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Noughts and Crosses.

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Noughts and Crosses

Stories, Studies and Sketches

BY

Q

"Ipsae te, Tityre, pinus,
Ipsi te fontes, ipsa haec arbusta vocabant."

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1891.
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Two of the following stories were first published in *Longman's Magazine;* the rest are selected from a number contributed to *The Speaker.* For permission to reprint them I must sincerely thank the two Editors.

Q.

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TO MY WIFE.

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NOUGHTS AND CROSSES.

THE OMNIBUS.

It was not so much a day as a burning, fiery furnace. The roar of London's traffic reverberated under a sky of coppery blue; the pavements threw out waves of heat, thickened with the reek of restaurants and perfumery shops; and dust became cinders, and the wearing of flesh a weariness. Streams of sweat ran from the bellies of 'bus-horses when they halted. Men went up and down with unbuttoned waistcoats, turned into drinking-bars, and were no sooner inside than they longed to be out again, and baking in an ampler oven. Other men, who had given up drinking because of the expense, hung about the fountains in Trafalgar Square and listened to the splash of running water. It was the time when London is supposed to be

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empty; and when those who remain in town feel there is not room for a soul more.

We were eleven inside the omnibus when it pulled up at Charing Cross, so that legally there was room for just one more. I had travelled enough in omnibuses to know my fellow-passengers by heart—a governess with some sheets of music in her satchel; a minor actress going to rehearsal; a woman carrying her incurable complaint for the hundredth time to the hospital; three middle-aged city clerks; a couple of reporters with weak eyes and low collars; an old loose-cheeked woman exhaling patchouli; a bald-headed man with hairy hands, a violent breast-pin, and the indescribable air of a matrimonial agent. Not a word passed. We were all failures in life, and could not trouble to dissemble it, in that heat. Moreover, we were used to each other, as types if not as persons, and had lost curiosity. So we sat listless, dispirited, drawing difficult breath and staring vacuously. The hope we shared in common—that nobody would claim the vacant seat—was too obvious to be discussed.

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But at Charing Cross the twelfth passenger got in—a boy with a stick, and a bundle in a blue handkerchief. He was about thirteen; bound for the docks, we could tell at a glance, to sail on his first voyage; and, by the way he looked about, we could tell as easily that in stepping outside Charing Cross Station he had set foot on London stones for the first time. When we pulled up, he was standing on the opposite pavement with dazed eyes like a hare's, wondering at the new world—the hansoms, the yelling news-boys, the flower-women, the crowd pushing him this way and that, the ugly shop-fronts, the hurry and stink and din of it all. Then, hailing our 'bus, he started to run across —faltered—almost dropped his bundle—was snatched by our conductor out of the path of a running hansom, and hauled on board. His eyelids were pink and swollen; but he was not crying, though he wanted to. Instead, he took a great gulp, as he pushed between our knees to his seat, and tried to look brave as a lion.

The passengers turned an incurious, half-resentful stare upon him, and then repented. I

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think that more than one of us wanted to speak, but dared not.

It was not so much the little chap's look. But to the knot of his sea-kit there was tied a bunch of cottage-flowers—sweet williams, boy's love, love-lies-bleeding, a few common striped carnations, and a rose or two—and the sight and smell of them in that frowsy 'bus were like tears on thirsty eyelids. We had ceased to pity what we were, but the heart is far withered that cannot pity what it has been; and it made us shudder to look on the young face set towards the road along which we had travelled so far. Only the minor actress dropped a tear; but she was used to expressing emotion, and half-way down the Strand the 'bus stopped and she left us.

The woman with an incurable complaint touched me on the knee.

"Speak to him," she whispered.

But the whisper did not reach, for I was two hundred miles away, and occupied in starting off to school for the first time. I had two shillings in my pocket; and at the first town where the

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coach baited I was to exchange these for a coco-nut and a clasp-knife. Also, I was to break the knife in opening the nut, and the nut, when opened, would be sour. A sense of coming evil, therefore, possessed me.

