragged himself to his feet. He had promised Mary that he would lie quietly there till the morning, but he could not find it in his heart to keep that promise. Sleep was out of the question. Dashwood looked at his watch to find that it was only just half-past three, five hours before it would be time to rise. It seemed like an eternity. And all the while that fiend, Horace Mayfield, was sleeping under the same roof. Suppose he had been listening to what was going on. Suppose that he had had his suspicions attracted to the dower-chest! The mere thought was intolerable; it was impossible to lie there with such a torture praying on his mind. And the house was as still as death.

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Sir George lighted his candle, though the bright summer dawn was creeping up from the east and the birds were beginning to twitter outside in the garden. The long corridor was getting pink and saffron with the strengthening colour from the great window. And under it lay the object of the sick man's search. Here it was with the lid unfastened and a mass of papers on the top. The first document was long in shape, neatly folded, and bearing an endorsement in a legal hand. The paper was yellow and faded, but the ink was quite plain for the eye to read. Yes, here it was, right enough, the yellow paper that meant happiness to all and the full splendour of the house of Dashwood.

"How did he know, how did he discover it?" Sir George muttered. "My hands are so shaky that I can hardly hold the paper. The will of Sir Ralph Dashwood, dated 1877, and duly witnessed by the family lawyer and his clerk. . . . Provided that for the space of twenty years after this date my son Ralph does not appear either by himself or by the heir or heirs male of his body. . . . Ah, six months more and the property comes to me absolutely! Strange that the will should come to light so near to the time appointed by Sir Ralph for — but that hardly helps me, seeing that my danger is so close at hand. . . . What is this? A deed executed by Ralph Dashwood the younger cutting off the entail. . . . I wonder where that is? Perhaps the yellow sheet of parchment lying by the side of the will. . . . By Heavens it is! Oh, this is a direct interposition of Providence to save the good old name from disgrace. And this is what Ralph Darnley was looking for as a pleasant surprise for me. Armed with these docu-

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ments, I can raise all the money necessary. I can kick Horace Mayfield out of the house, I can ——"

The speaker staggered to his feet and pressed his hands to his throbbing, reeling head.

He was nearer to collapse again than he knew. He would have denied the fact that he was terribly afraid of Mayfield, but it was true all the same. The aim of the financier had never been quite hidden from his eyes; for some time past he had an instinctive knowledge of what Mayfield was after. His family pride had bidden him to have no more of Mayfield, but he had not listened. Proud as he was, he had not hesitated to stoop to gambling transactions, with the risk that he would not be able to pay his debts if he lost. Surely he deserved a sharp lesson and a cruel awakening.

But he was free now, fortune was on his side. His great good luck sent him trembling from head to foot like some amazed criminal who has been discharged by a stupid jury. He would have to give up nothing. He was still Sir George Dashwood with a grand estate, and a house with a history of three hundred years behind it. He would go to London to-morrow with those papers in his possession and his bankers would be ready to accommodate him to any amount in reason. He would pay the sum that Mayfield had mentioned, and wash his hands of the whole transaction. He would show the world how a country gentleman deals with these things. It never struck Dashwood that he was a feeble creature who had juggled with the good name that he proposed to hold so highly; he little realized the deep self-abnegation that had led to this dazzling piece of good fortune.

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"Kick Mayfield out," he repeated, "after breakfast. Let him see that I am not in the least afraid of him; make him understand that we are little better than strangers for the future. Ah, that will be a triumph."

He hugged the papers to his breast, like a mother with a child. There were weak and senile tears in his eyes. He had lost nothing after all; the fine old house, the wide and well-kept estate, the great timber in the park and the deer there, were all his. He started as the sound of a footstep fell upon his ears. It seemed to him that somebody was creeping along the corridor. Perhaps it was Mayfield, who had found out what had happened. Mayfield was strong and unscrupulous, and he might try to gain possession of those papers by force. Sir George would have hidden himself, but it was too late, and besides it was broad daylight now.

The first rays of the morning sun shone on the old man as he stood there huddling those precious papers to his breast. He might have been some clumsy thief detected in the act. With a sigh of relief he recognized the figure of Slight coming in his direction. The old butler only looked a shade less distracted than his master, and his eyes were drawn and haggard; obviously he had not been to bed.

"What — what are you doing here?" Sir George stammered. "Why are you spying upon me like this? Why are you down so early?"

Slight made no reply. His gaze was fixed in a dazed kind of way on the papers which Sir George was still hugging to his breast. There was something like horror in the old man's eyes. There might have been the proofs of murder there.

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"So you've got them," he said in the voice of one who talks to himself. "So he has carried out his threat and they have passed into your possession. Take and burn them, take and pitch them on the fire, and watch them till the last ash has vanished. You will be a happier man for it, Sir George, and a great wrong will be averted."

"What does the man mean?" Sir George cried in astonishment. "Slight, what are you talking about? Say it all over again. If you are mad or drunk ——"

"Not mad," Slight said mournfully. He seemed to have come to his senses suddenly. He spoke now as one does when acting under a great restraint. "Not mad, Sir George, and as to the other thing, why. . . . But the secret is not mine. I promised solemnly not to open my lips. I have given you the best advice one man can give another, but more I dare not say. Burn them, burn them, burn them, for the love of Heaven!"

Slight turned away and seemed to totter down the corridor. The full light of the strong morning sun was shining through the gold and crimson glories of the great stained glass window now, the birds were singing sweetly outside. The park grew fair and green as the dew rolled back across the fields; the garden blazed in the sunshine. Sir George saw all this as he looked through his bedroom window. The fierce joy and pride of undisputed possession were upon him; everything was safe now.

"Slight is mad," he murmured. "What does that old man know? What can he know? Let me put these papers away where they will be safe. How shaky I feel; how my head swims! If I could only get an hour or two of sleep. . ."

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CHAPTER IX

THE PARTING GUEST

THE big clock on the breakfast-room mantelpiece was chiming the hour of ten as Sir George came downstairs. He was a little later than usual, and he apologized to his guest for his want of punctuality with a courtly air. He was not accustomed to country hours, he said; he doubted if he ever should be. He made no allusion whatever to his last night's quarrel, his manner was perfectly natural and easy. If anything, there was a suggestion of bland patronage in his tone.

Mayfield glanced keenly at his host from time to time. There was something here that he quite failed to understand. He had expected to find Sir George apologetic and rather frightened. On the contrary, he was more like a bishop who entertains a curate than anything else. And Mayfield could get nothing from Mary, who sat at the head of the table, cold and stately, yet serenely beautiful, in her white cotton dress. Mayfield ground his teeth together and swore that Dashwood should pay for this before long. He held the fortunes of the baronet in the hollow of his hand; his passion for Mary was the more inflamed by her icy coldness. It would be good to humble her pride in the dust, to compel her to come to his feet and do his bidding. All the same, Mayfield had made up his mind

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to have an explanation after breakfast. He smiled and talked, though his anger was hot within him.

"Mr. Mayfield will want a time-table presently, my dear," Sir George was saying in his most courtly manner. "I am afraid that we have intruded too long already on his valuable time."

"I have always time to spare for you," Mayfield said with a snarling smile. "And Miss Mary need not trouble about the time-table. You forget that I have my car here which will get me to London by mid-day. Before I go I should like to have a few words with you, Sir George. You will pardon me for mentioning it, but we left matters in rather an unsatisfactory condition last night."

The little shaft passed harmlessly over Sir George's head. He smiled blandly.

"To be sure we did," he said. "You are quite right, we will settle things up before you go. What do you say to a cigar on the terrace after breakfast? No, you need not go, Mary. I have a reason for asking you to listen to our business conversation. We had a quarrel last night, when I regret to say I lost my temper. For that exhibition of unseemly and vulgar violence I sincerely beg your pardon, Mayfield. I apologize all the more humbly because we are not likely to meet very often in the future. Henceforth our business transactions promise to be slender, for after this week I am determined that the City shall not see me again. You will quite see, Mayfield, that in future our intercourse must cease. It is rather painful to talk to a guest like this, but you will understand me."

Mayfield's face expressed his astonishment. He wondered if Sir George had taken leave of his senses,

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and deluded himself into the belief that he was the possessor of a vast fortune. And yet the speaker was absolutely calm and collected. What could possibly have happened since last night to change him like this?

"Perhaps I am rather dense this morning," Mayfield said slowly, "but I cannot follow you at all. Yesterday I explained to you the position of affairs fully. We had been deceived by a trusted servant of mine, and you were called upon to pay £50,000. Failing this, you would perhaps have to face a criminal charge. Unfortunately, your hold upon the estate is so slender that it would not be possible for you to borrow any large sum of money. Not to speak too plainly, your position was, and is, a desperate one. Partly because I was in a measure instrumental in bringing about this lamentable state of affairs, I offered to advance you the money. In other words, I offered to give you £50,000. It is true there was a condition, but I merely allude to that in the presence of Miss Dashwood."

Mary's face flamed. Her heart was heavy within her. So far as she could see, this was the master of the situation. He held the demons of Disgrace and Bankruptcy at bay. What was the cherished possession of Dashwood worth so long as the shadow of dishonour lay across the threshold? For the sake of the grand old home and the grand old name, Mary would have to listen to Mayfield's proposal. She glanced from him to the smiling face of her father, who had risen from the table and produced his cigar case.

"Quite so," he said genially, "you are perfectly correct. You made that proposal, and, like a cur, I forgot myself and insulted you. I went so far as to

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say that you had planned deliberately to bring this thing about. It was ruin on the one hand and the sacrifice of my dear child on the other. Pray take one of my cigars. There are chairs on the terrace, let us continue our discussion there."

"Why go over the old ground again?" Mayfield asked impatiently. He flung himself into one of the big basket chairs on the terrace. "Has there been any material change in the position since last night? Not a bit of it. If you could find this money ——"

"There is no if about it, my good Mayfield," Sir George replied. "I can find the money. It will be paid over to my creditors by the end of the week, and I will take care to let the world know what a victim I have been. The money will be paid."

A quick angry cry came from Mayfield's lips. The mask had fallen from his face for the moment. His disappointment was clear and hideous.

"What?" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Do you mean to say that you have found the wi ——"

He paused and shut his lips together with a vicious click. He was going to say too much. He glanced at Sir George to see if the imprudent words had had any effect on him, but the head of the Dashwoods seemed to be immersed in his own pleasant thoughts. Only Mary noticed, but it was not till many days afterwards that she was to attach any significance to the speech.

"The money is going to be paid," Sir George went on. "By the end of the week I shall have finished with the City forever. I am not going to make any accusation, but in the clearing of my own name I shall not give any heed to others. Amongst the 'others' I need not say I am alluding to you."

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"And there I am kicked downstairs," Mayfield said bitterly.

"If you like to put it so. I could speak a little more freely if you were not my guest at the present moment. But you quite understand me."

"Your patience will not be unduly taxed," Mayfield said grimly. "If I am not mistaken there is my car under the portico at this moment. But, before I go, I have something to say. You will not forget your personal obligation to me."

"A matter of £5,000. I assure you it had not escaped my memory. By the end of the week ——"

"Quite so. By the end of the week. You wanted that money badly at the time. I lent it you on the condition that you allowed me to take a judgment for the debt. I brought a friendly action against you to recover the money, and you allowed judgment to go by default. It is a little formula that is sometimes gone through in the City, Miss Mary, to enable one or more fortunate creditors to have the preference over the rest. When I signed judgment I was in a position to levy execution as it is called. That is another technical expression that means that I am in a position now to place men in possession here and to hold everything till the debt and costs are paid in full. In vulgar circles this is called 'having the bailiffs in.' It happens with such people as struggling tradesmen and the like who cannot pay their rent. It is held to be a terrible disgrace amongst the poor. Common men come in and take possession of the drawing-room, where they smoke clay pipes and drink beer. Try to imagine a dirty creature of this kind with his feet on your Louis Quinze furniture, Miss Mary. The very idea causes you to

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look pale and ghastly. And yet such things have happened, and history is always repeating itself."

The speaker paused and smiled, his words were horribly slow and grating. Mary laid her hand on her heart as if some sharp fear thrilled her.

"Is — is it possible for you to do this thing?" she asked.

"Indeed it is," said Mayfield with the same hard smile. "I could do it to-day — as soon as I reach town, in fact. Quite like a scene from a modern melodrama, is it not? Well, good-bye, Sir George; good-bye, Miss Mary. I see my luggage is on the car and my chauffeur is waiting. I will not intrude myself on you any longer. When my slaves of the law, with their clay pipes and dirty boots arrive, there will be no necessity to ask them to have dinner at the same table as yourself. Good-bye."

With a sign of his hand, Mayfield motioned to his chauffeur. The great car came along with a fuss and a clatter, and Mayfield sprang to the side of the driver. He pulled off his hat with a gesture of mocking humility and the car dashed away. Sir George sprang up, but too late. The car was disappearing now in a cloud of dust down the drive. With a face white as death Mary turned to her father.

"Is this thing true?" she asked hoarsely. "Are you still in that man's power? Is it quite impossible for you to get the money to-day?"

"Quite," Sir George groaned. "I — I had forgotten that judgment. I should have waited; I should not have shown my hand so soon. But he will never do it; he was dismayed to find my position so strong; he merely meant to frighten me."

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"He *will* do it," Mary cried. "I saw it in his face, in his wicked eyes. A disgrace like that would break my heart, father. What is to be done to avert this awful calamity? No sacrifice could be too great. And I can think of absolutely nothing!"

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CHAPTER X

SKIN DEEP

MARY spoke as one who is moved to the very core of her being. It was not merely a painful and unpleasant incident that faced her, but something in the nature of a great and overwhelming tragedy. The girl's pride was part of her being. She accepted it naturally, as in the order of establishing things. Usually she was brave enough. She would have encountered any physical danger with coolness and courage, but the mere suggestion of this outrage frightened her.

Well, she could look to her father for assistance. He had behaved with great fortitude during the recent interview with Mayfield; indeed, it might be said that he emerged from the combat victoriously. Doubtless, he could find some way out. The old blood had asserted itself before, and it could do it again.

"Why are you so silent?" Mary asked. "Tell me what is to be done. A disgrace like that would be horrible — after such contamination, Dashwood would never be the same to me again. Father, you have found a way?"

But Sir George made no reply. The bland and easy dignity had vanished, the suave smile with which he had greeted Mayfield was not to be seen. He had suddenly become a poor feeble wreck of a man again, and

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he burst into senile tears. They were real tears, for Mary could see them trickling down his face. She trembled with an alarm and anger that she had never felt before.

For tears formed no part of her woman's armour; she left them to children and the fretful mothers of the poor. In all the traditions of the house, there was no mention of tears. Both men and women had met their misfortunes with hard faces and dry eyes. It had been left to Mary to be ashamed of a male Dashwood. Perhaps there was something in the bitter scorn of her face that caused Sir George furtively to remove the tell-tale drops.

"I'm not myself," he whined. "I have had a deal of trouble and Mayfield is a great scoundrel. I had to have that money hurriedly — a disastrous speculation. If I had not been high up in the service of my country, it would not have mattered so much. But my creditors were pressing, and Mayfield offered to help me. Of course, he wanted what he called security. It seemed so natural when he explained to me. And all the time he wanted to get me into his power."

"Oh, why go over the same ground again?" Mary cried. "Something must be done without delay. Those horrible men must not come here."

"Perhaps it was only a threat on Mayfield's part," Sir George said feebly.

"It was nothing of the kind and you know it, father. There was deadly malice in every word that he uttered. And before then you had got the better of him. You acted like a true Dashwood — I was proud of you. And now you sit there, and, oh, I cannot bring myself to say the hateful word. Why did you behave so nobly

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a little while ago, and so cowardly now? You seemed to have found a way out."

"I had," Sir George whispered. "Last night you left me in the depths of despair. I could not sleep, I could think of nothing but what you told me about Ralph Darnley. I wondered if perhaps he was secretly my enemy. Then it occurred to me that he was looking for some papers in that old chest. I could not rest till I was satisfied; I also searched the old chest. And what did I find? I found the late Sir Ralph Dashwood's will and I found his unhappy son's deed cutting off the entail. If no son of the second Ralph turns up within the next six months, everything is mine. You can understand how the full force of that discovery overwhelmed me. Here was a way out of all my difficulties. That is why I was in a position to face Mayfield fearlessly this morning. Within a week at the outside I could raise the money to be clear of him. I had quite forgotten the smaller item. I should have remembered it, I ought to have been smooth and smiling before Mayfield's face until I was ready to be clear of him for ever. And now he can strike me a deadly blow before I am ready to meet it. Of course the inconvenience ——"

"Inconvenience! Can you speak of so disgraceful a thing by such a name? Dearly as I love the old house, I would rather see it and all its treasures burnt to the ground. I could put the match to it myself."

