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THE BISHOP'S EMERALDS

BY

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The Bishop's Emeralds

CHAPTER I

LADY HESTER CARDEW was the Bishop's second wife, and as such was regarded with a certain amount of suspicion. For one thing, she was very handsome. Bishops' wives, and, indeed, the wives of the clergy generally, do not usually err on the side of excessive physical attractiveness, and a Bishop's lady should surely embody the consolidated virtues and leading characteristics of all the helpmeets of the cloth. She refused to be dowdy; she drove her own dogcart; she wore bright colors whenever the sun shone; and generally displayed a fine, healthy, physical energy and enjoyment of life. Her hair was such a beautiful auburn that the spiteful said it was dyed. She rode a bicycle and was at home on a horse, and it was whispered that her ladyship had openly stated that her husband's public position alone prevented her riding to hounds.

They forgave the widower Bishop, who was but a man, and fleshly—a large, handsome, expansive, dogmatic, loud-voiced person with broad shoulders, and standing six feet in his socks—because he had succumbed to the wiles of Lady Hester Lennox in very different surroundings. They had married when he was merely the vicar of St. Saviour's-in-the-East, and could not be expected to view matrimony in the severe light that beats upon an episcopal throne. He was nobody then.

The *East Ripley Gazette*, at the time of the Bishop's

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enthronement, had devoted a whole page to the life-story of his lordship, in which the curious learned all that there was to know of his eventful life, and read how he found his second bride in the East End of London, where the beautiful lady was wearing herself to a shadow in the cause of the poor and lowly. That was fifteen years ago, and the diocese was prepared to give the lady full credit for that heroic period of her existence; but they could not forgive her being fashionable now.

So much for the general opinion of the diocese. Lady Hester was popular with the county, conscientious to a fault in her duties, ever moving, ever busy, yet apparently never quite happy. Sympathizers declared that the stress and sorrow of that sad period of battle in the slums still lingered. Others thought that tragedy lurked in her big brown eyes, which laughed and wept in shadow; and her sweet, sympathetic, forgiving soul went out to wrong-doers with such lenient charity that the Bishop himself was often compelled to admonish, and protest that she lacked a proper sense of the expediency of earthly chastisement. She carried the Christian doctrine of forgiveness of sins to absurd lengths, especially in judging the sins of women. She had actually been known to talk to a divorced woman in the streets of Ripley, and had been found out in attempting to hush up a scandal, the suppression of which would have robbed the diocese of at least three months' tea table gossip. Such conduct might be Christian, but was it wise?

The county acclaimed her "a good sort." She was invited everywhere, and, sad to relate, she danced. Yes, she actually danced. Her other sins were also tabulated:—

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She was only thirty-eight!
She refused to wear black bonnets.
She rode horseback unattended.
She played tennis.
She lived.

She did not flirt. That saved her, and every lovesick girl made her a confidante. As for the Bishop, he idolized his wife. So did Jack Cardew, the Bishop's son by his first wife.

Jack was twenty-five, and beginning his career at the Bar. His relationship to the prelate helped him a little, but his briefs were short and the vacations long. He was at home now at the Palace, and, the vacation being near its end, he contemplated an early return to London.

* * * * * *

Jack wanted to marry on nothing a year—or next to it—and the Bishop had put his foot down. Bishop Cardew's foot for trampling undesirable schemes was large and firm. The beautiful girl about whom the difference of opinion had arisen between the Bishop and his son was at the present time a guest in the house, and the Bishop blamed his wife for bringing her there.

Lady Hester herself could not have quite explained why Mabel Bannister had stayed so long. Six weeks ago the girl was the guest of Lady Beatrice Carew, a neighbor and daughter of the Marquis of Ripley, and Lady Hester had suddenly extended an invitation to the Palace, because she wanted to see more of the girl.

A slim, tall, upstanding, fair-haired stripling, with a fine poise of the head, a proud, almost disdainful, grey eye, a baby mouth, and a foreign vivacity, for which her education abroad was doubtless largely responsible. This was Mabel Bannister.

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Jack Cardew, who was very much in love, was much incensed at his father's opposition, because in an expansive moment the Bishop had patronizingly admitted that Mabel was the very counterpart of Lady Hester fifteen years ago, except for the spirit of folly, the light laugh, and the easy, careless bearing, which were so different from the restrained earnestness of the world-weary Lady Hester at the time of her first meeting with the vicar of St. Saviour's-in-the-East.