"Why don't you speak to him?"

The boy glanced up, not catching her words, but suspicious: then frowned and looked defiant.

"Ah," she went on in the same whisper, "it's only the young that I pity. Sometimes, sir—for my illness keeps me much awake—I lie at night in my lodgings and listen, and the whole of London seems filled with the sound of children's feet running. Even by day I can hear them, at the back of the uproar——"

The matrimonial agent grunted and rose, as we halted at the top of Essex Street. I saw him slip a couple of half-crowns into the conductor's hand: and he whispered something, jerking his head back towards the interior of the 'bus. The boy was brushing his eyes, under pretence of putting his cap forward; and by the time he stole a look around to see if anyone had

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observed, we had started again. I pretended to stare out of the window, but marked the wet smear on his hand as he laid it on his lap.

In less than a minute it was my turn to alight. Unlike the matrimonial agent, I had not two half-crowns to spare; but, catching the sick woman's eye, forced up courage to nod and say—

"Good luck, my boy."

"Good day, sir."

A moment after I was in the hot crowd, whose roar rolled east and west for miles. And at the back of it, as the woman had said, in street and side-lane and blind-alley, I heard the foot-fall of a multitude more terrible than an army with banners, the ceaseless pelting feet of children—of Whittingtons turning and turning again.

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FORTUNIO.

At Tregarrick Fair they cook a goose in twenty-two different ways; and as no one who comes to the fair would dream of eating any other food, you may fancy what a reek of cooking fills the narrow grey street soon after mid-day.

As a boy, I was always given a holiday to go to the goose-fair; and it was on my way thither across the moors, that I first made Fortunio's acquaintance. I wore a new pair of corduroys, that smelt outrageously—and squeaked, too, as I trotted briskly along the bleak high road; for I had a bright shilling to spend, and it burnt a hole in my pocket. I was planning my purchases, when I noticed, on a windy eminence of the road ahead, a man's figure sharply defined against the sky.

He was driving a flock of geese, so slowly that I soon caught him up; and such a man or such geese I had never seen. To begin with, his rags were worse than a scarecrow's. In one

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hand he carried a long staff; the other held a small book close under his nose, and his lean shoulders bent over as he read in it. It was clear, from the man's undecided gait, that all his eyes were for this book. Only he would look up when one of his birds strayed too far on the turf that lined the highway, and would guide it back to the stones again with his staff. As for the geese, they were utterly draggle-tailed and stained with travel, and waddled, every one, with so woe-begone a limp that I had to laugh as I passed.

The man glanced up, set his forefinger between the pages of his book, and turned on me a long sallow face and a pair of the most beautiful brown eyes in the world.

"Little boy," he said, in a quick foreign way —"rosy little boy. You laugh at my geese, eh?"

No doubt I stared at him like a ninny, for he went on—

"Little wide-mouthed Cupidon, how you gaze! Also, by the way, how you smell!"

"It's my corduroys," said I.

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"Then I discommend your corduroys. But I approve your laugh. Laugh again—only at the right matter: laugh at this——"

And, opening his book again, he read a long passage as I walked beside him; but I could make neither head nor tail of it.

"That is from the 'Sentimental Journey,' by Laurence Sterne, the most beautiful of your English wits. Ah, he is more than French! Laugh at it."

It was rather hard to laugh thus to order; but suddenly he set me the example, showing two rows of very white teeth, and fetching from his hollow chest a sound of mirth so incongruous with the whole aspect of the man, that I began to grin too.

"That's right; but be louder. Make the sounds that you made just now——"

He broke off sharply, being seized with an ugly fit of coughing, that forced him to halt and lean on his staff for a while. When he recovered we walked on together after the geese, he talking all the way in high-flown sentences that were Greek to me, and I stealing a look every now

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and then at his olive face, and half inclined to take to my heels and run.