Mary's voice rang out with passionate anger. Her blue eyes blazed. There was no trace of exaggeration in what she said, she would have been ready to carry out her threat.

"It won't last long," Sir George muttered. "I'll

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go to London to-morrow and take those papers with me. As soon as they have been verified, the bank will advance me all I need. But business of this sort takes time. People are very chary of parting with their money unless it is well secured. Probably by the end of the week ——"

"The end of the week! And the blow may fall to-night! We must have that money now."

"Impossible, my dear child. I'm afraid you do not appreciate the situation. When I came into the property I was heavily in debt. I had to pay off those debts; also I had to keep up the house in a way that befitted the traditions of the family. The consequence is that I am constantly overdrawn at my bank as far as the people there allow it. They don't like it, because they feel that if anything happened to me, or some son of young Ralph Dashwood came along, I should find myself not in — er — a position to meet all my liabilities. Therefore, to go to them to raise this money would be worse than useless. I am afraid that we shall have to put up with the inconvenience till the end of the week, when those papers I found will have been properly verified."

Mary restrained the passionate anger that flamed within her. It was a cruel blow to find her father so wanting in courage when the critical moment came. He was prepared to sit down and weep, when hourly the danger was drawing nearer. Instinctively Mary's thoughts went out to Ralph Darnley. He would not have taken the blow like this, though he had not the good fortune to call himself a Dashwood. He would be up and doing. Perhaps it would be as well to consult him and ask his advice. She felt ashamed of her-

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self as the thought occurred to her. And yet she had no other friend in the world. Despite her exalted position, Mary was a very lonely girl.

What was the use of all her pride? This splendid isolation faded to ashes now that she was face to face with the task before her. Evidently her father meant to do nothing, he would submit tamely to the degradation and wait for it to pass.

There were dead and gone Dashwoods smiling, or simpering, or frowning from the walls — soldiers and statesmen, scholars, famous beauties, and not one of them had ever seen the tainting of the family name. It was left to Sir George to submit tamely to that. Mary could see that his eyes were still wet.

"Something must be done," she said. "Are there no jewels that one could turn into cash? Strange that I have never given a thought before to the family jewels! But surely in a family like ours there must be historic diamonds and the like. Did I not hear once from somebody that the Dashwood emeralds are unique? I am told that it is no uncommon thing for great ladies to take these jewels to men in London who advance money on them. I have listened to such stories with incredulity — I begin to see now why things like this have to be done. Let me have them and I will go to London this afternoon. My cheeks flame with shame when I think of it; but I suppose there are harder tests of one's endurance. Where are they, father?"

"They are not here," he said. "I believe there are some magnificent heirlooms in the way of family gems, but they are not in my possession. You see we are merely a collateral branch of the old tree, so we have nothing to do with the jewels. At present I under-

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stand they are in the possession of the dowager Lady Dashwood. They came to her as a matter of right on her marriage, and I am told that she has retained them ever since. If her son had lived and come to the title and married, then his wife would have taken the stones as a matter of right, being the wife of the reigning head of the family. Whether or not they would come to you on your marriage is another question. Anyway, you would have the right of wearing them after the dowager dies. But this is a matter about which I know really nothing. As you are aware, my dear, Lady Dashwood does not like me. For some reason or another she has a violent prejudice against me, and she never asks me to the dower house if she can help it. Of course with you the thing is different — she brought you up and regards you more or less as her own child. It is just possible that she may tide us over the difficulty."

"Which means that you will go and ask her," Mary said eagerly.

"By no means, my dear," Sir George responded. "I could not stoop to ask a favour of that kind from any woman, however pressing the necessity. It seems to me to be more a question between one woman and another. Now from you, the request would seem quite natural. If you care to undertake it ——"

But Mary heard no more. She could not trust herself to reply. Slowly and coldly she walked from the room, her hands locked convulsively together. Truly the family pride was a shattered reed to lean on, a skin deep thing after all. And the strong capable face of Ralph Darnley rose like a warm vision before her.

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CHAPTER XI

THE DOWAGER LADY DASHWOOD

THE silent moody dinner was over at length; Slight was placing the dessert on the shining mahogany. Mary rose presently and walked over to the open window. Over the park the moon was gleaming like a silver shield against the pallid sky; the deer moved like ghosts in the pearly dew. It was more sweet and peaceful than ever, and yet Mary dwelt bitterly on the mockery of it all. What an enviable mortal she appeared to be, and yet how little did she deserve that envy. The hours had crept on and the thunderbolt had not yet fallen. Perhaps the blow would be delayed till to-morrow, which was a soothing reflection, for nothing had as yet been done, though Mary had made up her mind to invoke the aid of Lady Dashwood. She had not been across to the dower house yet, for Lady Dashwood had gone out on one of her rare visits to a neighbour, and at seven o'clock had not returned. There would be plenty of time afterwards, and Mary stood by the window, drinking in the full beauty of the night. She had made up her mind to tell Lady Dashwood everything and throw herself upon the elder woman's mercy. She turned to her father, who was gently complaining to Slight of the quality of the claret he was pouring out.

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"I am going to the dower house now," the girl said coldly. How could a man be so trivial at such a moment, she wondered. "I may be late, father."

Sir George murmured something in reply. He was still absorbed in the contemplation of his glass. He had evidently forgotten the importance of Mary's errand. The girl was very chill and her heart very cold and empty and lonely as she passed down the old elm avenue and through a path leading by a great belt of evergreens to the grounds of the dower house beyond. It was a Tudor mansion a little older than the Hall itself, and it boasted some wonderful gates and a rose garden famous throughout the county. The whole façade of the house was covered with roses, too, and the night air was heavy with their fragrance. The back of the house looked on a green forecourt, and a long conservatory led to a set of cloisters, which made a deliciously cool spot in the hot weather. There Mary usually found her aged relative, but she was in the drawing-room to-night. She rose as the girl entered, a tall figure with a mass of white hair done up in some old fashion that was not without its charm. Lady Dashwood's face was white as her hair, and it bore the impress of some great and lasting trouble that never would fade away on this side of the grave. Her eyes had the same haunting care in them, the same suggestion of remorse. A keen observer might have been justified in regarding Lady Dashwood as a woman who was being weighed down with the burden of a terrible secret.

But her smile was sincere enough as Mary came forward; her slim hands shook as she laid them on the girl's shoulders and kissed her. Then she seemed to

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discern that something was wrong, for she sighed as she looked into Mary's face.

"Sit down, dearest," she said tenderly. "It is very good of you to come and see me so late. But there is something the matter, Mary. I have not known and loved you all these years without being able to read that transparent mind of yours. What is it dear? You know that I will do anything in the wide world to save you from unhappiness."

"Dearest of foster mothers, I know it," Mary whispered. She blinked away the rare tears that would rise to her eyes. "It is selfish of me to come and worry you at this time of night, but there is no help for it. We are in great distress."

"Does that mean your father as well as yourself, or rather that you are worrying about him? What has he been doing now to cause you all this anxiety? Something to do with those speculations over which I have helped him more than once in the past."

"Have you?" Mary asked with a startled blush. He never told me. He wrote to you ——"

"More than once, my dear. As heir presumptive to the estate, I suppose he thought he had a right to do so. But I am afraid that I can't help him again — at least, not just at present. But then I don't suppose it is so very serious."

"It is disgrace," Mary said in a low voice. "It means the intrusion of strangers, men sent down to take what is called possession till the debt is paid. It is a matter of £5,000, and it must be obtained at once — before mid-day to-morrow. Perhaps I had better tell you all about it, but it would break my heart to see this disgrace fall on Dashwood. Dearest, tell

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me that you will find me the money or the means to get it!"

Lady Dashwood made no reply for a moment. A still more ashen pallor crept over her white face. She placed her hand to her heart as if to still some poignant pain there, her rings shimmered and trembled in the lamplight.

"Tell me everything," she said huskily. "My punishment is coming, my sin is finding me out at last."

"Your sin?" Mary cried. "If ever there was a good woman in the world, you are one. I hate to hear you speak like that, my more than mother. Surely you must know how good and pure your life has always been. And you talk like this! If there is any mystery here, any secret that lies like a shadow over our house ——"

"Was ever a great family without its trouble?" Lady Dashwood asked. "You must not take my foolish words quite so seriously, child. Perhaps by brooding over them, one is apt to magnify troubles. So your father has discovered this will and the deed by which my unhappy boy cut himself off from his inheritance. Strange that the papers should be found just now."

"Why?" Mary asked. "Why just now? Did you know of their existence?"

But Lady Dashwood made no reply. She seemed to be lost in a sea of troubled thoughts. Mary did not repeat the question. After all, it mattered very little either way. Lady Dashwood came to herself with a start.

"But we have the present to think of," she said. "Your father will be able to do as he likes now, therefore the trouble caused by this hostile creditor is all

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the more to be deplored. He is some business man, I presume?"

"Yes," Mary explained. "By birth a gentleman. His name is Horace Mayfield."

A startled cry came from Lady Dashwood's lips, the grey pallor was on her face again.

"Do you happen to know the man?" Mary asked.

"Oh, yes; I know him and his family. A bad man, a hateful man. Never mention his name to me again. Mary, he must be got rid of at all costs. I have no great head for these things, but I see the necessity of getting out of the hands of Horace Mayfield. As you say, in a week's time it would not matter. As it is the thing is urgent. Is it so utterly impossible to find this money?"

"It is out of the question for us," Mary said haltingly. Her face was burning now that she was coming to the pith of her errand. "My father could not place his hand on a fifth part of the sum. I racked my brains to find the way out. Then it occurred to me that there were certain people who lent money on the security of jewels and valuable plate, and things like that. I had never heard our family jewels mentioned, but I felt quite sure that they existed. My father told me that they were in your possession, that they belong to you so long as I remain single. Dear mother, do you see what I mean? Do not put me to the pain of having to speak more plainly. And it is only for so short a time! By the end of the week the stones will be in your hands again. I could go up to London in the morning and take the jewels to one of the big dealers who do business of this kind. . . . The disgrace would be averted. I

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hate to come here with a proposal like this, but I can think of no other way. You are not going to refuse me this great favour?"

"You want me . . . to lend you . . . my jewels?" Lady Dashwood gasped. There was no trace of anger or displeasure in her voice. She looked strangely white and drawn, as if suddenly, years had been added to her life. "How do you know I have any?"

"'I asked my father. No, he did not suggest it. He told me that our family collection of stones was a famous one; he said that everything was in your possession. Then in shame and agony of spirit I dragged myself here to ask you to do this thing. My own proper pride held me back, my family pride urged me on."

"The curse of the race," Lady Dashwood cried. "The besetting sin of the family will ruin us all yet. Heavens! the mischief that it has brought about already. It made my wedded life a long intolerable bondage, rendering me old before my time. It was responsible for the great sin which caused my son to leave home for ever. And yet I fed you on the family pride, I held it before you day by day until you have grown so cold and hard that I alone know of the kind and generous heart that beats within you. . . . But enough of this. You want me to lend you some of my jewels. If I tell you I have none, what then?"

"My father told me that they were in your possession, Lady Dashwood."

"My child, you must not speak to me in that tone. It hurts me dreadfully. Suppose the stones are gone, suppose that I have parted with them one by one to

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preserve a fearful family secret! Suppose that I parted with the last diamond yesterday! What would you say if I told you that?"

Lady Dashwood had suddenly lost her reason. Mary could see no other explanation for this extraordinary speech. And yet the speaker looked guilty enough, there was a shamed flush on her withered cheeks. She rose from her seat and moved to the door.

"Wait a moment," she said. "I may find a way yet. But my sin is going to find me out and my sacrifice shall be all in vain."

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CHAPTER XII

LADY DASHWOOD SEES A GHOST

WITH faltering hesitation Lady Dashwood made her way into the dark hall beyond the drawing-room. She bore little resemblance to the grand dame that her friends knew. In spite of her silks, her laces and her flashing rings, she looked like the ordinary woman who is suffering from the burden of a great affliction. There were tears in her eyes as she walked along. The house was strangely silent; no servants were to be seen anywhere as Lady Dashwood reached a door leading to the green forecourt with the cloisters beyond. She stepped out into the moonlight slowly, she passed across the garden under the brown stone archway that led to the cloisters.

There she paused and looked about her furtively. There was nothing to be seen but the shadows made by the moonlight. Like a thief in the night Lady Dashwood crept along till she came at length to the end of the cloisters, where there was a stairway leading to some dilapidated apartment overhead. Once again there was a pause, and after that the aged lady began to climb the stairs. At the same time there came the unmistakable sound of voices overhead.

Lady Dashwood started and almost lost her balance. The sound was so unexpected, so utterly unlooked for.

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The voices were quite clear and distinct, too, on the still air. Lady Dashwood had no desire to play the eavesdropper, but it was impossible not to hear everything. The one voice was low and pleasant, and yet clear and commanding.

"I tell you it is impossible," the pleasant voice said. "You must allow me to conduct this business in my own way. I have already given you my word that everything will come out right in the long run. There is still six months of the time to expire, remember, so that you need do no violence to your conscience."

"Yes, but you have not taken Lady Dashwood into your calculations, sir," the other voice said.

"Indeed I have, my good fellow. I have forgotten nothing. Everything has been most carefully mapped out. As Lady Dashwood is more or less of a recluse, there is nothing to be feared from her. It will be a very easy matter to keep out of her way."

The listener fell back, clutching at her heart wildly. She was compelled to lean against the brown walls of the cloisters for support.

"I am dreaming," she murmured. "I shall awake presently and find myself in bed. I am getting old and fanciful, and my mind is playing me strange tricks. The owner of that voice has been dead for many years; it is a mere chance resemblance. And yet it is as real as if I had gone back over the wasted years. Is it possible ——"

The speaker paused. It seemed to her that the two men overhead were coming down and she had no mind to be caught listening. She turned away swiftly, her slim ankle in its satin slipper gave a turn and a cry of pain escaped her. A moment later and Slight was

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by her side, looking at her with mingled sympathy and suspicion.

"Your ladyship has hurt yourself," he said. "Permit me to take you back to the house. What are you doing here at this time in the evening?"

There was something almost masterful in the tone of the question. In spite of the pain that she was suffering, Lady Dashwood turned a cold displeased eye on the speaker.

"You sometimes forget yourself, Slight," she said. "It is a failing of old and privileged servants. Your place is over at the Hall. What are you doing here? You were ever a man to do strange things in a strange way. Have you some secret here?"

"We have had many secrets together, my lady, and we may take most of them to the grave with us," said Slight coolly. "I have been too long a friend of the family to be treated like this. And your ladyship must just come back to the house at once. You are in pain."

"Pain or not, I am not going back yet, Slight. I came here for something that I had left in one of the cloister chambers, and I heard your voice. I should have thought little of that, for you are permitted to come and go as you like. But you were not alone, you had a companion with you. And I heard his voice, too, Slight."

The withered old servant looked slightly confused. Then his dry face grew hard and dogged.

"I am not going to deny it, my lady," he said. "A — friend of mine, who ——"

"Is a gentleman. No mistake about that, Slight. And the voice was so like that of my poor dead boy that

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I almost died of the sound of it. What does it mean, Slight; who are you hiding up there? I am going to see."

"Indeed, your ladyship is not going to do anything of the kind," said Slight hastily. "Besides, my friend has gone. There is another way from the cloister chamber, remember. And your ladyship has just got to come back to the house."

Lady Dashwood sighed impatiently. Slight had been her own servant for nearly forty years, and she knew the dogged obstinacy of the man. She knew his sterling honesty, too, and how faithful he could be to a trust.

"Very well," she said. "If there is anything to tell me, you will tell it in your own way. But that voice startled me — it was like a voice from the grave. It was as if my boy had come back to me once more. Slight, if you are deceiving me ——"

"I'm not deceiving anybody," Slight said in an aggrieved voice. "I leave that to my betters. If your ladyship will lean on my arm, I will try to ease your foot as much as possible. The shortest way is to cut across the grass."

It was rather a slow process, for Lady Dashwood's foot was getting painful. She came at length to the great stone doorway leading from the forecourt into the house; she looked back over her shoulder, and as she did so she grew almost rigid.

"Look!" she whispered. "What did I tell you? Don't you see it, Slight — the figure standing over there by the laurels in the moonlight? See, the rays on his face. Don't tell me that my eyes deceive me, Slight. It is my boy come back again."

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Slight muttered something under his breath. In reality he was objurgating Ralph Darnley for his careless imprudence in standing there with his face turned to the dower house. Yet the old man's frame never moved a muscle.

"What does your ladyship mean?" he asked. "I can see nothing."