But there was a practical side to the whole business. Jack was unable to enlighten his father concerning Mabel Bannister's family connections. She was an unknown, a chance schoolfellow of Lady Beatrice Carew at an Italian convent school, a girl without a mother, daughter of an indolent man about town whose social position seemed to be summed up in the membership of several smart clubs and the *entrée* to some good country houses; and since childhood she had known no home save school and the hospitality of schoolfellows. The seminaries were of the best, the very best, and her friends were staunch, loyal, and devoted, and vied with one another in having the motherless girl near them. Indeed, for the last year, ever since Mabel's finishing at B——, she had lived almost entirely in the houses of her friends, with an occasional flying visit to her father's London chambers at Stratton Street, Mayfair.

Her stay at the Palace was now coming to an untimely end, and constraint had fallen on everybody since the Bishop withheld his necessary consent to the engagement of his son—who was dependent upon him for income—with a lady of no fortune or family.

Jack was in open mutiny. An appeal to his stepmother brought no comfort, only a counsel of "Pa-

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tience, patience." Mabel was entirely under Jack's influence. They were madly in love, and she, transformed by her passion from girlhood to womanhood, was ready to defy the whole world (and cry in Lady Hester's lap for sympathy).

A week of suspense had gone by. A sudden, strange calm had settled down. The Bishop made no suggestion to his wife that Mabel should be sent away; and Jack appeared to have accepted the situation with grave resignation. Mabel neither wept nor smiled, but fell into long abstractions and stared into space, pursing her lips finely in a manner suggestive of an obstinate resolution.

Lady Hester, who seemed to understand the working of the girl's mind as if it were her own, instinctively divined the truth. It came upon her one day all in a rush.

"They are going to marry secretly," she cried. "Secretly! God forbid!"

There was a note of horror in that "God forbid!" and she blanched as in the face of an awful peril.

After that she watched Mabel's every movement until the day fixed for the supposed departure for London. Jack, under pretence of a sudden call to town, was leaving the Palace on the same day, but earlier. Mabel was not going till midday.

His farewell to the girl before his father and mother at the breakfast table was almost that of a stranger, so frigidly polite and absurdly indifferent was it.

The parting was unreal. They were going to meet again, and something must be done. Lady Hester was in a fever.

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CHAPTER II

THE Bishop suspected nothing, nor did he notice the tremor in Jack's voice, or the lingering, emotional handgrip. He scarcely glanced at the pale, determined face. Mabel studied the pattern on her plate, and, when her lover offered his hand, bade him farewell with ridiculous nonchalance. If this was the parting of broken-hearted lovers their passion was made of shallow stuff, and the Bishop felt that he was justified in crushing the projected marriage.

To tell the truth, he was a little disappointed. In his fatherly heart he sympathized with the young people. He understood enough of feminine charm to feel that had he been in Jack's place, he could not have relinquished lovely Mabel Bannister so casually. For all her defects of character and family, she was the sort to drive young men mad. He had nerved himself for much trouble and argument with his son, and several finely rounded periods and enlightening speeches, specially prepared for Jack's edification in hours of youthful despair, looked like being unrequired.

The Bishop, much relieved at the passing of the storm, betook him to his day's duties; but Lady Hester prepared for action.

Mabel avoided her hostess all the morning under plea of final packing, yet twice sought her out, and with moist eyes asked some futile question. Each time she hovered like one on the brink of tears, or confession, yet mastered the impulse. At last, when it was

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time to watch the clock and talk of dressing, it became necessary to express the usual civilities, and she feelingly protested that she had been oh! so happy at the Palace, that she would never forget Lady Hester's kindness, and would ever remember her as the one dear, dear, sweet woman of her life.

Then she burst into a flood of tears—hysterical, shamefaced sobbing.

Lady Hester delivered her bomb.

"Mabel, I know your secret. You cannot deceive me. You are going up to town to marry Jack. You're not going home at all."

"Why do you say that?" gasped the girl.

"Because I know. You cannot deny it."

Taken off her guard and rendered helpless and tearful, Mabel took refuge in excuses.

"Oh! we love each other so—and he pleaded so hard. I wanted him to let me confide in you, but he refused. He is unshakable in his determination. Oh, Lady Hester, you can't know, you can't understand, what it is to love, as we love. Marrying as you did—and—and the Bishop not a young man——" she halted in her naïve rudeness and faltered, "you know what I mean. We are both young and—and this is the heyday of life, and——"

"You are both foolish and impatient. You are only quoting secondhand Jack's preposterous arguments."