We came at length to the ridge where the road dives suddenly into Tregarrick. The town lies along a narrow vale, and looking down, we saw flags waving along the street and much smoke curling from the chimneys, and heard the church-bells, the big drum, and the confused mutterings and hubbub of the fair. The sun—for the morning was still fresh—did not yet pierce to the bottom of the valley, but fell on the hillside opposite, where cottage-gardens in parallel strips climbed up from the town to the moorland beyond.

"What is that?" asked the goose-driver, touching my arm and pointing to a dazzling spot on the slope opposite.

"That's the sun on the windows of Gardener Tonken's glass-house."

"Eh?—does he live there?"

"He's dead, and the garden's 'to let;' you can just see the board from here. But he didn't live there, of course. People don't live in glass-houses; only plants."

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"That's a pity, little boy, for their souls' sakes. It reminds me of a story—by the way, do you know Latin? No? Well, listen to this:—if I can sell my geese to-day, perhaps I will hire that glass-house, and you shall come there on half holidays, and learn Latin. Now run ahead and spend your money."

I was glad to escape, and in the bustle of the fair quickly forgot my friend. But late in the afternoon, as I had my eyes glued to a peep-show, I heard a voice behind me cry "Little boy!" and turning, saw him again. He was without his geese.

"I have sold them," he said, "for £5; and I have taken the glass-house. The rent is only £3 a year, and I shan't live longer, so that leaves me money to buy books. I shall feed on the snails in the garden, making soup of them, for there is a beautiful stove in the glass-house. When is your next half-holiday?"

"On Saturday."

"Very well. I am going away to buy books; but I shall be back by Saturday, and then you are to come and learn Latin."

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It may have been fear or curiosity, certainly it was no desire for learning, that took me to Gardener Tonken's glass-house next Saturday afternoon. The goose-driver was there to welcome me.

"Ah, wide-mouth," he cried; "I knew you would be here. Come and see my library."

He showed me a pile of dusty, tattered volumes, arranged on an old flower-stand.

"See," said he, "no sorrowful books, only Aristophanes and Lucian, Horace, Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire's novels, 'Gil Blas,' 'Don Quixote,' Fielding, a play or two of Shakespeare, a volume or so of Swift, Prior's Poems, and Sterne—that divine Sterne! And a Latin Grammar and Virgil for you, little boy. First, eat some snails."

But this I would not. So he pulled out two three-legged stools, and very soon I was trying to fix my wandering wits and decline *mensa*.

After this I came on every half-holiday for nearly a year. Of course the tenant of the glass-house was a nine days' wonder in the town.

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A crowd of boys and even many grown men and women would assemble and stare into the glass-house while we worked; but Fortunio (he gave no other name) seemed rather to like it than not. Only when some wiseacres approached my parents with hints that my studies with a ragged man who lived on snails and garden-stuff were uncommonly like traffic with the devil, Fortunio, hearing the matter, walked over one morning to our home and had an interview with my mother. I don't know what was said; but I know that afterwards no resistance was made to my visits to the glass-house.

They came to an end in the saddest and most natural way. One September afternoon I sat construing to Fortunio out of the first book of Virgil's "Æneid"—so far was I advanced; and coming to the passage—

"Tum breviter Dido, vultum demissa, profatur" . . . . .

I had just rendered *vultum demissa* "with downcast eyes," when the book was snatched from me and hurled to the far end of the glass-house. Looking up, I saw Fortunio in a transport of passion.

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"Fool—little fool! Will you be like all the commentators? Will you forget what Virgil has said and put your own nonsense into his golden mouth?"

He stepped across, picked up the book, found the passage, and then turning back a page or so, read out—

"Sæpta armis *solioque alte subnixa* resedit."

Alte! Alte!" he screamed: "Dido sat on high! Æneas stood at the foot of her throne. Listen to this:—'Then Dido, bending down her gaze . . . '"

He went on translating. A rapture took him, and the sun beat in through the glass roof, and lit up his eyes. He was transfigured; his voice swelled and sank with passion, swelled again, and then, at the words—

"Quæ te tam læta tulerunt
Sæcula? Qui tanti talem genuere parentes?"

it broke, the Virgil dropped from his hand, and sinking down on his stool he broke into a wild fit of sobbing.