"That is because you are not looking in the right direction, Slight. Over there by the laurels. Do you dare to tell me that a man is not standing there? It is my son Ralph come back from the grave! The fine figure, the gracious open face, the determined eyes. Has time stood still with him that he looks so young? And yet it is forty years since. . . . Ralph, Ralph, it is your mother who calls to you."

The words rang out with startling stillness in the great cloister. The young man standing there started and turned round. He had been absolutely lost in a deep study, contemplating the old house. He came tumbling down to earth again, and became conscious of a white-haired, richly-dressed old lady who was holding out a pair of arms in his direction. He could see the pleading, loving look on her face, he noticed the menace and anger in Slight's eyes. Without further ado Ralph stepped back into the bushes, his feet making no sound on the mosy turf. It was like the slow diminishing of a dream.

"He has gone," Lady Dashwood cried. "I have frightened him by my notice. Did you not see him, Slight? Did you not observe the extraordinary likeness?"

"I saw nothing but a young man who was trespassing," Slight said evasively. "Your ladyship is full of

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fancies to-night. You will laugh at yourself in the morning."

Once more Lady Dashwood sighed impatiently. She managed to drag herself back to the drawing-room without the aid of Slight. She dropped into a chair white and quivering, whilst Mary regarded her with eyes filled with deep concern.

"Something has happened to you," she said. "What is it? Can I do anything?"

"Nobody can do anything," Lady Dashwood whispered. "Mary, I have seen a ghost. I not only saw the ghost, but I heard the vision speak. And they wanted to persuade me that it was an old woman's foolish fancy. . . . I meant to have done something for you to-night, but I forget what it is and where I put it. I can think of nothing but my ghost. And I want to be alone, my dear, you cannot think how much I want to be alone! Ring for my maid now and go. Don't think me unkind, my child. Come back in the morning, and I will try to help you in the way you need. Kiss me and say good-night."

Mary bent down obediently and kissed the faded, unsteady lips. Her errand had been more or less of a failure, but she could not pursue the subject now. She could only ring the bell and depart as she had come. To press the matter nearest her heart would have been wanting in tact and delicacy. Very sorrowfully Mary took her way across the park in the direction of the Hall. She would come back and see Lady Dashwood after breakfast, and then if she could get what she required, she would go to London at once and get matters settled by the family solicitor. She might be an hour or two too late, but she had to risk that.

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The drawing-room windows were open; on the terrace in front Sir George was passing up and down with a distracted air. Mary could see that his tie was ruffled and that his hair had been stirred as if by a high wind. He paused as the girl spoke to him.

"What is wrong?" she asked. "Has anything happened?"

"The very worst," Sir George groaned. "They came soon after you had gone . . . three of them. One in the servants' hall, one upstairs, and one in there, the drawing-room. A foul man with a foul pipe. Look and see the creature for yourself!"

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CHAPTER XIII

DESECRATION

A FEELING of almost physical sickness held Mary for the moment. She had dreaded this thing, and at the same time she had hoped against it — it had seemed almost impossible that such a calamity could happen to Dashwood Hall. Mary would have scoffed the idea that she regarded ordinary humanity as different clay to herself, but it was so all the same. It did not seem right that one in her station of life should be called upon to suffer an indignity like this.

And yet here it was, blatant and hideous, and so transparently vulgar! Mary knew the full significance of the disaster; she had seen something of it, two years before, in the house of one of the estate farmers who had fallen into the hands of a money-lender. She had seen the mother of the family bowed and distracted, whilst a gin-soddened wretch sat in a priceless oak chair and puffed some dreadful tobacco. And the man had been quite insolent when Mary had spoken to him.

That was bad enough, but to have the same thing at Dashwood was a thousand times worse. It seemed to Mary that she could catch the reek of that vile tobacco now. But something had to be done; it was useless to stand there idle.

"Have you spoken to the people?" Mary asked. "The servants ——"

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"Are all in bed except old Slight," Sir George whined. "Slight managed that. The other servants don't know anything for the present."

"Well, that is something gained. I have been to see Lady Dashwood. It was the most shameful moment of my life, but I managed to ask for the jewels. No, I did not get them — I don't believe that Lady Dashwood has them. I believe that she has some secret trouble of her own; I begin to believe that there is something terribly wrong with our family. There is no hope from Lady Dashwood."

Sir George whined in a feeble kind of way. Mary's heart overflowed with bitter contempt. This was the head of the family, the man to be relied upon to uphold the traditions of a long line of glorious ancestors! The girl steeled herself to face the inevitable; she knew now that she would have to rely solely on her own exertions. She passed through the open window into the drawing-room, which would never be quite the same to her again. Nothing appeared to be altered; the soft shaded lamps were here, the mellow subdued light playing on old furniture and pictures, and the flowers artistically arranged in their priceless vases. Surely sorrow and shame and humiliation would not touch the picture with chill fingers!

There he was, lounging back on a Chippendale couch, with his muddy boots on a hassock of Gobelin tapestry, his sullen face half-ashamed and half-defiant. His profession would have been apparent to anyone who had ever met one of the tribe before. Those men were of a race apart, idlers and loafers, who can face sorrow and suffering and the breaking up of homes without a spark of human feeling. The man looked up at Mary's pale

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haughty face, with a certain dumb admiration in his bleared eye.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" Mary demanded. "Tell me that."

"It's all right," the object said, without removing his pipe. "There's the docyment on that little marble table. Suit of Mayfield and Co., £5,193 17*s.* 4*d.*, debt and costs. If you pay within seven days, all right; if you don't then the auctioneer comes in. No use making a fuss about it. Pay us and we go, don't pay us and we stay. Treat us well, and we'll treat you well. It isn't the first time I've been in swell houses like this."

The man was so coolly, unconsciously insolent that Mary could make no reply for a moment. It seemed incredible that she, who had always had the reverence of every man and boy in the village, could be treated like this. Nothing seemed to pierce the creature's dull hide.

"But you can't stay here," she said. "That is impossible. I suppose the idea is to see that nothing is taken away. Nearly all the furniture belongs to the family; most of the things are what are called heirlooms. We could not dispose of them if we wanted to. We could make you all comfortable in one of the empty lodges."

"Won't do," the man on the sofa said huskily. "Had that game tried on me lots of times. I sit up here all night, whilst my mates get a rest. We take it turn and turn about. Better keep your breath to cool your porridge. You can go to bed now without any fear of burglars. I'll see that nothing goes away from here."

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Mary turned away, sore and helpless and sick at heart. She, who despised tears so heartily in others, felt like bursting into hysterical weeping now. The humiliation was almost more than she could bear. She would have welcomed any calamity that was likely to overwhelm the old house and lay it in grey ashes at her feet. Fiercely, angrily, she grasped her father by the arm and led him from the room. Sir George trotted along feebly, muttering in a small voice. He was as useless as a woman in a storm at sea. He sat down in the library with his hands folded in his lap, and looked anxiously for any suggestion from Mary.

"Is there nothing you can do?" she demanded impatiently. Could this feeble, white-faced creature be the same jaunty, debonnaire figure that had been so popular in the Paris salons? Mary asked herself. "Is there no way out of the difficulty?"

"I — I am afraid not," Sir George stammered. "I am so dazed and confused that I can think of nothing. Most unfortunate that business about Lady Dashwood and the diamonds. Wonder what she has done with them. Very selfish of her."

Mary suppressed a desire to scream. Ralph Darnley flashed into her mind suddenly, and she wondered why. Anyway she could not ask him to help her, even if he had the means to do so. She had repelled his advances more or less scornfully, and one does not borrow money from a man in conditions like that.

"Lady Dashwood is powerless to help us," she said with an effort. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, she has a sorrow far deeper than ours ——"

"Impossible," Sir George said testily. "You are talking nonsense, my dear. What blow could be

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heavier or harder to bear than ours? But I trust that we shall meet it with proper dignity. Nothing can deprive us of our dignity."

Mary laughed aloud. The echo of her mirth came back mockingly in the silence and almost frightened her. Heavens! was it possible that Sir George had no idea of the pitiable figure he presented at that moment? He went on to suggest fortitude and calmness. He had heard of the same thing happening in the castle of a duke. Worse things had taken place in the chateaux of the aristocracy in the French Revolution.

"Ay, but they knew how to live and die like gentlefolk," Mary said bitterly. "I understand that you are going to sit down and tamely submit to this thing?"

"My dearest child, how impetuous you are! There is nothing else to do. By the end of the week I shall have more than enough for all my needs. Still I think, I think that there is a way to get out of the difficulty, without anybody being any the wiser. The remedy, however, lies in your hands. Of course, it requires a certain amount of self-sacrifice on your part. I am bound to confess that I could desire other channels for the amelioration of the situation. Still, as I said before ——"

The voice was cringing and fawning; there was something mean and furtive on Sir George's face as he spoke his polished periods. A certain sickness of heart gripped Mary; she was conscious of a sensation of absolute fear.

"Pray do not be diplomatic with me," she said. "I have seen so much of that kind of thing in Paris. What are you concealing from me?"

"Your tone is not filial," Sir George complained.

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"I did not mean to tell you; I was going to spare you the pain. I thought perhaps you would agree with me that patience was the best line to take. But I see that you desire to strike a decisive blow; at any cost you long to get those impossible creatures out of the house. Our boats are not entirely burnt as you seem to imagine — one slender plank of safety remains. Not to elaborate the thing too much, I may say I have had a note from Mayfield. I should like you to read that note and consider its inner meaning carefully. Mayfield has come down from London in his car to-night, and is staying at his old fishing quarters at Swainson's farm. He more or less apologizes for the course that he has taken, and reminds me that friendship must not be mixed up with business. He does not allude to the way in which I so flagrantly assaulted him, which strikes me as being generous on his part ——"

"But he has come here to gloat over our misfortune," Mary cried. "I see that my instinct did not play me false when I estimated the man."

"There you go, there you go," Sir George said testily. "I gather from the letter that Mayfield regrets his precipitate action. But, on the other hand, he fears to lose his money. He wants a substantial security for it. He says in his letter, which is an exceedingly gentlemanly one, that an amicable understanding is quite easy. He suggests that if you like to send for him and discuss the matter, he has no doubt that affairs may be arranged."

Mary started forward and laid a hand upon her heart. She was conscious of a fierce pain there, as if the organ of her being had suddenly stopped its beating. So this was the way out! She had only to smile,

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to raise one pink finger, and the horrid miasma in the drawing-room would fade like some unspeakable nightmare. Mary dropped into a chair shaking in every limb.

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CHAPTER XVI

A FIERCE TEMPTATION

"AND so that is what you mean!" Mary said slowly when at length she had found sufficient breath to speak. "Stripped of empty phrases and diplomatic trappings, I am to make a bargain with Horace Mayfield to save the honour and reputation of our house."

"Let me point out to you that the thing can be done to-night," Sir George whispered.

"Oh, I know that. That is why Horace Mayfield is here. He has returned on purpose. He has carefully calculated the place where the wound is likely to hurt most. He knows the full extent of my pride, my idolatry for the old house and the old name. And I am to make a bargain with him. I am to exchange myself for freedom from the disgrace and humiliation. And that is a course that you seriously suggest."

"I have not said so," Sir George muttered. He held his head down. He could not meet the flashing blue scorn in his child's eyes. "These things happen every day. Look at Lady Cynthia Greig. She married Newman the financier, who started life goodness knows where. And she was supposed to be the proudest girl in London."

"Oh, I know. There was some whisper of a terrible family scandal involving a deal of money. And the

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last time I saw Cynthia, she looked like a beautiful white statue. There was a fierce, hard gladness in her voice when she told me that she was dying of consumption. Yet, so far as I know, Mr. Newman is an honest man."

"Does not the same remark apply to Horace Mayfield?"

"Certainly not. I judge him from your own lips. You declared that he had robbed you of a large sum of money, that he had deliberately worked it so that it appeared as if he had been defrauded by a dishonest servant. And all this to get me in his power. And you did not reply to that letter of Mr. Mayfield's with the scorn that it deserved; you waited to hear what I had to say about it."

Sir George protested mildly that he could do nothing else. But Mary was not listening. She glanced at the familiar objects about her; she passed over to the window and pulled up the blind. The moon was shining peacefully upon the rose garden and tinting with silver glory the old gates beyond, as it had done many times the last two hundred years. It all looked so sweet and graceful, so refined and restful. No shadow of disgrace had ever rested on the house before, no slander had ever made a target of the house of Dashwood. And now the tongues of the whole county would be wagging. The price to pay was a terrible one, but Mary did not hesitate. It never occurred to her that she was deliberately estranging the very pride that she hugged so closely to her heart, that trouble and misfortune could be borne with dignity and fortitude, that the gossip of the idle mattered nothing. She reached out a hand to her father, and he understood.

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He took a note from his pocket and passed it over to the girl. It was only a few lines that Mayfield had written, but there was no mistaking their meaning. Mary felt that the words had been written for her alone; very clearly the issue had been thrown into her hands. She crossed over to a table and began to write. She was burning and trembling from head to foot; therefore she was surprised to see that her handwriting had never been bolder and firmer. Without heading or ending of any kind she wrote this message to Mayfield: —

"It is getting late now, but it is not too late to talk business to a business man. I am sending you this at once, so that you may get it a little after eleven. If you will be so good as to come over to-night we may settle matters at once."

She read the letter aloud and folded it calmly. Sir George nodded a sort of shamefaced approval. Under his brows he had been watching Mary with the keenest anxiety all the time. He knew that the girl's scruples were justified; that he ought to have torn up Mayfield's letter and treat it with the contemptuous silence that it deserved. But he merely smiled and nodded his head.

"I have done it," Mary said. "God knows the price that I am likely to pay for my sacrifice, if the sacrifice is worthy of the occasion. Where is Slight?"

Slight replied to the bell in person. His small red face had an angry flush; his grey hair stood up all over his head like a clothes brush.

"Take this over to Swainson's farm," Mary said, "and wait for an answer. The letter is for Mr. Mayfield, as you will see, Slight."

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The old butler drew back a few paces. He regarded the letter as if it had been something noisome to sting him; his face grew obstinate and dark and almost murderous. Slight was a fanatic in his way, as Mary had noticed many times.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said doggedly, "but I respectfully decline to do anything of the sort."

It was no time to argue with the old servant. And Slight was something more than an ordinary butler; he was a friend of the family. Despite his blunt refusal, his manner was as respectful as the most exacting could have wished. Then he seemed to forget everything; his passion broke out and burst all bonds.

"I've been here for more than forty years," he said. "I was bred and born on the estate, and on the property I hope to die. I know the Dashwoods better than they know themselves. It's all pride, pride, and nothing else matters. And it's part of your pride, Miss Mary, to make terms with Mayfield, who is one of the greatest rascals that ever drew breath. You may be surprised to hear me say this, but it's true. That man has brought all this about. He's done it for his own ends. He's waiting for you to own that he is master of the situation, and he dictates his terms. And that he shall some day come here and lord it over us is one of them. And it's your pride in the old house that is going to play into his hands. Don't you do it, Miss Mary, don't you let that scoundrel come here. If it happens ——"

"Silence," Mary cried. "Slight, you are forgetting yourself."

"Maybe," Slight responded; "but I'm not forgetting you. And I won't take that letter; not if I lost my

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place for it. Besides, I've got something else to do. I've got to save you from yourself if possible."

Slight turned quickly and left the room. With an exclamation of annoyance, Sir George crossed the lawn in the direction of the stables, with a view of calling upon one of the helpers there. By the time he had succeeded, Mary was ready with her letter. She looked very white and stern and proud as she stood there in the moonlight. The fading light fell upon her neck and shoulders and turned them to ivory. A fitting mistress for that grand old house, truly! She was like one of Tennyson's cold and immaculate heroines, she had a sort of fierce satisfaction in the knowledge that she came without a pang to the altar of the family sacrifice. She was quite blind to her own insensate folly; she would have been astonished to know that she was doing a wrong thing.

"Please take this note to Swainson's Farm for me, Walters," she said in her sweetest manner. "It has been forgotten, and I am exceedingly sorry to give you all this trouble. There is no occasion for you to wait for an answer."

Walters stammered something to the effect that it was a pleasure, and went his way. In the distance, old Slight was stumping off across the park with evident determination. A shade of annoyance crossed Sir George's face.

"We must get rid of that fellow," he said. "Really, the insolence of these family retainers is past all bearing. You will see to this to-morrow, Mary!"

Mary made no reply. She was not in the least angry with old Slight. She understood the old man's feelings exactly; she knew his love and affection for her.

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Sir George's vapid attempts at conversation almost drove her mad. She wanted to be alone to think. She passed into the drawing-room, muttering that she had forgotten something. The lamps were still burning, the great bronze clock chimed the hour of twelve.