"Nothing will move us from our purpose, even if we have to live apart all our lives. We are going to get married!"

"Mabel, Mabel, are you the nice, reasonable, clear-headed girl with a sense of humor that I grew so fond of? Don't you see the absurdity of what you are do-

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ing? Is there no such thing as patience and self-sacrifice for the sake of others?"

"I know, I know. Jack admits that it would have been better to wait—if we could have waited—and if we could be sure that things would come right in the end. But we're going to make things certain. We are not to live together—at present. At least——"

"Well?"

"We are going for a short honeymoon, of course." The girl buried her crimson face in her trembling hands, then flung herself into the elder woman's arms.

"And are you concealing this from your father?" asked Lady Hester.

"Yes—and no. That is, father has raised no objection to my engagement. I wrote to him about it."

"But he has never even seen Jack."

"Oh, you don't know father. When I wrote to him he just sent me a charming letter full of confidence in my good sense and judgment, and gave the engagement his blessing; and that's all he'll trouble about it. He says I mustn't expect more than a hundred pounds for my trousseau; so, you see, he can't make much fuss just because it's a little hurried."

"You are not giving him any opportunity to object by this rash acceptance of Jack's mad scheme."

"We cannot exist apart," sobbed the girl, "and we resolved yesterday that no living soul should come between us."

"Neither shall they, my dear," murmured Lady Hester, clasping the girl gently to her breast. "All I ask is, don't—don't marry secretly."

"But what does it matter?" pleaded the girl, a little frightened at the sudden intensity of the appeal, and breaking away to dry her tears.

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Lady Hester paced the room for a few moments like a soul in torment. Her cheeks were white and her lips drawn with emotion.

"Oh, how can I make you understand? How can I frame words to warn you against a thing you may regret to your dying day? You must be saved from this folly at all costs. You must—you shall."

"Oh, Lady Hester, you won't interfere? Jack would never forgive you. It's too late now. The train starts in an hour. Please don't make me cry. I shall look horrid. I am resolved. I've given my word, my oath. Why should we ever regret?"

"Mabel," cried the elder woman, seizing her hand, "you must, of your own accord, withdraw from the position you have taken up. A secret marriage is an abomination of hell."

The words came out with great suddenness, and the dignified Lady Hester became strangely hysterical. She recovered herself with a great effort, seeing that her extravagance of speech had only startled the obstinate girl.

"You think I'm exaggerating. But if you only knew the misery, the lifelong regret that can follow a secret marriage. If I could only tell you my own story—oh! what am I saying? Can I find no arguments to convince you of your wickedness, Mabel? Oh, think—think!"

"Practically I have my father's consent. The rest is Jack's affair," replied the girl, proudly.

"Mabel, Mabel, can you keep a secret if I tell you something—something about myself that you don't know—that nobody knows? No, why should I? Oh, Mabel, will you believe me when I tell you that I speak upon this matter with authority—that I have known—

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I mean, that I have seen—the dreadful misery that can come from a secret marriage."

"I don't know what you mean," Mabel observed, calmly.

"Oh, girl, don't compel me to explain! Don't you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Just now you questioned my knowledge of love and youthful passion. I was young as you once, and as foolish. I, like you, listened to honeyed, plausible pleading. It was to be secret, romantic, and beautiful. Secret, do you hear? Secret! And oh, the misery of it, the sickening deceit! Be brave and strong and face everything openly. If you mean to defy us all, be courageous and urge the same upon Jack. If you should ever regret, there will be no escape. Don't I know to my cost what it means? The very suggestion of secrecy sickens me. You might have to carry the burden of it to your grave. Girl, listen! I have been through it. I know."

"Do you mean that you were married secretly—married to the Bishop secretly?"

"No, no!" cried the hysterical woman with a rasping laugh. "It was before that—oh! what am I saying?"

"You mean that you were married before you became Mrs. Cardew!" exclaimed the girl in white astonishment.

"Did I say so? Well, if I said so much I must tell you more. I must justify myself. I am mad to speak of it, yet the desire gnaws at my heart. But you must swear eternal fidelity and faithfulness to me, Mabel, whatever the issue of this business may be. You mustn't mention to a living soul what I am going to tell you? You promise?"