"Oh, why did I read it? Why did I read this sorrowful book?" And then checking his

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sobs, he put a handkerchief to his mouth, took it away, and looked up at me with dry eyes.

"Go away, little one, Don't come again: I am going to die very soon now."

I stole out, awed and silent, and went home. But the picture of him kept me awake that night, and early in the morning I dressed and ran off to the glass-house.

He was still sitting as I had left him.

"Why have you come?" he asked, harshly.

"I have been coughing. I am going to die."

"Then I'll fetch a doctor."

"No."

"A clergyman?"

"No."

But I ran for the doctor.

Fortunio lived on for a week after this, and at length consented to see a clergyman. I brought the vicar, and was told to leave them alone together and come back in an hour's time.

When I returned, Fortunio was stretched quietly on the rough bed we had found for him. and the Vicar, who knelt beside it, was speaking softly in his ear.

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As I entered on tiptoe, I heard—

" . . . in that kingdom shall be no weeping——"

"Oh, Parson," interrupted Fortunio, "that's bad. I'm so bored with laughing that the good God might surely allow a few tears."

The parish buried him, and his books went to pay for the funeral. But I kept the Virgil; and this, with the few memories that I impart to you, is all that remains to me of Fortunio.

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THE OUTLANDISH LADIES.

A MILE beyond the fishing village, as you follow the road that climbs inland towards Tregarrick, the two tall hills to right and left of the coombe diverge to make room for a third, set like a wedge in the throat of the vale. Here the road branches into two, with a sign-post at the angle; and between the sign-post and the grey scarp of the hill there lies an acre of waste ground that the streams have turned into a marsh. This is Loose-heels. Long before I learnt the name's meaning, in the days when I trod the lower road with slate and satchel, this spot was a favourite of mine—but chiefly in July, when the monkey-flower was out, and the marsh aflame with it.

There was a spell in that yellow blossom with the wicked blood-red spots, that held me its mere slave. Also the finest grew in desperate places. So that, day after day, when July came round, my mother would cry shame on my small-clothes, and my father take exercise

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upon them; and all the month I went tingling. They were pledged to "break me of it"; but they never did. Now they are dead, and the flowers—the flowers last always, as Victor Hugo says. When, after many years, I revisited the valley, the stream had carried the seeds half a mile below Loose-heels, and painted its banks with monkey-blossoms all the way. But the finest, I was glad to see, still inhabited the marsh.

Now, it is rare to find this plant growing wild; for, in fact, it is a garden flower. And its history here is connected with a bit of mud wall, ruined and covered with mosses and ragwort, that still pushed up from the swampy ground when I knew it, and had once been part of a cottage. How a cottage came here, and how its inhabitants entered and went out, are questions past guessing; for the marsh hemmed it in on three sides, and the fourth is a slope of hill fit to break your neck. But there was the wall, and here is the story.

One morning, near the close of the last

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century, a small child came running down to the village with news that the cottage, which for ten years had stood empty, was let; there was smoke coming out at the chimney, and an outlandish lady walking in the garden. Being catechised, he added that the lady wore bassomy bows in her cap, and had accosted him in a heathen tongue that caused him to flee, fearing worse things. This being told, two women, rulers of their homes, sent their husbands up the valley to spy, who found the boy had spoken truth.

Smoke was curling from the chimney, and in the garden the lady was still moving about—a small yellow creature, with a wrinkled but pleasant face, white curls, and piercing black eyes. She wore a black gown, cut low in the neck, a white kerchief, and bassomy (or purplish) bows in her cap as the child had stated. Just at present she was busy with a spade, and showed an ankle passing neat for her age, as she turned up the neglected mould. When the men plucked up gallantry enough to offer their services, she smiled and thanked them in

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broken English, but said that her small forces would serve.