The dreadful object on the satin couch had fallen asleep; his shock head was thrown back, and from his lips came a long and regular snore. A poisonous scent of foul tobacco filled the air. Surely no sacrifice would be too great to get rid of this, Mary told herself. Mayfield would come along presently like some malignant fairy; he would wave his wand, and this terrible invasion would disappear as if it had never been at all.

But Mayfield would demand his price. Of that Mary had no doubt. For a long time now the girl had known that he cared for her. He had made no effort to disguise his feelings from the time that they had met in Paris two years ago, when Mary was paying one of her visits to her father in the French capital. And Mayfield was of the class of men who always get their own way. Sooner or later Mary would be absolute mistress of Dashwood Hall, and it was no mean thing for a man to have the chance of sharing such a home with his wife.

But the cost of it all; the sacrifice entailed! From the bottom of her heart Mary loathed and despised the man who was plotting to make her his wife. She knew him to be an utterly unscrupulous rascal, a fitting instrument to sway the dishonour of the Dashwoods. A few days more of this unspeakable degradation and Mayfield would be powerless. It was only a matter of making the neighbours talk, of tittle-tattle at tea tables. And in a few days it would all be forgotten. Other

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people had gone through the same humiliation and had come out of it as if nothing had happened, but they were not Dashwoods. . . . A long snore came from the figure on the couch, and the man stirred uneasily.

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CHAPTER XV

MARY seemed to flame from head to foot. The momentary hesitation passed. No, it was quite impossible to support this kind of thing for the best part of a week; the thought of slanderous, wagging tongues was unendurable. At any cost these creatures must be removed; even the servants must know nothing. So far as Slight was concerned, he was absolutely to be trusted. Mary's mind was made up for good and all.

Time was passing more quickly than she knew. As she stood there the clock chimed the half-hour after midnight. A few minutes later and Mary heard her father calling her. She understood him to say that Mayfield had arrived.

"Let him come here," the girl said independently. "I am quite ready."

Sir George shuffled off again in the direction of the library, where Mayfield stood on the mat before the fireplace smoking a cigarette. There was not the slightest suggestion of triumph about him, his face was calm and set. He looked like some under-secretary who is about to read statistics to a House of bored listeners. He had left his eye-glass behind him, so that the cynical expression was absent.

"She's in the drawing-room," Sir George said. His

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manner was almost cringing. "She — she prefers to discuss the matter with you alone. Perhaps she thinks that you are more likely to listen to her than to me — Mayfield."

"She's right there," Mayfield said almost brutally. "It is a matter between ourselves. Sorry to put you to all this inconvenience, Dashwood, but there was no other way of teaching the lesson. But you need not worry, half an hour will see the whole matter settled, and even your servants will not be any the wiser. I arranged the thing so that you should have the maximum of experience at the minimum of inconvenience."

Sir George muttered something to the effect that his companion was very thoughtful. There was not an atom of fight left in him, and he took no heed of anything but his own personal comfort. The sooner Mayfield and Mary came to an understanding and those cattle were cleared out of the house, the better. After that Sir George could go to bed.

Without undue haste or eagerness, Mayfield passed into the drawing-room. There was just a sardonic touch in his smile as he noticed the snoring hog on the yellow satin lounge. He quite understood why a sight like that could touch Mary's pride to the quick. Strange what queer pawns in the game of life a clever man had to use at times! Mary was standing in the window-frame looking out into the night. Everything seemed so still and peaceful; there was no jarring note save the snore of the man in possession. Mayfield just touched Mary on the arm and she turned. Her face flushed for an instant, and then it became deadly pale again.

"Not in there," she said, "I cannot breathe in the

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house to-night. Do you know what I should have done had this happened a century or two ago?"

Mayfield did not know, but he could give a pretty shrewd guess as he glanced at the steely blue glitter in Mary's eyes. A certain pride of possession thrilled him.

"I think you know," Mary went on. "I should have asked you here to discuss the matter, to appeal to your better nature. And when I failed I should have killed you first and myself afterwards. I could do it now if I had the weapon to my hand."

Mayfield nodded. Far better to let Mary talk herself out, he told himself cynically. She was not the sort of girl to yield without a struggle, she was no frightened child to sue for terms. But in the letter she had written to Mayfield she had sounded the note of surrender. He was here now as conqueror; to see her walk out with all the honours of war. And surely she was worth all the strategy if any woman was, the tall, fair beauty with those flashing eyes and the skin of alabaster glistening in the rays of the moonlight. A prize worth the winning, a daughter of the gods, if ever there was one.

"But these methods are out of date," Mary went on in the same bitter strain. "I am told that they do things in different fashion to-day. You have done me the honour to ask me to share your future life and I refused the offer."

"Why?" Mayfield asked. "My family is equally as good as your own."

"I know it. But *noblesse oblige*. You are what you are. And so you planned and plotted for this; with diabolical cunning you saw where you could strike

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me in a fatal spot. You came here to-night in a position to make your own terms."

"Not quite," Mayfield said quietly. "There is another way for you. So far as I understand your father is in a position to make his holding sure in a few days. The house is large and the presence of a few guests, however undesirable, makes little difference. It is, I admit, not a nice thing to have one of the great unwashed smoking shag tobacco in the drawing-room, but it is only a matter of days. The matter is in your hands for you to decide as you please. I am not going to coerce you."

Mary laughed scornfully. The mirth sounded harshly against the silence of the night; the man on the satin cushions stirred and made a gurgling noise in his throat. Mary's mood suddenly changed and she shuddered. She was bitterly conscious of her complete inability to do anything. She had expected Mayfield to take his triumph openly; she was just beginning to understand what a strong and dangerous foe he could be.

"You know how to gloss it," the girl said. "But there is going to be no tacit ignoring of the real truth between you and me. You have brought this all about to force my hand. You have calculated upon my pride of race, and my pride of place. You know — nobody better — what suffering this is likely to afford me. And you are in a position to remove the pain and the humiliation with the stroke of a pen."

"Yes, I could do that," Mayfield said, speaking as if the suggestion threw an entirely new light on the situation. "As a matter of fact the thing is absurdly simple. I have only to send a telegram to my lawyer

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— one of your servants could take it to Longtown and despatch it even at this late hour. My lawyer could come down by the morning mail, getting here before six o'clock, and send those fellows packing. Then the incident would be forgotten as one forgets an unpleasant dream. You see, my resource is practically without a limit. I can meet you in any way that you please."

"I have felt that for some time," said Mary coldly. "And in return for this — kindness!"

"Surely there is no occasion for me to repeat my conditions! Besides, 'conditions' is not a pretty word to use in dealing with a lady. You will not find your bonds irksome, you will not find in me a very exacting lover. It can go out to the world that there is an engagement between us and in due course a marriage will follow."

Mayfield spoke quietly enough, but his looks belied his tone. There was a fierce volcano under that placid exterior, a strong, consuming passion, and a will to lead Mary when once Mayfield had the power over her. Some instinct told the girl this.

"It sounds prosaic enough," she said. "I suppose I must take you at your word. And yet all the time I know perfectly well that I am doing myself a great wrong in the eyes of God and man. I am not so strong as I think — I am not strong enough to place my happiness before humiliation. I must have time to think this over."

"Take as much time as you like. I will come again to-morrow, if you please. You shall not throw it in my teeth afterwards that I have hurried you in any way."

Mary sighed helplessly. The man was so strong

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and she was very, very weak. She might have gained the full advantage of her pledged word and broken it deliberately afterwards. It was the code of honour that Mayfield would have possessed himself if he had seen any advantage by so doing. "And suppose I play you false?" Mary asked.

"You will never do that. I am not in the least afraid; I trust you implicitly."

Mary turned back, baffled and defeated at every turn. The night seemed to have grown suddenly chill, for she shivered as she made her way into the drawing-room. It wanted but a feather in the scale now, to make up her mind for good and all. Her eyes were drawn by magnetic attraction to the sprawling figure on the cushions. The harsh note smote her like a thong.

"Look at him," Mayfield whispered, "does it not fill you with pain? And there he is likely to remain till the sight of him drives you beyond endurance. One word from you and the loathsome episode is past. Why do you not say the word and finish it?"

The words seemed to sink into Mary's soul. Ralph Darnley flashed into her mind, but she put his image resolutely aside. She pointed towards the door.

"You had better go," she said huskily, "go before I change my mind again. You will find some telegram forms in the silver case on the library table. Need I say any more than that? You can come back and show me what you have written."

Mayfield bowed and departed without showing the faintest indication of his victory. Mary staggered across to the window, with her hands to her dry, hot head. A shadow seemed to rise from the gravel of the terrace, a shadow with a white face framed in grey

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hair, the form of Lady Dashwood, limping a little, but otherwise strong and resolute.

"You have been there long?" Mary asked. "You have been listening."

"Yes, yes," Lady Dashwood said in a strange thrilling whisper, "listening, and waiting for my chance. It is not too late yet, my child. Thank God, I am in time. You must not do it, you must not heed, for the sacrifice would be all in vain. Come, let me tell you what I mean. You are not used to dealing with scoundrels — I am!"

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CHAPTER XVI

THE UNFINISHED WORD

MARY placed her hand to her head in utter bewilderment. The world seemed to have changed in the last few hours. Hitherto, life at Dashwood had progressed on oiled springs, calm and peaceful. There was the regular decently appointed day, with its routine of refined duties, the dinner and the pleasant contemplation of placid evenings. Mary had swung like a proud planet in the still atmosphere. And now everything had passed into the wildest topsy-turveydom.

Even Lady Dashwood had altered. The quiet, self-contained woman, whose very restfulness had been one of her greatest charms! The sweet expression of her face had vanished; she looked aged and anxious, almost fierce.

"What does it all mean?" Mary asked. "What has come to everything and everybody? It seems almost impossible to believe that here at Dashwood ——"

"Trouble comes; but trouble comes everywhere. It enters the palace as easily as the cottage, my child. And my fault, all of it. But come outside and talk to me. Mary, you must have nothing to do with that man!"

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"But how do you know?" Mary asked. "I — I am not yet certain myself. Who could have told you anything?"

"But you are certain, child. You had made up your mind. The misery of your face tells me so. And you sent a note to that man. Would you have done so unless you had made up your mind to surrender?"

Mary looked down, and the red of shame flamed into her face. Come what would, she could not turn to either side and escape humiliation.

"Slight told me," Lady Dashwood went on. "He came to me at once. My dear, you must not be angry with old Slight. He worships the very ground you walk on; he would lay down his life for you. And he knows everything; I shrewdly suspect that he knows even more than I do. Slight is something more than a servant, he is a valued friend of the family. And he came to me as I have said. He tells me that Horace Mayfield has got his wicked fingers in here; that he has plotted to make you his wife. That must not be, Mary, that must never take place. Surely you can defy that man, can order him out of the house."

"I could," Mary said slowly, "I am not afraid of him. As yet I have not pledged my word. Still, I am quite helpless. Look into the drawing-room and see for yourself. . . . That is what we have to put up with, three of them for the best part of a week. By eight o'clock to-morrow morning the servants will know everything; before the day is out we will be the talk of the county. I could not show my face after that. The degradation would make me old before my time. It is not as if I cared nothing for Dashwood.

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I love every stick and stone of it, the place is part of my being. It was your house for nearly forty years. Can't you understand my feelings?"

"I ought to," Lady Dashwood said bitterly. "It was I who first fostered those feelings. I tended them; day and night I watered them and fed them till they grew like a plant. With the lesson of the past before my eyes, I encouraged your pride. And now it is the master passion of your life. Everything has to be sacrificed to the old name and the old place. As for me, I should not hesitate for a single moment."

"And never know the feeling of happiness again!" Mary cried.

"Oh, my dear! happiness and I parted years ago. The old never expect happiness; there are too many ghosts, too many gaps, and too many memories. Peace is the greatest possession that one can expect at my time of life. And if you do this vile thing, then I shall have to go down to the grave without it. I am a wicked old woman; I am suffering now because I dare not tell the truth; but rather than this wrong shall be done, I will speak, though I made a death-bedside promise not to do so. Suppose I told you that you have less right at Dashwood than I have!"

The last words came with a fierce whisper that struck a cold chill to Mary's heart. Had Lady Dashwood suddenly lost her reason? But that white quivering face had no dull insanity upon it; the dark eyes were full of horror but not of madness.

"What do you mean?" Mary asked.

"I — I cannot tell you. I was sorry to say as much. Do you suppose that Horace Mayfield loves you in the ordinary sense of the word?"

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"I believe he does, if that has anything to do with the question."

"Dear child, that man is incapable of any such feeling. Love is a sacred thing. Horace Mayfield is a cold-blooded and designing scoundrel. Your beauty may inflame him, but there is no love behind. He calculates that it will be no bad thing to call this his home. He plays upon your sinful pride as a master plays the violin. He knows that you would do anything, even to marrying him, to keep the scandal away."

"It is the only way," Mary said; "Horace Mayfield is too strong for us. What is that?"

Something stirred in the bushes close by, a crooning song was but half audible.

"It is your old nurse, Patience," Lady Dashwood explained. "She was sitting with me to-night when Slight came over hot-foot with the news. Patience has one of her lucid moods to-night. And Patience knows everything. The secret is hers, too."

"I am tired of this mystery," Mary said; "why is Patience Ray hiding there?"

A thin, bent figure emerged from the bushes; a dark withered face in a frame of thin grey hair looked out. It was an old woman, toothless and haggard, yet the eyes were sharp and shrewd now. For some years past the aged creature had been suffering from decay, but there were moments when her wit was as sharp and shrewd as ever.

"I couldn't stay away, dearie," the thin piping voice said. "It was like a mercy that God gave me back my mind to-night. The wicked old woman may do a lot of good before she dies yet. Don't you do it, dearie.

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Tell him that the proper owner is coming back to Dashwood, and that your face is your only dowry. Because I've seen the heir, as I knew that I should do before I die."

"What is she talking about?" Mary asked in utter astonishment. "Patience, explain yourself."

But the old woman shook her head and refused to say any more. She muttered to herself something about disgrace and the house of Dashwood.

"Smoke the rats out!" she cried shrilly and suddenly, "smoke them out! It is the only way to clear Dashwood of such vermin. Put the match to the faggot and burn them out. That's what I would do if I had my way. And to think that it should come to this after all these years. Mistress, mistress, what a couple of wicked old women we are."

"We are that," Lady Dashwood said mournfully. She did not chide the wild speaker's words as Mary had expected. "Our sin is going to find us out, Patience. Mary, I implore you to do what I ask you. I implore you to spare me the pain of a full confession. Send the man about his business and have none of him."

There was passionate entreaty in Lady Dashwood's tone, so that Mary was troubled in more ways than one. The heart pulled her one way, pride and reason another. And behind it all was a haunting sense that something was terribly wrong here. There was some dreadful meaning underlying the wild words of old Patience. As Mary stood there, cold and dispassionate in the moonlight, Horace Mayfield emerged with a telegram form in his hand.

"I have been some little time," he explained, "the

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forms were mislaid. But what is the meaning of this, Miss Mary? Surely it is late for Lady Dashwood to be abroad."

Mayfield spoke calmly enough, but his eyes looked troubled. He glanced from one to the other of the group anxiously.

"I came to see Mary," Lady Dashwood said coldly. In some magical way she had recovered her self-possession. She was cold and collected, a vertiable *grande dame* in the presence of an inferior. "I had received certain information as to what has recently taken place here. It seems that Sir George Dashwood is under obligations to you, and that as these obligations have not been satisfied, you have put the law in motion. In the language of unfortunate people in a lower walk of life, you have 'put the bailiffs in.' It probably occurred to you that this would cause Miss Dashwood a deal of suffering!"

Mayfield bowed with exaggerated politeness.

"We have known each other a long time, Lady Dashwood," he said. "We have had some business transactions together, and you have never been at any great pains to conceal your opinion of me. Therefore, I should gain nothing by an endeavour now to appear in a more favourable light in your eyes. To be candid, when I set the law in motion, I was not blind to the fact that my action would cause Miss Dashwood a certain anxiety."

"Shameless!" Lady Dashwood cried, "more shameless than I expected."

"Smoke them out!" came shrilly from the lips of the old woman, "Burn the rats out! Put the firewood and the candle together and burn out the vermin!

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Burn Horace Mayfield! Burn him and the other rascals in a pile together!"

Mayfield started, he seemed as if about to say something, then apparently he changed his mind, and ignored the speaker altogether.

"As you please," he said, "I shall be glad to have your views on the matter."