"I promise, of course."

"Mabel, when I was your age I was very much like

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you, except that I lived a secluded life in Bath with two straight-laced, old-fashioned, rich, maiden aunts, to whom I was indebted for everything, and from whom I should one day inherit an income. I was an orphan. My father, a spendthrift, penniless peer, was dead. I never knew a mother. My life was very dull, and there came a man into it, who set my heart afire. My guardians objected to him—and wisely. He was nobody—worse, he was a fraud. He pleaded for a secret marriage, and—and I consented.

"You understand the gravity of what I am telling you? This is a secret, a sacred confidence. I have never spoken of it to any other woman. For some months, with the aid of a foolish, sentimental friend, I lived a double life, discovering each day a new defect in the idol I adored, until at last my eyes were opened. He proved to be a dreadful sham. He was fond of me, in his way, no doubt. He must have loved me, or he would never have let me go as he did. But he was a black sheep. Little by little the truth began to dawn on me that I had linked myself to one who had only his persuasive guile to recommend him, a villain, a fraud, an adventurer—worse, a thief."

"A thief."

"Yes. He confessed his vile life to me little by little. He wanted me to play the fascinating decoy; for he was a polished high-flying scoundrel. Fortunately for me, he put himself in my power by his confessions, and I was able to free myself and dictate my own terms—which were silence, and secrecy, and freedom. Freedom! He drove a hard bargain—God only knows how hard—but I knew that I must be free at any price, or be forever damned and ruined; and he let me go. A thief! Yes. He robbed me of all.—Ah, it shocks you,

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I can see. You didn't think that I had this tragedy in my life. You didn't know that I had suffered and been driven mad to the verge of self-destruction. But I worked out my own salvation. I left him, and to keep myself from going crazy, I plunged into a hard, grinding life of self-denial in the East End. I worked for others—the only way to forget private sorrows. Then, by chance, I was freed by a merciful Providence. My precious husband died, and my secret with him. . . . I rose to the surface again, and felt that I had a right to live. I had told nobody. Better for me perhaps if I had. I thought that I could bear it all alone, that the years would wither my secret. Foolish hope—each day it grows greener and greener. There are moments when I can scarcely keep my lips from screaming out the truth to my good, unsuspecting husband. A secret like this is a pestilent seed, it grows and grows and bears an endless crop of rank deceits. At first I bore it well. I had injured no one but myself, and—and another of whom I cannot speak. I took joy in life again after a fashion; and I bruised my heart to subtler tendernesses by ministering to the pains and sorrows of others more unfortunate. I imagined myself ennobled, purified. Then I met my present husband, who offered me a share in his hard thankless labors and his meagre vicar's home in a grim, sordid, squalid corner of the great city of sin and suffering. I refused at first. I could not confess because I knew that my story would destroy the dear, absurd ideals of me that he had formed—and he was my only friend. His wife was dead—she was a weak commonplace person. I was all to him that she could never have been, and he pleaded so forcibly, and—and I was terribly lonely. I had hidden my secret that I might go back to the life and

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the friends I had lost; only to find that I could not. I was another person."

"But you married Mr. Cardew—and you never told him?"

"Yes. Have I not said so? I stifled my conscience by weak unconvincing sophistries as you are doing. I married him. Oh, yes; I did it deliberately, thinking that I could atone by lightening his grey existence. At first I was rewarded beyond my deserts. You know how his fortunes changed ever for the better. The time for confession had gone by. I dared not speak. You see what infamy this abominable secrecy breeds."

"You ought not to have told me this," observed Mabel coldly and quietly.

"I had to tell some one. It has been gnawing at my heart for years. But I have abased myself to you to warn you and save you from a similar fate. Mabel, Mabel, you will not do this ridiculous, secret, wicked thing."

"There is no similarity in our two cases," the girl continued, remorselessly. "And I have my father's consent. Here is his letter."

Lady Hester, having gone too far, was frightened, and felt it incumbent upon her to recover her composure. She dried her tears, and tried to read the letter; but her eyes refused to see, and her senses to understand. Her hands dropped, and she turned again to Mabel.