So they went back to their wives; and their wives, recollecting that the cottage formed part of the glebe, went off to inquire of Parson Morth, "than whom," as the tablet to his memory relates, "none was better to castigate the manners of the age." He was a burly, hard-riding ruffian, and the tale of his great fight with Gipsy Ben in Launceston streets is yet told on the country-side.

Parson Morth wanted to know if he couldn't let his cottage to an invalid lady and her sister without consulting every wash-mouth in the parish.

"Aw, so there's two!" said one of them, nodding her head. "But tell us, Parson dear, ef 'tes fitty for two unmated women to come trapesing down in a po'shay at dead o' night, when all modest flesh be in their bed-gowns?"

Upon this the Parson's language became grossly indelicate, after the fashion of those days. He closed his peroration by slamming the front door on his visitors; and they went

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down the hill "blushing" (as they said) "all over, at his intimate words."

So nothing more was known of the strangers. But it was noticed that Parson Morth, when he passed the cottage on his way to meet or market, would pull up his mare, and, if the outlandish lady were working in the garden, would doff his hat respectfully.

"*Bon jour, Mamzelle Henriette*"—this was all the French the Parson knew. And the lady would smile back and answer in English.

"Good-morning, Parson Morth."

"And Mamzelle Lucille?"

"Ah, just the same, my God! All the day stare—stare. If you had known her before!—so be-eautiful, so gifted, *si bien élevée!* It is an affliction: but I think she loves the flowers."

And the Parson rode on with a lump in his throat.

So two years passed, during which Mademoiselle Henriette tilled her garden and turned it into a paradise. There were white roses on the south wall, and in the beds mignonette and

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boy's-love, pansies, carnations, gillyflowers, sweet-williams, and flaming great hollyhocks; above all, the yellow monkey-blossoms that throve so well in the marshy soil. And all that while no one had caught so much as a glimpse of her sister, Lucille. Also how they lived was a marvel. The outlandish lady bought neither fish, nor butcher's meat, nor bread. To be sure, the Parson sent down a pint of milk every morning from his dairy; the can was left at the garden-gate and fetched at noon, when it was always found neatly scrubbed, with the price of the milk inside. Besides, there was a plenty of vegetables in the garden.

But this was not enough to avert the whisper of witchcraft. And one day, when Parson Morth had ridden off to the wrestling matches at Exeter, the blow fell.

Farmer Anthony of Carne — great-grandfather of the present farmer—had been losing sheep. Now, not a man in the neighbourhood would own to having stolen them; so what so easy to suspect as witchcraft? Who so fatally open to suspicion as the two out-

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landish sisters? Men, wives, and children formed a procession.

The month was July; and Mademoiselle Henriette was out in the garden, a bunch of monkey-flowers in her hand, when they arrived. She turned all white, and began to tremble like a leaf. But when the spokesman stated the charge, there was another tale.

"It was an infamy. Steal! She would have them know that she and her sister were of good West Indian family—*très bien élevées.*" Then followed a torrent of epithets. They were *lâches* —*poltrons.* Why were they not fighting Bonaparte, instead of sending their wives up to the cliffs, dressed in red cloaks, to scare him away, while they bullied weak women?

They pushed past her. The cottage held two rooms on the ground floor. In the kitchen, which they searched first, they found only some garden-stuff and a few snails salted in a pan. There was a door leading to the inner room, and the foremost had his hand on it, when Mademoiselle Henriette rushed before him, and flung herself at his feet. The yellow monkey-

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blossoms were scattered and trampled on the floor.

"*Ah—non, non, messieurs! Je vous prie—Elle est si—si horrible!*"

They flung her down, and pushed on.

The invalid sister lay in an arm-chair with her back to the doorway, a bunch of monkey-flowers beside her. As they burst in, she started, laid both hands on the arms of her chair, and turned her face slowly upon them.