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CHAPTER XVII

"I HAD no intention of seeing you," Lady Dashwood said. "To think that you are the son of my dearest friend! It is well that she died before she knew. I came here to see Mary, because I knew exactly how you had played on her feelings. For purposes of your own, you have been diving into the family history. Many things you have discovered, but many things remain a secret to this day. Clever as you are, you have no inkling of the shameful truth. If I chose to speak now, I could disperse several of your pleasant dreams. I took an oath by the bedside of a dying man to say nothing, and I have regretted my promise ever since. A promise like that is a sacred thing; to break it is a deadly sin. Yet there are some promises that God never intends one to keep. Mine is one of them. So long as I alone suffer, it matters little. But when others are to suffer for my silence, others whom I love more than I love myself, then it is time to break the vow and let the world know everything. By my silence I doom yonder beloved child to lifelong misery. If you cared for her ——"

"Pardon me," Mayfield interrupted, "that is what I am trying to prove. My methods may not commend themselves to you, but I hold that everything is fair in love and ——"

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"Hold," Lady Dashwood cried; "you pollute the word with your tongue. What can you know of love in its better and higher sense? Would you be standing here to-night if Mary were a pauper instead of heiress to Dashwood Hall?"

Mayfield had no reply for the moment. Clever man of the world as he was, the question found him dumb. He could only fall back on the commonplace.

"Why put an impossible case?" he asked. "If it comes to that, why are you here at all? Miss Mary and myself have come to an understanding — the understanding will be complete as soon as I have dispatched this telegram. We are going to stifle the voice of scandal between us. Where is the young footman who was going to take the message to Longtown?"

"The message is not going to Longtown," Lady Dashwood whispered hoarsely. "I can guess what that message means to my beloved child. Mary, fetch your father here. The hour has come when God tells me that I may break my word and speak."

The flimsy telegram form crumpled in Mayfield's grip. His face had turned deadly white with baffled fury. He fought down the anger in his heart and forced a smile to his lips.

"I am afraid we are all going too far," he said. "Let us wait till the morning. Lady Dashwood gives me no credit for magnanimity, I know. I am going to prove that she wrongs me. After all, I have other resources. There are other ways than this."

He tore up the telegram deliberately, and dropped the fragments on the terrace. He must conciliate the old woman at any cost. It would not be difficult, once she had gone, to get Mary to pledge her word. Deep

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down in his heart, Mayfield was angrily wondering what secret Lady Dashwood had to disclose. He could tell by the expression of her face that it was something dramatic. He turned to Mary who was regarding the fragments of the telegram with anxious eyes.

"I am afraid I do not understand," she said, "I am so worn out and tired that my brain seems incapable of grasping anything. I thought that that telegram was going to be the means of removing those men and averting scandal. If there is any other way of saving our house from such a calamity ——"

"That can be managed," Mayfield smiled, "nothing easier. Come with me a moment and I will show you how it is done. Perhaps Lady Dashwood would also like to see ——"

"No, I am quite satisfied for the present," Lady Dashwood said coldly. "Thank God, I have been able to save the situation. I understand that you are staying at Swainson's Farm for to-night. As the farm is on my way home, I shall be glad of your company so far, as there is something that I wish to say to you. I will wait for you at the bottom of the rose garden. Come along, Patience."

The old bent woman muttered something and shook her head. She stood there with her cunning, beady eyes fixed on the noble façade of the old house. There broke from her a dry chuckle, as if her inmost thoughts were not displeasing.

"You let me alone, my lady," she said. "It isn't often as my mind is as clear and bright as it is to-night. And don't you worry about Miss Mary. I'm an old woman, and I'm not good for much, but I can prevent that."

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A haggard, shaking hand was pointed to the entrance of the drawing-room where Mary's figure stood out under the soft light of the shaded lamps. Then Patience turned away and plunged into the bushes. Again and again Lady Dashwood called softly, but no answer came. It was peaceful and silent once more under the light of the waning moon.

Mary had passed back into the drawing-room with Mayfield. The girl's head was in a whirl. At the same time she could not forget Lady Dashwood's warning and the strange hints she had dropped. Mayfield had been impressed also, or he would not have been in such haste to tear up the telegram. Why was he afraid of Lady Dashwood? How could he tell that there was something under the surface?

"Perhaps you had better explain to me," the girl said. "The events of the past hour have puzzled me. You went to the library to procure a telegram form. You were going to send a message to your solicitor asking him to be here in the morning with authority to remove those men. As they are your creatures, is it not possible for you to get rid of them?"

"No," Mayfield explained, "these people represent the sheriff. My solicitor is acting for me in the matter, and there would be certain formalities to go through before I could take matters out of his hands. But there are ways of keeping such matters quiet that you little dream of. . . . Wake up."

The snoring creature on the yellow cushions turned over uneasily at a vigorous application of Mayfield's foot and opened his eyes. He sat up presently and demanded to know why he had been interferred with.

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There was no civility in the man's manner; he evidently had no sympathy with misfortune.

"Speak in a proper manner," Mayfield said sternly. "I happen to know that you will be out of this house in a few hours. There is nothing to grin about, fellow. I suppose that you would not have the slightest objection to earning £5?"

"So long as it's all right, mister," the other growled, "but if you've got some little game on and think that you are going to get me out of the house ——"

"Nothing of the kind. Do I look like that kind of person?"

"Never can tell, mister. I've had the dodge tried on with me by them what has handles to their names. Still, there is no objection to hearing what you've got to say."

"That is very nice and obliging of you," Mayfield said grimly. "I am going to make no effort to undermine your virtue. We do not want the servants to know who you are or what you are doing. There's £5 cash for you if you can manage this. I'm told it is often done. What do you suggest?"

As he spoke, Mayfield played thoughtfully with some sovereigns. The big man grinned.

"Now you are speaking fair," he said. "If people meet us all right and don't regard us as convicts or bushrangers, why, we can meet other people. The three of us have been in many a good house together. The last time we came down to go over the place to give a proper estimate for electric light. You've only got to look wise and potter about with a foot rule and a notebook, and there you are! We can pretend to be measuring outside when the servants come down in the morn-

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ing, and I daresay Sir George can arrange for our food to be given us somewhere handy. Bless your life, there's many a way of doing it, if you'll give me the brass for the other two chaps and settle it at once."

Mayfield handed over a little pile of sovereigns and the man shuffled off in the direction of the kitchen. Mayfield smiled at the success of his errand.

"There," he said; "I fancy that is all right. Only you must tell Sir George exactly what has happened so that there is no confusion in the morning. Sir George is thinking of having the electric light installed. The men are here to take measurements. They will keep the joke to themselves. You ought to be very much obliged to me."

But no protestation of gratitude came from Mary's lips. The light of a great scorn was still in her eyes.

"Lies and prevarication and deceit," she said. "I seem to have found myself in a very network of falsehood. The poorest girl on the estate is happier than I am. It may be as you say, it may be that we shall escape the tongue of scandal. But what are you going to do — how long is the deception to go on?"

"That depends on yourself," Mayfield said coolly. "You can defy me if you like, and take the consequences. But it shall not be said that I have treated you unfairly. That is why I am giving you another night to think the matter over. Now go and tell Sir George what has happened."

Mary turned on her heel and left the room without another word. There was a sinister smile on Mayfield's lips as he watched the girl's drooping figure.

"The thing will pass as far as she is concerned," he muttered. "And now to tackle Lady Dashwood and have matters out with her."

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CHAPTER XVIII

MARY dragged herself as far as the library. Sir George was pacing up and down the room, trying to soothe his nerves with a cigar.

"What a time you have been!" he said impatiently. "Why did you not return before, knowing how anxious I should be? Mayfield came for a telegram form, so I presume he has made matters right with you? Did Walters take it?"

"So far as I know, Walters has gone back to bed," Mary explained. "The telegram was not sent, for reasons best known to Mr. Mayfield. There is no occasion to be angry. It was no fault of mine — and has nothing to do with me. Mr. Mayfield suggested that I should have another night to think it over. It is not his code of honour ——"

"Code of honour! The fellow hasn't got one! There is no trusting him! And now everybody will know of this disgrace of ours."

"They won't. Mr. Mayfield has arranged all that. He seems to be clever at this kind of thing. But perhaps I had better explain."

The anger and irritation died out of Sir George's face as he listened. He expressed no feeling of disgust or abhorrence at the trick to be played upon his household; on the contrary, a suppressed chuckle broke

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from him, a chuckle instantly smothered as he noticed the white scorn on Mary's face.

"I beg your pardon, my dear. Of course, it is all very wrong, but in the circumstances, what else could we do? I have not the slightest doubt that Mayfield will make it all right to-morrow. And now we must go to bed."

Mary turned aside and went wearily in the direction of the hall. Usually, she gave her father a warm and dutiful kiss before retiring, but she really felt that she could not do so to-night. She had always freely expressed her contempt for tears as a woman's weapon and as a solace in the hour of trouble. But the tears rose to her eyes now as she thought of her father and the sorry part he had played. It seemed almost incredible that the head of the house of Dashwood could act so meanly.

And she herself! How much better was she behaving in the hour of trial? The girl's face flamed as she thought of it. In her heart of hearts she knew that the proper thing would have been to face the matter and see it out to the end. Yet her pride had impelled her to make an appalling sacrifice to silence tongues that did not matter in the least. What would Ralph Darnley have thought of it all had he known? How strange that Ralph should come into Mary's mind now, she told herself, strange that she should revert to him when danger threatened.

"You need not wait on me to-night, Kelly," Mary told her maid. "It is so very late and I want to be alone. Have you been asleep in my chair all this time?"

The pretty little maid admitted that she had. She

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went her way presently and Mary began slowly to undress. But tired as she was she felt that somehow sleep to-night could not be for her. Usually, she dropped off directly her head touched the pillow; the silence of the old house was very soothing. But not to-night, for the place seemed full of weird noises, the noises that the invalid hears when pain prevents slumber. Mary lay there, but she could not sleep. It seemed to her that somebody was moving about the corridor. Surely she heard a footstep, and something like the scratch of a match.

Mary rose and slipped on a dressing-gown. Candle in hand, she opened the door. And, surely enough, she was not mistaken. A dark figure was there, a figure that muttered and crooned, as if seeking something. Mary approached the intruder.

"Patience!" she exclaimed, "what are you doing here? And how did you get into the house? I thought that you had returned to the dower house with her ladyship."

Patience looked up and smiled in a weak, watery kind of way. She was not in the least afraid, and there was just a suggestion of slyness in her aged, faded eyes.

"I forgot something, my dearie," she said. "There was something that I made up my mind to do and then I forgot clean about it. It was one of my good nights, and my head was as clear as yours. Her ladyship told me everything. But she didn't tell you everything because she dared not. Ay, we are two sinful old women for certain."

"Never mind about that," Mary said soothingly, "I daresay it will all come right in the morning. But

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you should not have come here like this. You had better lie down on the couch in my dressing-room and go to sleep."

"But there was something that I wanted to do," the old woman whined. "I thought of a way of saving you, of saving everybody. And then it clean went out of my head."

Patience wrung her hands and the tears stood in her faded eyes. She appeared to be deeply distressed about something. She stopped suddenly, and stood alert and listening.

"Did you hear that?" she demanded. "They are in the kitchen. All three of them together! I saw them just now, but they did not see me. They were laughing together, and one of them had gold, which he was dividing with the rest. And they have come here to bring disgrace on this noble house. And there was I standing close by with a way to get rid of them in my head. . . . There was something that I wanted, and I couldn't find it. So I came to look, and I forget what it was. Such a beautiful plan, too, so very simple and yet perfect. My dearie, can't you help me to think what it was? If you can only help me we shall get rid of these men, and the trouble and disgrace will vanish, never to return. It isn't often that I get a good idea in this poor head of mine, and to forget it like that is cruel, cruel!"

Patience wept a little, and began to wring her hands again. Mary's old nurse had been in this state now for some years, though there were times, for longer or shorter periods, when she was in possession of all her faculties. She was not in the least dangerous; as a privileged old servant she had been allowed to wander

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from one house to the other at her pleasure. But Mary had never seen her so wild and excited before, and the thing troubled her.

"What do you know of our trouble?" she asked.

"Her ladyship told me. It was something to do with some money that Sir George owed to Mr. Mayfield, and which those men had come to get. And her ladyship could not help you, for Mr. Vincent has made her sell all her jewels already."

Mary fairly started. Was it possible that she was on the track of another family trouble, some new and black disgrace of which she had hitherto known nothing? It seemed hardly fair to take advantage of a weak-minded old woman in this, and yet —

"Who is this Mr. Vincent that you speak of?" Mary asked.

"Mr. Vincent — that is all I can tell you. He is young and handsome, and yet so wicked and unscrupulous. And it is to prevent him from speaking out that my lady has sold all her jewels. They are not hers to sell, but they have been disposed of all the same. I really do know who Mr. Vincent is, and why he has such a hold over her ladyship, but something gets in the way of my brain and I can't think what I ought to say. And I'm so tired."

The old woman suddenly dropped into a chair and began to whine like a child that has walked too far. Mary was accustomed to these sudden changes and knew how to humour them. She fairly lifted the old woman from her seat and led her to the dressing-room. Obedient as a child now, Patience lay down and closed her eyes. A moment later and she had fallen into a placid sleep. Mary regarded her with eyes of envy.

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"After all she is better off than I am," she murmured, "and her troubles are nearly over. What a blessing it is to be able to sleep when you want to! And here am I on the brink of a fresh and darker mystery than my own! I begin to understand now why Lady Dashwood looks so haggard and worried. And what does this Vincent know, who can blackmail my poor old second mother in this way! All the family jewels, over £30,000. Oh, how sad it is to be almost without a friend in the world! And yet Ralph Darnley promised me ——"

The colour rose to Mary's face as she pronounced Ralph's name. It was the one reflection that sweetened her thoughts as she lay on her bed waiting for the sleep that would not come. She turned from side to side; she could see by the saffron gleam on the blind that the summer dawn was close at hand.

Then at last she fell off into a kind of fitful slumber that was a mass of confused and hideous dreams. She was in some vague, indefinite kind of trouble, tangled up with a scheme of Mayfield's, and across a yawning gulf Ralph Darnley was holding out his hands to save her. And then it seemed to her that Ralph kissed her, and that she did not in the least mind it. After that they drifted apart again, and once more the baleful influence of Mayfield was uppermost. They were falling together down a deep pit with flames at the bottom; the fumes were so great that Mary could not breathe.

She woke up with a gasp and a cry, struggling for breath. The whole thing had been so vivid that Mary could not realise for a moment that she was sitting up in bed. Yet there she was, with the early morning

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sun shining through the blinds, and still she held her hand to her throat and fought for the breath that would not come.

Surely there must be something wrong here! Why was the room so insufferable, where did that stifling air come from? Then a draught of air came from somewhere, and the bedroom was almost instantly filled with a maze of thin smoke and vapour. There was no longer room for doubt. With a quick cry Mary sprang from her bed, for the Hall was on fire!

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CHAPTER XIX

A GUARDIAN ANGEL

THERE was no longer any question as to the house being on fire. Very rapidly Mary proceeded to don her clothing; her idea afterwards was to alarm the house. The girl was not conscious of any feeling of fear, though she was trembling from head to foot. She had had but a poor night's rest, and the strain of the previous day had tried her. And now as she huddled into her clothing, she was conscious of a kind of relief, the feeling that if the house was burnt down a way had been found out of her troubles.

There was an emotion almost of gladness in the thought. But the pride of race and place came back, and Mary hastened to her task. Dashwood Hall must be saved at any cost — the historic house must not be allowed to perish. There were pictures and works of art there that had almost a national interest.

Mary flung the door open and strode boldly into the corridor, but she did not gain a yard before she was driven back by a dense mass of suffocating smoke. The corridor was filled with it, thick, black, and overpowering. It was absolutely impossible to force a way through that blinding cloud. Mary screamed at the top of her voice, but no reply came. Already her brain began to reel, already her lungs almost ceased to work.

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There was only one thing for it — to shut the door and seek for some other exit.

Back in the bedroom the air was comparatively pure. The window looked on to a green court with a high hedge of clipped yew trees beyond. It was one of the quietest and most shady rooms in the house, and Mary had chosen it for that very reason. In the winter she occupied another apartment. But its very quietness frightened the girl now. As she looked out of the small diamond casement in the great stone mullion, she realised that it would be impossible for any grown figure to squeeze through. She might have taken the risk of jumping down on to the grass, but the bars of the mullion window were too close together to permit of the attempt. And already the draught from the open window was drawing the smoke into the room.

Listening intently, Mary could hear the sound of shouts and the tramping of feet; now, she caught the echo of horses' hoofs as mounted messengers galloped down the drive. She shouted aloud, but nobody appeared to hear her. The thick high hedge of yews seemed to smother her voice. It was dreadful to be caught in a trap like that, but Mary resolved to meet her fate bravely.