"You will abandon this marriage? For my sake you will?" she urged plaintively. "Think how I have betrayed and humbled myself to point the moral——"

"Jack will be waiting for me. I cannot abandon it now. I can't—you must see that I can't. Jack would be broken-hearted. Everything is arranged, and Tom

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Nestor, of St. Jude's, is to perform the ceremony. So you see somebody knows and sympathizes. Tom Nestor thinks——"

"Mabel, you must, you must—you shall!" cried Lady Hester, hysterical with helplessness.

"No. I will not."

It was a very quiet and determined refusal.

"You must. If you persist I shall tell the Bishop," cried the other in petulant despair; "I won't see you ruin your own and Jack's life in this fashion." She walked threateningly towards the door. "I shall send a messenger at once, and——"

"If *you* tell I shall tell," replied Mabel, breathing hard. There was no mistaking her meaning.

Lady Hester collapsed into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"Girl, you are going to ruin, and you want to ruin me, too."

Mabel showed by her calm and determined manner that all further argument was useless. She was alarmed, too, by the unsought burden of responsibility. She refrained from any further reference to the outburst; and the other, scared by her quiet confidence, was humbled and abashed to the verge of panic. The girl's calm was forced, her farewell tearless and hard.

But Euston was still some distance away; and her heart was full of misgiving and uncertainty.

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CHAPTER III

THE arrival platform at Euston is not a very inspiriting place, but on a sunshiny day it can appear quite cheerful to an expectant bridegroom awaiting the coming of her whom he regards as brighter than the sunshine and more wonderful than all the triumphs of railway engineering skill.

Jack Cardew paced up and down restlessly. He was a handsome fellow, lithe and active, with more of the soldier about him than the lawyer, a stiff carriage, and a small, shapely head, with fresh coloring, and a very unlegal small brown mustache, sharply trimmed. His grey eyes were full and convincing, and just sufficiently nervous not to be bold. To-day his cheeks were flushed with long-repressed excitement. He was excited and tremulously nervous—as a man should be when he is taking the greatest step in his life contrary to the dictates of common sense and in direct opposition to the wishes of his best friends. He argued his business with himself, employing almost forensic eloquence in his attempts to demolish the case for the defendants. "Here am I," he mentally cried, addressing an imaginary jury of well-wishers, "a young man in the pride of early manhood, passionately in love with the most adorable of her sex, condemned by an old-fashioned and obtuse parent to patiently wait until fortune shall smile upon me. Meanwhile the precious hours and barren years are passing, and two souls are made

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wretched by living apart when there is no earthly reason why they should not be joined together in the holiest of bonds. Here am I, struggling at the Bar, confronted with years of drudgery, compelled to run the gauntlet of all the temptations of this great city, while the sweetest girl in the world is eating her heart out in some other place, longing for me every hour of the day, yet forbidden to join her life with mine because I have not attained that position of wealth and dignity which my father considers necessary for the son of the Bishop of Ripley. I am of age, and can marry whom I choose. My father is well aware of that. It is only the question of income that keeps me in his power. Men and women should marry, not eat their hearts out during the best years of their lives. And there are some men who cannot live alone. I am one of them. Some cannot work unless their minds are at ease. That is my temperament. It is monstrous that——"

Further sophistical arguments were cut short by the roaring arrival of the train. It glided in majestically with remorseless, inevitable force, and Jack vaguely likened it to the rush of fate that was to carry him today irresistibly to the terminus of his bachelorhood. He scanned the vibrating crowd of alighting passengers with some trepidation, expecting every moment to see his goddess, yet at the sight of every woman that was not Mabel he dreaded that she had changed her mind.

A tall, slim figure in a white dress, wearing a bewitching hat, was standing at the door of a first-class carriage watching his excitement with some amusement. She was within a few yards of him. He ran to her, and she almost jumped into his arms. He wanted to hug her there and then, but she, with practical co-

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quetry, evaded even a kiss, and uttered the prosaic word "Luggage."

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, but not with happiness. Two hours in the train—hours of mental uncertainty—had produced a state of nervous indecision. Lady Hester's pitiful story and her cogent arguments were ringing in her ears. Patience! patience!

Why had she been so rash?

The lovers had planned to spend the honeymoon in the little village of Weybury, at the foot of the Chiltern Hills, where there was some excellent trout-fishing; and presently Jack bundled his bride into a cab and they drove off for St. Jude's, hoping all the way that no one they knew would recognize them, and so self-conscious that it seemed to be only necessary for a friend to see them to guess their errand by clairvoyance. Jack's fingers closed on Mabel's gloved hand, and he held it tight in a fierce grip that was meant to signify inflexible determination; but she drew her hand away, and dabbed her eyes with a ridiculous little lace handkerchief.