She was a leper!

They gave one look at that featureless face, with the white scales shining upon it, and ran back with their arms lifted before their eyes. One woman screamed. Then a dead stillness fell on the place, and the cottage was empty.

On the following Saturday Parson Morth walked down to the inn, just ten minutes after stalling his mare. He strode into the tap-room in his muddy boots, took two men by the neck, knocked their skulls together, and then demanded to hear the truth.

"Very well," he said, on hearing the tale;

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"to-morrow I march every man Jack of you up to the valley, if it's by the scruff of your necks, and in the presence of both of those ladies—of *both*, mark you—you shall kneel down and ask them to come to church. I don't care if I empty the building. Your fathers (who were men, not curs) built the south transept for those same poor souls, and cut a slice in the chancel arch through which they might see the Host lifted. That's where *you* sit, Jim Trestrail, churchwarden; and by the Lord Harry, they shall have your pew."

He marched them up the very next morning. He knocked, but no one answered. After waiting a while, he put his shoulder against the door, and forced it in.

There was no one in the kitchen. In the inner room one sister sat in the arm-chair. It was Mademoiselle Henriette, cold and stiff. Her dead hands were stained with earth.

At the back of the cottage they came on a freshly-formed mound, and stuck on the top of it a piece of slate, such as children erect over a thrush's grave.

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On it was scratched—

Çi-Gît
Lucille,
Jadis si Belle ;
Dont dix-neuf Jeunes Hommes, Planteurs de
Saint Domingue.
ont demandé la Main.
Mais La Petite ne Voulait Pas.
R. I. P.

This is the story of Loose-heels, otherwise Lucille's.

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STATEMENT OF GABRIEL FOOT, HIGHWAYMAN.

THE jury re-entered the court after half an hour's consultation.

It all comes back to me as vividly as though I stood in the dock at this very moment. The dense fog that hung over the well of the court; the barristers' wigs that bobbed up through it, and were drowned again in that seething cauldron; the rays of the guttering candles (for the murder-trial had lasted far into the evening) that loomed through it and wore a sickly halo; the red robes and red face of my lord judge opposite that stared through it and outshone the candles; the black crowd around, seen mistily; the voice of the usher calling "Silence!"; the shuffling of the jurymen's feet; the pallor on their faces as I leant forward and tried to read the verdict on them; the very smell of the place, compounded of fog, gaol-fever, the close air, and the dinners eaten earlier in the

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day by the crowd—all this strikes home upon me as sharply as it then did, after the numb apathy of waiting.

As the jury huddled into their places I stole a look at my counsel. He paused for a moment from his task of trimming a quill, shot a quick glance at the foreman's face, and then went on cutting as coolly as ever.

"Gentlemen of the jury"—it was the judge's voice—"are you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We are."

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"*Not guilty.*"

It must have been full a minute, as I leant back clutching the rail in front of me, before I saw anything but the bleared eyes of the candles, or heard anything but a hoarse murmur from the crowd. But as soon as the court ceased to heave, and I could stare about me, I looked towards my counsel again.

He was still shaping his pen. He made no motion to come forward and shake hands over my acquittal, for which he had worked un-

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tiringly all day. He did not even offer to speak. He just looked up, nodded carelessly, and turned to his junior beside him; but in that glance I had read something which turned my heart cold, then sick, within me, and from that moment my hatred of the man was as deep as hell.

In the fog outside I got clear of the gaping crowd, but the chill of the night after that heated court pierced my very bones. I had on the clothes I had been taken in. It was June then, and now it was late in October. I remember that on the day when they caught me I wore my coat open for coolness. Four months and a half had gone out of my life. Well, I had money enough in my pocket to get a greatcoat; but I must put something warm inside me first, to get out the chill that cursed lawyer had laid on my heart.

I had purposely chosen the by-lanes of the town, but I remembered a certain tavern—the "Lamb and Flag"—which lay down a side alley. Presently the light from its windows struck

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