Probably the volume of smoke would cause unconsciousness long before the dreaded fire reached its victim. There would be no pain or suffering. It seemed to Mary that she had heard people speak of such things before. Well, she would die alone, and nobody would know how the end had come.

Not quite alone! Suddenly Mary remembered that old Patience was in the dressing-room and looked towards the couch there.

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She rubbed her eyes in astonishment. Patience was no longer there. Perhaps she had not been able to sleep, probably she had aroused herself very early and gone about her business. At any rate, she was not in the dressing-room, and Mary felt glad of it. The horror of the situation was lessened by the absence of the demented woman.

Greatly daring, Mary opened the window and screamed for help once more. She could hear yells and calls, and presently the steady throb of what she knew to be an engine. But all the time the smoke was growing thicker and denser in the room. So far Mary could not hear the crackling of flames, she was not sensible of the fact that the room was getting any warmer. There was always the hope that the fire might be subdued before it got a good hold of the building. A great deal of timber had gone to the building of Dashwood Hall, but the walls were of the most solid masonry, and it was quite possible for the fire to burn out a room or two without going any farther.

Something like an hour passed, an hour that seemed like eternity. The shouting and the tramping and the thudding were still going on. Then came a lull for the moment, and it seemed to Mary that somebody was calling her by name, somebody inside the house. She waited a moment, thinking perhaps that it was her excited fancy, but once more the call came, and this time from the corridor.

Mary thrilled as she heard the voice. At last they had discovered her absence. She opened the door and called in reply. The smoke was thick as ever, but there was no sign of flame. Out of the dense whirling mass a figure emerged and staggered breathlessly

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into the bedroom. It was the figure of a man with his handkerchief pressed to his mouth. He gasped for breath and closed the door behind him. His face was blackened and grimed with smoke, but Mary had no difficulty in recognising Ralph Darnley.

"Again," she said unsteadily, "you are like a guardian angel to me. This is the third time that you have come to save my life. Had they forgotten me?"

"It was all a misunderstanding," Ralph gasped. "In the confusion it was assumed that everybody was out of the house. Somebody professed to have seen you going off in the direction of the dower house. My landlord woke me up, saying that the Hall was on fire. And Lady Dashwood sent a message to ask if you were all right, and then we understood. It occurred to me that it would be impossible for you to escape by way of the window, and whilst the rest were discussing the best thing to be done, I made a dash for it. The house is full of the most blinding, suffocating smoke, but I can see no flames anywhere."

"And so you took your life in your hands like this for me?" Mary faltered. There was something almost of affection in the eyes which she turned on the stalwart figure by her side. "I was actually thinking of you at the very moment that you appeared. But how did you manage to find the way to this wing so easily?"

"I suppose by instinct," Ralph said. The question seemed to confuse him. "How brave and calm you are! But we are wasting time here. Mary, there is only one way for it. We shall have to fight our way through that smoke. There is no other chance. It will be quite a blindfold labour. But perhaps you could pick your way ——"

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"In the dark, with my eyes shut," Mary cried. "If I am to die, then at least I shall die in good company, with a brave, true man by my side. I shall not perish alone."

"You will not perish at all," Ralph said between his teeth. "You are reserved for a better and a sweeter fate than that, my darling. Heaven is going to rescue us for one another, despite your pride and despite anything that Mayfield may do. But these heroics are out of place in the face of the common danger. You have water here and towels?"

"Plenty of both in the dressing-room," Mary said. "What do you want them for?"

But Ralph made no reply. He had a stern task before him, and no time to waste in words. He took a couple of the largest towels and dipped them in the water jugs. Then he wrung out the moisture and wrapped the cold wet fabric round Mary's head. After he had led her to the door, he did the same for himself. Then he took Mary by the hand, and whispered that she was to lead the way.

The task was no easy one, well as Mary knew every inch of the house. She felt her way to the top of the stairs at length, but her head seemed like bursting now. Still, the pressure of Ralph's hand gave her courage. With him by her side, she felt like daring anything. As presently the air began to grow cooler and sweeter, it seemed to Mary that she was conscious of the scent of the roses.

Then the cloth was pulled from her face, and she felt the full delight of her lungs again. A great crowd had gathered on the lawn, the people burst into a torrent of cheers. It was all like a dream to Mary.

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She saw that Ralph was standing by her side breathless and triumphant.

"Do not crowd us like that," he said. "Please let Miss Dashwood have as much air as possible. Neither of us is the least hurt by the fire; indeed, so far as I can see, this is no fire at all. Has anybody a conveyance that will take Miss Dashwood as far as the dower house? It is only a little way, but still ——"

There were scores of people ready to comply with the request. Then the crowd parted as if by a kind of instinct, and Lady Dashwood appeared. She was pale and breathless, but not for one moment did she forget herself or her position.

"My dear child," she said, "you must come with me at once. Fancy you being in that house all the time and nobdy any the wiser! And they tell me that a gentleman who is a stranger here volunteered for your rescue in the bravest possible manner. If he is here I should like to thank him warmly for ——"

"This is Mr. Ralph Darnley," Mary explained. "He is not a stranger, for we met in Paris two years ago. Let me introduce Mr. Darnley to you."

Ralph bowed and moved towards the hand that Lady Dashwood held out to him. There were gracious words on his lips.

"It is impossible to thank you," she said, "but if you will come as far as the dower house with me, I dare say that I shall be able to — to ——"

The words seemed to freeze as Lady Dashwood's glance travelled over Ralph's face. Lady Dashwood took a step forward and would have fallen if Ralph had not put out an arm and supported her. Then there was an awkward silence.

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CHAPTER XX

THE meeting was quite an unexpected one for Ralph. He had his own powerful reason for not wishing to come in contact with Lady Dashwood, but the thing was done now, and there was no help for it. Ralph was the first to recover his self-possession. He saw that the colour was coming back to Lady Dashwood's face, and that it was very far from her intentions to make a scene. That would probably come later.

"There seems to be no conveyance here," Mary said. "And really it is not worth while to make all this fuss about me. I am quite myself again and capable of walking as far as the dower house with Lady Dashwood. Meanwhile, there is other work to do."

The excitement of the moment had passed, and willing hands were back once more at the task of putting out the flames. Of the little group of principal actors in the scene, nobody was more calm or more collected now than Lady Dashwood.

"Perhaps we had better walk," she said. "We can take the short cut through the shrubbery. And I shall be very glad if Mr. Darnley will accompany us. I presume, sir, that you have not had any breakfast?"

"I haven't," Ralph said. "Sir George has gone over to one of the farms for his. If you will be so

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good as to give me a mouthful of something, I will come back here and do my very utmost to save the old house. It would be a great pity to lose it."

"Indeed I am glad to hear that you are so anxious about the place," Lady Dashwood said with a significance that puzzled Mary, though it was by no means lost on Ralph. "The Hall is one of the finest places of its kind in England."

Ralph ate his breakfast in silence; Mary was silent too and pleaded a headache. She had had no sleep, she said, and was in need of rest. She ate little and drooped like a lily over her plate. When at length she rose, Ralph rose also.

"Please don't go yet," said Lady Dashwood in a voice with a touch of command in it. "I will just see that Mary is made comfortable, and then I should like to have a word with you, sir. There are so many willing workers at the Hall that one more or less will make no difference."

Ralph bowed. Lady Dashwood would be glad if he would go as far as the drawing-room. He waited there till his hostess returned, proud and white, with a stern expression in her eyes. She shut the door behind her and pointed to a seat.

"Pray do not stand," she said. "We may be some little time. Did I not understand my — Mary, to say that you are Mr. Ralph Darnley?"

"That is quite correct," Ralph said quietly. "Miss Mary made no mistake."

"Possibly not. The mistake is on your side. I do not wish to seem in the least curious or impertinent, but have you no other name?"

"For the present, none," said Ralph. "Will not

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your ladyship oblige me by leaving matters just as they are for the moment? My happiness, the happiness of everybody, depends upon a complete and absolute discretion. I did not desire to see you ——"

"No! I gathered that when I saw your face a night or two ago in the shrubbery. The moon was shining on your features, and it seemed to me that I was face to face with a ghost. But let me show you something, Mr. Darnley. It is a miniature of a man whom I have not seen for nearly forty years, the picture of my son. He left home for reasons which I need not go into, I never looked on his face again. I have never before shown the picture to anybody, but I have my very good reasons for showing it to you. What do you think of it?"

With trembling hands the old lady passed a miniature in a small gold frame over to Ralph. He gazed at the picture long and intently, with a flush on his face and something that was very like moisture in his eyes. He was silent for so long that Lady Dashwood felt constrained to speak.

"Well?" she asked. "I will try to restrain the natural curiosity of my sex and not ask too many questions. Did you ever see that face before?"

"You force me to reply," Ralph said slowly. "You have the advantage over me, Lady Dashwood."

"Please do not call me Lady Dashwood. Oh, I am not going to try to force your confidence; that will come to me in time. Only you have not yet replied to my question. I asked you if ever you have seen that face before?"

"Many a time and oft," Ralph said. "Is it very like me?"

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"Like you! It is a speaking likeness. When I came face to face with you to-day, it required all the seventy years of my social training to keep me from bursting into tears and throwing my arms about your neck. And nobody recognised you! But I forget that forty years have elapsed since my boy was in the midst of us. And now tell me, why do you persist in calling yourself Ralph Darnley?"

"I have never been known by any other name," Ralph replied. "Perhaps the time may come some day when I — but we need not discuss that. Please do not think me churlish or wanting in courtesy to you, Lady Dashwood."

Lady Dashwood shook her head mournfully. Something like tears stood in her eyes.

"I have no right to ask anything," she said. "I forfeited my right years ago. But, unless I am greatly mistaken, you could call me by a sweeter name than Lady Dashwood. My dear boy, I do not wish to pry into your secrets — you could not act in anything but a straightforward manner, I am certain. Your face tells me that. Nearly forty years ago I lost a son like you. How like he was to you I have proved by showing you that miniature. My son left Dashwood Hall vowing that nobody should ever see his face again there, and he kept his word. The blame was mine, and only mine, but I have been terribly punished for my treachery and deceit."

"I can hardly believe you guilty of those things, Lady Dashwood."

"Oh, but I was. It was the cruellest wrong, and he found me out. From that day to this I have known no happiness. Why do I talk like this to a stranger?

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I think you can guess. When I saw your face in the cloister the other night it seemed as if God had forgiven my sin and given my son back to me. Is that so?"

"This is very painful," Ralph stammered. "Will you trust me and be patient?"

"I can be patient. I have been patient for forty years. And your face speaks for you. Go on."

"There is little more for me to say," Ralph resumed. "For the present I can tell you nothing. If the son you speak of came back to-morrow not a soul would recognise him but you."

"And old Slight," Lady Dashwood said meaningly. "Pray do not forget him."

"And old Slight. Quite true. And I am the image of the Ralph Dashwood who left his home nearly forty years ago. There were reasons, therefore, why I did not desire to meet you, Lady Dashwood, till the time was ripe. But circumstances were too strong for me; sooner or later it had been my hope that — that ——"

"I begin to understand," Lady Dashwood said as Ralph hesitated. "For the present you desire to be just Ralph Darnley. But the deception cannot continue for long."

"For long enough," Ralph smiled. "Let me confide in you to a certain extent, Lady Dashwood. I am a sentimental man as my father was before me."

"I know he was," Lady Dashwood said absently. "If he had not been, my punishment might have been less — but I am assuming too much. Please go on."

"I am a lonely man. My mother died early, and my father and myself were thrown a great deal to-

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gether. We spent most of our time in California, where the population is not great. You can understand how it was that I became so retrospective. And when I came to hear of the mystery that my father had kept till the end, I began to have dreams of my own. I began to see myself the master of a lovely place, like Dashwood Hall, for instance. . . . You see that I am speaking from my heart to you now, and I know that you are going to respect my confidence and sympathise with me."

"As long as you look at me with those eyes of — yours," Lady Dashwood murmured. "We are going to be great friends, thank God. But please go on."

"Well, I had my dreams of the kind of wife who would make my home a Paradise for me, and two years ago I met her in Paris. She was proud and reserved and haughty, but all the same I knew that my instincts had not played me false. The girl likes me — of that I am certain. It sounds egotistical, but I believe that she loves me without knowing it. Had I told her of the fine old house and the good old name, there would have been no obstacles in the way. But I gave the curb to my inclinations, and my secret remained untold. . . . For nearly two years I did not see that girl, not till I came down here less than a week ago. Can you guess who it is?"

"Mary," Lady Dashwood cried. "My dear, dear Mary! And she does not know, she does not dream — indeed, how should she? You want her to ——"

"To care for me, Ralph Darnley. Mary has a terrible curse, her family pride comes before her duty, and even before her religion. It is the idol that she has come to worship. Mind, I am by no means blind

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to the girl's virtues; I should not love her as I do otherwise. But I want to break down that family pride, I want to show Mary and prove to her that it is a mere nothing by the side of love and duty and common humanity. That is why it is merely Ralph Darnley who speaks to you to-day. When Mary owns her love for Ralph Darnley, and holds that love better than her pride of race, then I can speak. It may be that there is a hard lesson to be learned first, but I shall not shrink from that."

"That is how your — my son used to speak," Lady Dashwood murmured. "So gentle and firm, and yet so kind and considerate! You are going to make Mary happy despite herself."

"That is my intention," Ralph went on. "Look how she is acting now. Sir George has come within the grip of a scoundrel. I am alluding to Horace Mayfield. He has schemed out all this trouble and disaster so as to get Mary in his power. The girl's senseless pride has been Mayfield's strongest weapon. You know all about those sheriff's men, of course. Rather than have a whisper of the trouble spoken, Mary is ready to marry Horace Mayfield and condemn herself to lifelong misery and humiliation. It seems almost incredible that a girl should be so frozen into the ice of her family pride. But Mary is not going to marry Horace Mayfield, she is destined for me. The lever to remove the stone from the path is mine, and I shall know how to use it when the time comes. Already I have so brought it about that Sir George can be free of Mayfield in the course of a few days, but there is still Mary to deal with. I do not quite see my way clearly with her, but fate may play into

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my hands and find me an instrument which ——"

Ralph paused hurriedly, for another man came noisily into the room. He was rather like Ralph as regards figure and feature and trick of expression, but his face was effeminate, and his very black eyes a little shifty and sinister. In dress and manner he had the air of a gentleman, but at the same time there was a suggestion of loudness and hardness about him that belied the description. He did not see Ralph, for he advanced noisily into the room.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," he said. "Why are you hiding here, old lady?"

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CHAPTER XXI

RALPH'S face grew stern as he stared at the intruder. The new-comer returned the stare with insolent audacity. The pleased and softened expression had left Lady Dashwood's features, she looked white and anxious, and Ralph could see that her hands were trembling. It was quite evident that she was greatly afraid of the man with the cold black eyes.

"Beg pardon," the newcomer muttered. "Didn't know you were engaged. Friend of yours?"

"Mr. Ralph Darnley," Lady Dashwood said. "A very old friend of the family, or, at any rate his father was. Let me introduce you to Mr. Vincent Dashwood."

"I have heard of you," said Ralph, with a queer vibration in his voice. "I understand that one time your father had some idea of claiming the succession to the property. I have heard my father speak of your branch of the family."

Dashwood muttered something that Ralph could not quite follow.

"We could tell a different story, the old lady and self," he went on suggestively. "I shall have a pleasant surprise for Sir George some of these days. I'm only waiting for some papers from the other side and

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I shall move. My father married a Californian lady, you see, and they are pretty careless there in their keeping of records. Still, it is only a matter of time."

"That is very strange," Ralph said grimly. "My father also married a Californian lady. Oh, you need not look so uncomfortable; I am not likely to interfere with your claim. Indeed, I may be in a position to assist you a little later."

Just for the moment there was a queer grey tint on Vincent Dashwood's face. He seemed to be horribly frightened about something. But the expression passed, and his old saturnine look returned. Ralph was smiling, too, as if something amused him. Lady Dashwood glanced from one to the other furtively, as if she feared some outbreak of violence. There was no means of reading Ralph's thoughts from the expression of his face, or Dashwood would not have been standing there so utterly at his ease. For he was a scoundrel of the vilest type, the class who do not hesitate to blackmail women.

"Well, I'll just go and look round till you have finished with the gentleman," Dashwood said airily. "Then mind that you are ready for our little business, old lady. I've got to be in London this evening, and no mistake about it. By the way, the Hall is in the hands of the firemen and police, but I'm told that no great damage has been done."