"What, crying?"

"Oh, yes, Jack. Don't you think we had better reconsider things after all?" She turned her great wistful eyes to his, knowing perfectly well what he would say.

"Your courage failing, darling?" He bent so near to her crimson cheek that an errand-boy in the street greeted them with a whistling shriek of derision, followed by some rude remarks about "leaving the gal alone."

"Oh, Jack, I must tell you. Lady Hester knows."

"You told her?" he cried, startled.

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"No; she found out for herself. She taxed me with it, and I couldn't tell her a lie. I had to own up."

"She'll tell father," he cried in alarm.

"No, she has promised not to do that. She'll keep our secret."

"It's deuced inconvenient. What an infernal nuisance!" cried Jack, who was much more startled than he cared to admit.

"Oh, Jack, she urged me to abandon the idea of getting married to-day. She counselled patience. She said that it was only necessary for us to wait a little while and she would be able to influence the Bishop. Don't you think we might change our minds after all? We are sure of one another, Jack, without—well——"

"Darling, darling!" cried the bridegroom reprovingly.

Mabel began to tremble. Tears filled her eyes. "Of course, Jack, if you insist——"

"I do insist," he cried hotly. "Mabel, I thought you were looking forward to our little honeymoon."

"So I am—so I am!" she hastened to assure him.

"Mabel, the other day you swore that you loved me, and that you would follow me to the ends of the earth. You would be mine forever. You would give yourself to me body and soul."

"Of course, Jack, of course. When a woman loves nothing else matters. Am I not giving myself to you by marrying secretly to-day?"

"Yes, darling; but you suggested backing out."

"Oh! no, no, no."

"Then let's say no more about it. The hours will be short enough."

"Yes, Jack."

She slipped her hand into his, and the cab rumbled

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on. She had made her attempt to reverse his decision, and it had failed. There was no more to be said.

But she had not tried very hard.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile, Lady Hester, at the Palace, had not been idle. At first she was overwhelmed with remorse at the futile revelation of her secret. Then reaction set in. She knew it to be her duty to inform the Bishop of his son's folly at all costs before it was too late; but it was not easy. The Bishop would have to be found, and when at last the news reached him, he would be powerless to take any steps to interfere. If anything was to be done she alone must accomplish it.

Fortunately, in mentioning the name of Tom Nestor, late curate of Ripley, Mabel had given a clue to the place where the marriage was to be celebrated. A telegram might carry some weight. She resolved to wire a last appeal to Jack himself, care of Tom Nestor. But by the time the telegraph form was under her hand the appeal became a threat:—

"You must abandon your plan, or I shall tell your father to-day. Wire reply.—MOTHER."

This telegram greeted Jack and his bride on their arrival at St. Jude's. Jack handed it silently to Mabel, who read it and passed it back again without comment. They looked at one another in dismay, but gave the Rev. Tom no clue to their trouble. They were in the vestry of the dingy St. Pancras Church, and Tom Nestor, a sandy-haired, lanky young man was getting into his surplice.

"It's too late now," whispered Jack in desperation, rapidly formulating a plan. "We must go on, darling, and brave it out. Are you ready?"

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"I am yours to do with as you will. I have promised."

She linked her arm in his, and they went into the church to wait Tom's convenience. And there they were married, with hired witnesses, kneeling hand in hand, like two naughty children. Tom rattled through the ceremony with his usual shocking elocution, the ring was slipped on the trembling finger, and at the conclusion of the ceremony Jack pressed his bride to his heart, regardless of the pew-opener and the brass-cleaner.

They returned to Euston as man and wife, receiving Tom's congratulations on the step of the cab; and it was not until the railway terminus was reached that they found time to consider the real gravity of what had been done.

"I do hope your father won't be angry—that is, if Lady Hester tells him," sighed Mabel. "I think it will be very mean of her, and she'll be sorry if she does."

"I don't care what she tells him," growled Jack. Then he pictured the furious anger of his lordship and trembled for the financial future.

"I'll tell you what, little wife," he cried with sudden inspiration as they paced up and down the platform. "Father mustn't know, and mother mustn't tell him. In fact, mother herself mustn't know. You see it's an awful responsibility for her to keep such a thing from her husband; but if I telegraph to her and say that we've changed our minds—well, then, we are *not* married as far as she is concerned, are we? How would that do?"