The speaker swaggered from the room with his hands in his pockets, whistling as he went. Ralph's expression grew *stern and hard.*

"So this is one of the crosses that you have to bear," he said. "At the risk of being curious, I must ask you a question. Is this the man for whose sake you

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have been raising money on the family jewels? How long has it been going on?"

Lady Dashwood clasped her hands and the tears came into her eyes.

"Nearly two years," she whispered. "Thank God, you have come to me, for my strength would not have borne the burden much longer. Nobody knows anything; nobody suspects but Slight. And he pretended to be my grandson. We were both utterly deceived. He knows everything, he told me all about the original quarrel, he had letters which I had written from time to time to your — to my son. And he is an infamous scoundrel. He desired me to keep his presence and his claim a secret, and for the credit of the family I did so. The few who know him think he comes from the Yorkshire side of the house. He traded on my fears; he knew what I thought of him. And when he had drained me of thousands, and in sheer despair I pressed him to push on his claim, he always pleaded that he could not get certain papers — his mother's marriage certificate, I think it was. Mind you, I believed in him implicitly; with all the sacred private information he had, I could do nothing else. And Slight also was equally deceived. He has had nearly everything of mine that he could lay his hands on. You see that I am powerless to protest; if I had forced him to speak, there would only have been a scandal. He has been getting bolder lately or he would not have spoken so freely to you just now. And directly I saw your face to-day I knew at once that it had all been a hideous mistake. You will free me from that man, Ralph?"

"Not quite yet," Ralph replied. "You must play

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your part a little longer. If, as you say, you have nothing more to bestow, you need not be afraid of him. That man has given me a new idea for bringing about the object that I have most closely at heart. I am going to make use of him, if necessary. If it is not necessary, then I shall make very short work of Mr. Vincent Dashwood. But before that you must tell me everything. Mind, I say everything as regards my — your son's marriage with Maria Edgerton. I believe that marriage was the cause of all the mischief."

"Indeed it was," Lady Dashwood said. Her voice was filled with the deepest sadness. "What will you think of me when you hear of the part I played in that unhappy affair? But I cannot tell you now, I am unfit to go into the matter at present. The shock of meeting you has been almost more than I can bear. Come and dine with me here on Saturday night, and I will tell you everything. My dear Ralph — if I may call you so in private — is it possible that your coming is the augury of a happier time for me? Happiness I won't ask for, but I should like to go down to the grave in peace."

"It shall be no fault of mine if you do not," Ralph replied. "I have planned out my scheme and I am going through with it to the end. There may be troubles and trials to come, but everything is going to end happily for us all. Good-bye."

Ralph held out his hand, but Lady Dashwood drew him down to her chair.

"Give me a kiss, my bonny boy," she whispered. "It may be as well for us to keep up the formality and play the drama till the time comes, but it is no harm to kiss an old woman and let her look into the

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eyes that she has seen in her dreams for forty weary years. God bless you, Ralph, and prosper your schemes, for nothing you do will be wrong."

Ralph went on his way presently through the shrubbery in the direction of the Hall. A great crowd of people still lingered there, but the police had kept almost intact the trim lawn and the beds of brilliant flowers. Inside the house were a posse of police and a few firemen from Longtown. In the stable yard the scarlet fire engine glittered in the sun. So far as it was possible to see, no great harm had been done.

Nobody was allowed in the house except the firemen and police, an inspector informed Ralph, who had asked for Sir George. None of the structure had been much damaged, none of the furniture had suffered anything except from smoke and water. There was just a suspicion that one of the great beams under the hall floor was still smouldering, and the firemen were going to stay until they were absolutely sure on the point.

"Most extraordinary thing, Darnley," Sir George said. "There seemed to be nothing but smoke. Slight will tell you that there was nothing but smoke. At the present moment an expert in this kind of things is making an examination with a view to discovering the cause of the outbreak. Nuisance to have these people here, but it can't be helped."

"Better these, Sir George, than Mr. Mayfield's friends," Slight croaked. "At any rate, we have got rid of them for the present. If somebody set the house afire on purpose, they could not have done us a better turn, seems to me."

Slight spoke loudly as a man in a kind of uniform came up. He touched his cap to Sir George, and

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looked fixedly at the old butler. Evidently he had overheard what was said.

"Many things more unlikely than that," he said. "Sir George, I think that I have discovered the origin of the mischief, if you will kindly come this way."

"Of course I was joking," Slight said indignantly. "You don't suppose that I mean to imply that the fire was anything but an accident, Mr. Sayers?"

"All the same it was no accident," the official said grimly. "If you will come this way, I will prove to you that the fire was a wicked and deliberate act on the part of somebody."

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CHAPTER XXII

WHO DID IT?

THERE was a smile on Slight's face, as if he rather enjoyed the situation. After all was said and done, the culprit had been successful in bringing about the thing the old butler most desired. Fortunately no harm had been done to the house; there was nothing the matter beyond the damage caused by smoke and water, nothing that the work of a day or two could not put right. At the same time this attempt to destroy the house had been the means of removing from it the trio whose presence had been so great a humiliation. The police had cleared everybody out of the house, indeed the Hall was likely to remain empty now till they had investigated the causes of the fire.

"It might have been worse, sir," Slight whispered to Ralph. "It's a good way of getting rid of those fellows till Sir George is ready to pack them off altogether. Whoever did this was a sort of friend of ours."

Ralph started. Slight's suggestion had given him a sudden idea.

"That may be," he said, "but you will admit that the experiment is a risky one. The place might have been utterly destroyed. Still, it is yet to be proved

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that this is the work of an incendiary. I can hardly believe that it is."

The inspector led the way to the Hall. So far as the eye of a novice could judge, it was here that the fire had burst out. The floor was black and scarred and a few beams were still hot from the effects of the flames. The floor was littered with some crisp ashes.

"Now I want to call your attention to this, Sir George," the inspector said. "Nothing has been destroyed here, nothing but the floor and a portion of the ceiling. There must have been a very fierce blaze here, and yet there is nothing for the flames to feed on. Then where did all those crisp short ashes come from? See what a pile there is of them! What was it that burnt here so fiercely?"

"It certainly is a strange thing," Sir George murmured.

"Very strange, sir. There was nothing left on the hall floor last night, I suppose? No packing cases or anything of that kind, Sir George?"

"There was not," Slight exclaimed. "I can answer for that, nothing whatever."

"Which renders my suspicions all the more certain," the official went on. "The short crisp ashes represented straw, a large bundle of straw dumped down on the floor and set fire to by some person or other. Please look at this."

The speaker stooped down and gathered up a handful of the crisp ashes, smoothing them out on the palm of his hand. At intervals there were yellow shining specks in the grains.

"Will you kindly look closely?" he said. "Amongst the charred mass you can plainly see specks

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of straw that have escaped the fire. It seems to me an amazing thing that anybody could carry straw into the house like this without being found out. But there it is, and there is an end of it. You are quite sure as to the straw, Sir George?"

"Quite," Dashwood muttered. "Most amazing. We did not go to bed till very late, which makes it all the more remarkable. It must have been practically daylight before the miscreant could have begun to work."

"It certainly is a novelty," the Inspector replied, "but I want to convince you fully that I am right in my conclusion. You will see that parts of the ashes, very minute parts, are plastered together as if they were wet. Also you will see that the floor has been burnt in a kind of channel nearly as far as the door. It is only a narrow channel, but at the same time it is perfectly well defined. Now, what caused the floor to burn in that erratic manner? I am going to tell you. Let us follow that track up as far as the door. There is a large stone with little cracks at the side into which a liquid of some kind has fallen or run rather."

The speaker bent down and rolled a scrap of paper into the moisture which lay shining in the crack of the stone. Then he handed the paper to Sir George.

"Will you kindly smell that, sir," he asked, "and tell me what you make of it?"

"No trouble at all about that," Dashwood exclaimed; "the stuff is paraffin beyond a doubt."

"Precisely. The straw was dumped on the floor and then saturated with paraffin. If the straw was slightly damp, that would account for the dense quantity of smoke. The paraffin ran into little ripples over

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the floor, which accounts for the strange track of the flames. But we can ascertain that to a certainty."

A question or two being asked, it was discovered that a large can of petroleum was missing from one of the tool-sheds. A little later the empty tin was discovered in one of the flower-beds. The discussion was at its height when Mary appeared. She looked very pale and shaky, otherwise she maintained her self-possession. But as she listened to the strange story it seemed to Ralph Darnley that she was disturbed about something. The pallor of her face became more marked, her eyes filled with something like fear. Did the girl know anything about it, Ralph asked himself? If not, why did she appear to be so strangely moved by the plain recital? The thought was ignoble and unworthy, but Ralph could not free himself from it altogether. He drew Mary a little apart from the rest; he could see that she was trembling with some strong emotion.

"The old house has had a very narrow escape," he began. "All Horace Mayfield's carefully prepared plans were very nearly in vain. If the house had been destroyed ——"

"I — I did not look at it in that light," Mary stammered. "As you say, nothing could have mattered had the house perished. Where are those men now?"

"I don't know. It does not in the least matter. As things stand at present, the police will not permit anybody to be in the house except one or two like ourselves. Until their investigations are complete and they have gathered all their evidence, nobody will be permitted to sleep in the house. The men you speak of will be treated just like anybody else. It seems as

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if Fate were fighting on your side, Mary. You have no occasion to fear Horace Mayfield now."

Mary smiled faintly. It was evident that she was deeply troubled about something.

"I think I understand you," she said presently. "The loss of the house would have been a dreadful grief to me. But, still, these natural misfortunes happen to all of us, and I daresay I could have suffered the loss as well as most people. And the blow would have possessed many compensations. To be free from Horace Mayfield, ah!"

Mary finished her speech with a deep, long-drawn sigh. But the whiteness did not leave her face, the look of fear still lurked in her blue eyes. Ralph took a step forward and bent down so that he could whisper his words into Mary's ear.

"Your pride would have carried you through that," he said. "At the same time, your position had driven you almost to despair. You know more than you care to say, Mary, you know more than the rest of us how the fire came about. Can you look me in the face and deny it? Are you going to tell me the truth?"

Mary's face flamed with anger. She stepped back, and her passionate eyes flashed in Ralph's direction. He could see the crimson mounting to her temples.

"Perhaps you would like to accuse me of the crime?" she asked breathlessly. "Perhaps you would like to suggest that I did it to save a scandal? That I risked my own life, and the lives of other people, because I was afraid of a paltry disgrace? Is there anything else that you would like to imply, Mr. Darnley?"

"You are talking nonsense," Ralph said coldly,

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"and you know it. I am not insinuating anything of the kind. But you know quite well who the culprit is."

Suddenly Mary's manner changed. She grew quiet and docile. Ralph could see that her lips were trembling, and that she found it hard to keep back the tears.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "Think how hard I am tried, how hard it all is for me. If I were a man I should probably take a more rational view of the case. Remember how my whole heart and soul are wrapped up in this house. I could fight to save it from contamination as a mother would try to shield an erring son. If I lost it I should die!"

"You would not," Ralph said. "If, by any trick of fortune, Dashwood Hall passed out of your possession, it would be the very best thing that ever happened to you. If you had to go out into the world to get your own living it would be the making of your character. It would bring out all the natural nobility of your nature — you would look back to the past with remorse. Of that I am certain."

"Indeed," Mary said coldly. "Perhaps you would like to bring that misfortune about?"

"I should," Ralph retorted. "If I could be cruel to be kind like that, I should not hesitate for a moment. But we are getting a long way from the point. I said that if you had no hand in this business, you know who did it."

"I have my suspicions. But, until I can verify them, it would be wrong to speak. Even if I knew for certain, I should hesitate to tell anybody what I had discovered. One thing I can promise you — the

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attempt will not be made again. . . . What are those people so excited about? Have they made some fresh discovery? Let us go and see."

Sir George and the Inspector were closely examining some shining object that the latter held in the palm of his hand. There was a grim look on Slight's face.

"What is it?" Rlaph asked. "What is the latest sensational development of the mystery?"

"This, sir," the Inspector exclaimed. "We have found this match-box under the burnt straw."

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE silver match-box was a peculiar one and quite out of the common run of such things. It had a spring lid deeply engraved with a hunting scene, in the centre of the medallion a pair of initials were ingeniously woven together in small stones. The Inspector asked Sir George if he could identify it as part of the family property.

"Never saw it before," Dashwood said promptly. "I am certain that the thing does not belong to anybody in my house. What do you make the initials to be?"

"'V.D.' or 'D.V.', sir, the Inspector said. "That is perfectly plain. Now does anybody know a person who bears those initials? I should say that the matches are of foreign make, for they are flat, wooden ones, such as one rarely sees in this country. The first thing we have to do is to find out who is this 'V.D.' or 'D.V.' is. He seems to have dropped his match-box into the fire. Probably, the blaze startled him by its suddenness. But I don't suppose we shall find much difficulty in proving who the owner is."

Sir George shook his head: evidently the puzzle was utterly beyond him. Slight crossed over to one of the windows as if the whole subject had ceased to interest him. He made a sign to Ralph and the latter joined

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the old servant. He could see that Slight was suppressing a certain excitement.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Have you solved the problem?"

"No, Mr. Ralph, I've only made it worse," Slight whispered. "I know quite well who that box belongs to, for I've seen it in his possession a score of times, to say nothing of the initials. Did you not meet a Mr. Vincent Dashwood at the dower house to-day?"

Ralph started in his turn. Vincent Dashwood's initials were on that box surely enough. And, that being the case, what did Mary know of the man? Was she shielding the man who gave out more or less directly that he was the proper owner of Dashwood Hall? Mary was not the girl to show any clemency to an impostor, and if, on the other hand, she did not regard him as an impostor she would be the last person to pretend to a position that she had no right to occupy. But Slight would know.

"I did meet that man you name, but I can't understand how you came to know it so soon," Ralph said. "A tiger, if I ever saw one, Slight. And he let me know pretty clearly that he had more than a passing claim to *a deal* that other people are enjoying. Is Mr. Vincent Dashwood pretty well known to people here, Slight?"

"Not to anybody but her ladyship and myself," Slight replied. "Mind you, I can't make out whether he's an impostor or not; at least, I was very uncertain in my mind until you came along, sir. He claims to be the son of the late Ralph Dashwood and he has proofs that would satisfy any court in England; and anyone except me. As yet he can't produce the cer-

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tificate of marriage of his mother and father. But he has any number of private papers,— letters from her ladyship to her son and all the rest of it, to say nothing of being familiar with the place. He didn't want to make a fuss about his claim; he wanted to have it quite plain first. He's been here for a long time."

"Blackmailing Lady Dashwood, I suppose? The fellow is too cowardly to claim the property out and out. In that case he would either have to substantiate his claim or run the risk of a long term of imprisonment if he failed. And, meanwhile, Lady Dashwood displays a weakness that is almost criminal. She half doubts this rascal, and yet at the same time she allows him to take the proceeds of the disposal of the family jewels. Half of the weakness is dictated by the dread of Miss Mary finding out the truth. If there are other reasons ——"

"Ay, there are other reasons, Mr. Ralph," Slight said in a broken voice. "If you only knew everything, you would pity her ladyship. She has kept this secret as well as she has kept the rest. Miss Mary knows nothing; she was meant to know nothing."

"And now she will know everything, everybody will know everything. The story of the match-box will have to be told, and the owner will have to explain how it came here and who he is. You should have known better, Slight, than try to keep a secret like this. Sooner or later the explosion was bound to come. What are you going to do about it now?"

"I'm not going to do anything, sir," Slight said bluntly. "It is not for me in my position to push myself forward. Let the police hunt the matter up

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for themselves. If Mr. Vincent Dashwood likes to lie low it makes no difference to us."

Ralph smiled at the suggestion. It was so like the policy of the house to leave things to chance like this. In a vague way, Ralph began to see that Fate was playing into his hands. He would let the rod fall. He would be cruel to be kind. As to the rest, it was in Mary's hands; all would depend upon how she behaved for the next day or two. It all stood out clearly in Ralph's mind now like the thread of a connected story.

"I'll go as far as the dower house," he said thoughtfully. "I should like to say a few words to Mr. Vincent Dashwood. Am I likely to find him there?"

"You are that, Mr. Ralph," Slight snapped. "When he isn't spending the money that does not belong to him, he is generally to be found not far from her ladyship. And this game has been going on for the last two years. I'm an old man, and hope I know my position in the place to which God has called me, but I've come very near to shooting that man more than once. Calls himself a Dashwood, and he has all the papers to prove himself a Dashwood, and yet he is no more a chip off the old block than I am. And yet you can't trip him up in anything, only in one way."

"And what is that?" Ralph smiled.

"Well, he wasn't astonished to see you, sir. He pretends to be the son of the late Ralph Dashwood, and, as such must have a pretty good idea of his father's physical appearance. Now you are the very image of what Mr. Ralph used to be. And this Vincent does not comment upon your likeness to my late young mas-

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ter. Why don't you step in, sir, why don't you step in and drive the blackguard away?"

"All in good time," Ralph replied. "You may rest assured that I shall speak out to some purpose when I am ready. Now I'll go as far as the dower house. I take it that the family will sleep there to-night."

Ralph crossed the lawn thoughtfully in the direction of the dower house. He understood the footman to say that her ladyship was somewhere in the garden.

Lady Dashwood was found at last, seated under a spacious cedar tree, which was one of the ornaments of the garden. She was not alone, for Vincent Dashwood was by her side. The man seemed to be hot and angry about something, and it was evident that Lady Dashwood had been weeping. A quick anger possessed Ralph, and it was all he could do to refrain from laying hands on this impostor, who was causing such trouble and misery here. A few words and the bubble would be pricked. Still, there was always the great plan before Ralph's eyes, the plan of his life with which nothing must interefere. He would have withdrawn now, only Lady Dashwood caught sight of him and beckoned him to her side. Vincent Dashwood scowled openly at the intruder.

"I was just coming over to see you," Ralph said. "You will be pleased to hear that the fire has done no particular damage, nothing that a little soap and water and some paint can't put right. But for the present the police and the fire people prefer that the house should not be used. As to the servants ——"

"They can all come here," Lady Dashwood said.

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"I will go over and see Sir George without delay. But, seeing that the house is all right, why do the authorities interfere in this unreasonable way?"

"They think that they have made an important discovery," Ralph explained. "They are under the impression that the fire is not an accident, and, really, I have been converted to the same opinion. It seems almost incredible, but somebody brought a lot of straw into the house and set it on fire, after saturating the mass with paraffin. There is no doubt about the straw, for fragments of it can be seen in the ashes, and distinct traces of paraffin can be found. Had not the floor and the walls been as hard as iron, a great tragedy might have taken place. But, to make matters certain, the police found a silver match-box with a monogram in the ashes."

"The blackguards!" Vincent Dashwood cried. "I'm glad of that. Let us hope that the box will lead to the discovery of the culprit."

"That is not quite likely," Ralph said drily. "I came over here on purpose to get at the bottom of that match-box business. It is rather a novelty in the way of a box, for I have seen it — even the matches are original. The monogram on it is 'V. D.,' which happens to be your initials, Mr. Dashwood. To go further, old Slight says the box is yours. Can you account for this strange happening?"

Dashwood started and changed colour. He plunged his hands into his pockets apparently in search of something he was unable to find.

"I've lost it," he cried. "There is no denying the fact, Mr. Darnley, that I had just the kind of box you describe. It is possible that I dropped it, and the

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culprit picked it up. I should hardly be likely — to ——"

The speaker paused, and Ralph filled in the rest of the speech for him.

"I perfectly understand," he said drily. "It is hardly likely that Mr. Vincent Dashwood would go out of his way to destroy a property which sooner or later he looks forward to enjoying as his own. I think that is what you mean to convey?"

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CHAPTER XXIV

A FRESH CALAMITY

DASHWOOD nodded sulkily. He had a vague idea that Ralph was making fun of him in some way. Still, he was understood to say that such was his precise meaning. Lady Dashwood rose and walked off in the direction of the house; she had to see to the comfort of her expected visitors.

"I hope you will dine with us to-night, Mr. Darnley," she said. "Just Sir George and Mary, with Vincent here — nothing more than a quiet family party."

"Too quiet and too family for me," Dashwood muttered. "You can count me out. Besides, I have the most important business in London to-night."

Lady Dashwood looked relieved. There was no mistaking the expression of her face as she turned away. Dashwood noticed it, and his face flushed dully. He made a motion to follow, but Ralph laid a strong hand upon his arm.

"One moment, if you please," he said, "I should like to have a few words with you on the subject of that match-box. The police are pretty certain to ask you a great many questions concerning it, as you can see for yourself?"

"Let 'em ask," growled Dashwood, "it's nothing

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to do with me. I dropped that box, and the chap who set fire to the house picked it up."

"But suppose that chap, as you call him, happened to see you hanging about the house at a very early hour in the morning, a groom or somebody of that kind, who was prepared to swear to your identity? What then, my dear sir?"

Ralph was only drawing a bow at a venture; he was really working out a little theory of his own, but the arrow went home to the feather. Dashwood's face turned to a dull grey; he seemed to be utterly unnerved for the moment.

"Look here," he blustered presently, "what do you think you are likely to gain by asking me all these prying questions? Suppose I *was* hanging about the place last night. What then? Isn't it natural? Can't you understand the interest I take in my own property? You don't suppose that I should be likely to burn down a house of my own that contained some fifty thousand pounds worth of artistic treasures?"

"Your logic is too strong for me," Ralph smilingly admitted. "As the claimant to the property and the title you are hardly likely to destroy the house. But there is one thing that puzzles me — if things are as you say, why do you not press your claim?"

"Because I am short of a certain document. It is rather an important document for it happens to be my mother's marriage certificate. But I am informed that the proper will comes into my possession soon, and then I can move. Till that time I have decided to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Meaning that Sir George is to remain in blissful ignorance, I presume?"

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"That's about it. Let him make the best of his reign. And that stuck-up daughter of his! She'll get her face to the grindstone before she is much older. Besides, there is another matter. Lady Dashwood has to be considered."

With difficulty Ralph disguised his contempt. A fine consideration the speaker had for Lady Dashwood! He was trading cunningly on her weakness and her desire to avoid scandal. It was his cue to pretend that he did not care to take any steps during the lifetime of the unhappy old lady. He had stripped her pretty well of all she had, without any risk to himself. So long as the golden stream flowed he need never fear.

Directly he came to make his claim he would be asked searching questions and would have to satisfy keen legal minds of the honesty of his proofs. Meanwhile, he preferred to blackmail an innocent old lady who was too ill and broken down to protest. Ralph read the fellow like an open book, but he was going to make use of him later, if needs be. Therefore it was that he disguised his feelings now.

"That sounds very creditable," he said. "It is very good of you to consider Lady Dashwood's feelings in this way. I hope she is correspondingly grateful."

"She isn't anything of the kind," Dashwood protested. "She fairly hates me. Every bit of affection that she has is centred on Sir George Dashwood's girl. Everything must be made smooth for Mary. Maybe her pride will have a bit of a dash before long. I don't know why I am telling you all these things, except that you seem a good sort. For all I know to the contrary, you may be a police spy inquiring into

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my past. All the same, I don't think the old lady would stoop to that kind of thing."

"You are quite right," Ralph said drily. "I'm sure she couldn't. I must be going now. I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you at dinner to-night?"

Dashwood winked significantly. There were better attractions elsewhere. The air seemed to be all the sweeter and purer after he had gone. Very slowly and thoughtfully Ralph made his way across the fields in the direction of his temporary abode. Fate seemed determined to place all the threads in his hands; everything was arranging itself just as he could have wished. His plan of action became quite clear and plain. There were certain circumstances to be taken into consideration, more particularly the way that Mary would act in the future. And Vincent Dashwood would be an important pawn in the game. By the time that it became necessary to dress for dinner Ralph had worked it all out.

He walked across the fields in the direction of the dower house. It was a lovely night, clear and bright, with no breath of air stirring. Ralph could see the red gables of the Hall beyond the noble elms and beeches, and a pleasant picture rose before his eyes. He could see himself as master of the place with Mary by his side — not the Mary of the proud, cold face and haughty eye, but another Mary, soft and beautiful, as she emerged chastened and purified from the furnace of the family pride. There would be trouble and humiliation first, but it should all come about, or Ralph would know the reason why.

He was still debating the matter as he reached the dower house and a well-trained footman took him as

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far as the drawing-room. The blinds were not down yet, so that the room was filled with the saffron glory of the sunset. It was all so refined and homelike, so different to anything that Ralph had ever seen before. It was the thing that Ralph had dreamt of, the home-life that had occupied much of his waking dreams. It lay before him now, but there was much to be done first.

Lady Dashwood came stately and smiling into the room. The look in her eyes was warm and affectionate as Ralph took her hand. Mary was not down yet, she explained, but the girl was dressing for dinner, and she was much better for a long sleep. Then Mary came into the room, serene and calm, with a flush on her beautiful face as she caught sight of Ralph.

"You have heard all the good news?" she asked. "The Hall has not been in the least damaged by the fire. My father ran in to tell me a little time ago, and he has gone back, preferring to dress at home. I understand that we shall be back home on Saturday."

"So I am told," Ralph replied. "It has been a great inconvenience, of course, but it most opportunely rid you of very undesirable visitors. By the time that Saturday comes you will be in a position to defy them."

"Indeed, I hope so," Mary said, with the deep flush still on her face. "My father intends to bring those documents so marvellously recovered here with him to-night, and to-morrow he will take them to London. Mr. Mayfield is a clever man, but circumstances have been too strong for him this time. Mr. Darnley, you are our good fairy; without you I have not the least idea what we should have done."

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"Don't be so sure of that," Ralph smiled. "The fairy of my time always seemed to want something in return for past favours, and you may find that I am keeping very closely to precedent. But is not Sir George very late?"

A big clock over the carved oak mantel chimed the hour of eight. Lady Dashwood shook her head, and explained that one must make allowances just now. There would be no great harm done if the dinner waited for five minutes. It was all the same to Ralph, who asked nothing better than to sit in that perfect atmosphere and contemplate the beauty of the girl before him. He had to wait some time for the prize, but he knew that it would fall into his fingers at last. There was one short cut to victory, but he wasn't going to take that way. He watched the sunshine playing on Mary's face, he seemed to see clean through the mask of pride to the pure white soul below.

"I am going to ask you a question," the girl said. "You have never told me what was your business here, except that you had lost your money and that you had come into these parts to pick up something from the wreck. Is everything gone, Mr. Darnley?"

"Everything," Ralph smiled, "save honour. My father trusted Horace Mayfield, and the result is that when I leave here I shall have to get my living. I don't quite know what I am going to do, but I am strong and capable and steady. I may say ——"

"Here is Sir George at last," Lady Dashwood exclaimed. "What a hurry he seems to be in. Mary, my dear, will you please to ring the bell and tell Seddon we are ready for dinner. . . . Why ——"

Sir George had come hurriedly into the room. The

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white tie had come unfastened and hung in two streamers down his shirt front, but he did not seem to notice it. His face was as white as his tie; his forehead was damp with moisture.

"I've lost them," he cried; "stolen out of my desk! All those precious papers! And now I am more in the power of that scoundrel Mayfield than ever! I — I ——"

He dropped into a chair and burst into a flood of maudlin, senile tears.

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CHAPTER XXV.

RALPH'S first feeling was one of contempt. It was almost incredible that a man of Sir George's position could behave in so childish and weak a fashion. Here was the diplomatist who had been so popular in Paris, so bland and dignified, assuming the *rôle* of a silly girl who had lost some foolish ornament. For the time being he had cast his manhood entirely behind him. He sat on the couch with the tears streaming down his cheeks, great sobs burst from his chest.

"Gone!" he wailed. "Absolutely vanished. I locked them up in a desk last night, or the night before, and now they have disappeared. Don't tell me they have not been stolen, because I know better. Besides, nothing else is disturbed. And those papers were there to prove my absolute claim to Dashwood Hall. With those documents in my possession I could have raised as much money as I needed. I could have returned here in a day or two and rid myself of that scoundrel, Mayfield, for ever. He meant to cover me with ignominy and disgrace, but the fire prevented that. And now he has managed to get those papers stolen."

"That is impossible," Ralph cried. "He did not know of their existence."

"Why not! How can you prove that he didn't

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know? He is one of the cleverest scoundrels in the world. He gets to know everything, and he was actually under my roof on the very night that the papers were so marvellously recovered. It is just possible that he was spying about all the time."

"It does not seem at all probable," Lady Dashwood said in a faint whisper.

"Oh, yes, it does," Sir George replied. "I'm quite ready to argue it out either way. We will admit that Mayfield didn't know till later, till the next morning, in fact, when I told him what had happened, and practically ordered him out of the house. He saw at once then that he no longer held me in his grip; he wanted nobody to tell him that those precious papers were close at hand. He made up his mind to obtain possession of them without delay. Therefore, he invented the idea of the fire — a fire that would cause a deal of smoke and confusion and yet not do much harm. Under cover of the fire he stole the papers."

Ralph was listening with a kind of painful toleration of the snuffling speaker. A startling idea came into his mind now. He glanced at Lady Dashwood, who seemed to read his thoughts. In the light of their especial knowledge, facts pointed to quite another individual as the culprit. If the fire had been the work of an incendiary, then that criminal was undoubtedly Vincent Dashwood, whose matchbox had been found in the ashes. Vincent Dashwood had palpably been uneasy when the missing match-box had been mentioned, he was still more uneasy at Ralph's suggestion that he had been hanging about Dashwood Hall within an hour or so of the outbreak. Was there some deep and powerful reason why Vincent Dashwood desired to see

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the old house burnt to the ground? Was it to bury some secret in the ashes?

The more Ralph pondered over this, the deeper the mystery became. He could see quite clearly how Mayfield's scheme would benefit by possession of those papers. What he could not fathom was what Vincent Dashwood had to gain by a disastrous fire. He would go into this without taking anybody into his confidence, Ralph thought. There was yet another danger that struck much closer at the root of his happiness — the position in which Mary stood in the face of this catastrophe.

He glanced across at the girl, who stood on the far side of the drawing-room with the light of the shaded lamps on her face. He could see that her features were pale and drawn, that there was a hunted, haunted look in her eyes. It was quite evident that she fully appreciated the danger of the situation. And yet the feeling uppermost in her mind was the feeling of bitterness and sorrow for the sorry part her father was playing.

"I should like to understand the position fully," she said. "What difference does the loss of those papers imply? Cannot you do without them, father?"

"I am helpless, my dear," Sir George groaned. "I am the head of the family, and the man who enjoys the revenue of the estates, and I shall probably continue to do so until I die. But for the next six months or so I could not raise a penny on the property, not till the time mentioned in the late owner's will expires, when I become legally possessed of everything, even though a direct heir of Ralph Dashwood appears. Then I can

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borrow as much money as I please. Now, I am absolutely at the mercy of Horace Mayfield."

The pallor on Mary's face deepened; hope faded from her heart. She was in the toils again and made no attempt to disguise the fact. It was quite immaterial to her who had those papers, so long as they were gone.

"Let me make the position quite clear," she went on, in a hard, level voice. "Let us revert to the condition of affairs existing before those papers were found; let us assume that they never existed at all. You owe a very large sum of money, father, a sum that it is impossible for you to pay. If you fail to raise the amount, which we may take for granted, something like disgrace and dishonour falls on you. That is not your fault, I know, but other people will not think so, and the head of the house of Dashwood will stand before his fellow men stamped as little better than a felon. Is that so?"

"That is the way in which the world will regard it," Sir George groaned.

"Quite so, father. You can't find the money, and nobody will find it for you. As I know already, it is useless to appeal to Lady Dashwood."

"Quite, my dear," Lady Dashwood murmured. "I would give anything to avert the disgrace, but I have nothing. I am a wicked old woman, and my sins are finding me out. I have parted with everything, even to my jewels, to keep a certain secret, and I see now that the sacrifice is going to be all in vain."

Mary turned and laid a soothing hand on the speaker's arm. There was something sweet, almost affectionate in the action.

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"A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind," she said bitterly. "After all there is a way out of the trouble, there has been a way out all along. Our blessing in disguise in the matter seems to be Mr. Mayfield. We will ignore for the moment that he has himself brought the situation about for his own ends. The fact remains that he can keep the disgrace away. He has offered to avert the catastrophe at a price. *I* am the price. By saying one simple word everything is changed. And in six months, you, my father, are master of Dashwood absolutely. I have only to say, 'Yes,' and the thing is done. It is a simple little word, which has been the cause of untold misery to thousands of poor girls. But, after all, there have been greater sacrifices for less satisfactory results. And now let us go into dinner."

The girl spoke quietly enough, but nothing could disguise the bitterness and scorn that rang in every word. It was all very wrong, it was dictated by motives clearly open to question, but in spite of everything, it seemed to Ralph that he had never admired Mary more than he did at that moment. He knew of the anguish of disappointment and despair that filled her cup to overflowing; he could realise the difference that the last half-hour had made to her outlook on life; he knew how much she hated and despised the man to whom she was once more tied by the hands of Fate.

He knew also that filial love and affection had nothing whatever to do with the fatal resolve. It was family pride that was the mainspring of the action. Mary stood there, proud and defiant now, with the lamplight streaming on her face, and Ralph knew now that the time was coming for him to act. The lesson would

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