"Oh, Jack, can't we avoid secrecy and deceit?"

"Our marriage is our affair, and nobody else's. I shall send the telegram. It will relieve her of the re-

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sponsibility. She can think what she likes, but she'll only know what we choose to tell her. There's a telegraph office in the station. Don't be alarmed, little one. Leave it all to me. I'll wire her 'Plans abandoned for the present.—JACK.' How will that do?"

She nodded, and sighed regretfully, and pleaded with her fine eyes, but Jack darted off and disappeared. He came back congratulating himself upon his astuteness; and when his pale, anxious wife reopened the discussion he silenced her with a laugh and a playful threat that if she said any more he would kiss her there and then on the platform before all the people.

He darted off again to bribe the guard to reserve a first-class carriage, and when that manœuvre was successfully accomplished, the excitement of adventure entered their veins, their spirits rose, and they were insanely happy.

* * * * * *

Lady Hester, waiting in suspense, and still hopeful that the reckless sacrifice of her secret might not have been in vain, received the lying message and read it with tears of joy, never doubting for a moment that she had conquered.

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CHAPTER IV

FOUR days later Jack Cardew returned home, looking less grave than usual, and not nearly so depressed as a broken-hearted swain should. The complete absence of any despair rather seemed to suggest that there had been meetings with his sweetheart in London.

The Bishop was no simpleton, but he hated deception of any kind. He had commanded his son to continue no more than a casual acquaintance with Mabel Bannister; and Jack had apparently accepted the situation, under the threat of a discontinuation of his allowance of £200 a year. He now saw that his commands were certain to be disobeyed.

He was diplomatically genial to Jack on his return. He took his son's arm and walked him round the garden, discussing local affairs and some Episcopal matters that interested Jack not at all. But discussion with his father while he was in a good temper was not to be lost by the bridegroom, who was faced by the fact that sooner or later he must overcome the Bishop's objections and break the startling news of his marriage. It was not easy.

The Bishop himself broke the ice with a sudden disconcerting question:—

"When did you last see Mabel Bannister, Jack?"

"I have seen her—once—in London," replied the bridegroom evasively, feeling excruciatingly uncomfortable.

"My boy, you think I'm an old fool. I've come to

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the conclusion that I owe you some further explanation of my objection to Mabel Bannister as your wife. I didn't intend to discuss her any more, but I see it is necessary. Have you met Mr. Bannister?"

"Yes, father, the other evening. I saw him at the club, and introduced myself. He seems a charming man, with the most polished manners. He spoke of you in the highest terms."

"Humph!" grunted the Bishop. "I'm sorry that the admiration is not mutual."

"Why do you object to him, father?"

"My dislike is founded upon things I have heard."

"Heard!" echoed Jack loftily and disdainfully.

"Yes, don't repeat my words. The knowledge came to me when we were at St. Saviour's. I attended the deathbed of a man named Judd, who came to grief through Bannister, and the poor fellow in his last hours was troubled by thoughts of the misery and ruin he had wrought at Bannister's instigation. Judd was once at Oxford, destined for the Church, but he degenerated. He went to the bad, eventually ending as a rascally begging-letter writer; and he died miserably in a garret. I knew him slightly in his Oxford days, then lost sight of him; and when next I came across him it was on his death-bed, rambling, raving, dying. He ascribed his downfall and ruin to this man Bannister. I never understood the nature of the crimes the poor fellow had committed, but he seemed to be much troubled by the recollections of one particular injury done to a woman whom Bannister had ruined. He declared that Bannister made love to a girl in Bath under an assumed name—and there was a child. For reasons of his own, and apparently to keep the matter from the woman's people, the child was taken away by the father

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and put out to nurse. The girl's relatives knew nothing of her trouble. Then Judd was sent to the woman by Bannister to tell her that the child was dead. It was a lie. That was the first bit of dirty work he did for him. Later Judd was again sent to play the humbug and pitch up a pitiful, plausible tale—this time to tell the woman the story of Bannister's own death. He carried the thing out artistically, and Bannister's demise was even advertised in the usual way in all the papers. Thus Bannister—I forget what his alias was then—passed out of existence so far as the girl was concerned.

"I don't pretend to understand the object of it all, but the thing was vile and disgraceful. The girl was deserted, and the child—God knows what became of that. I sometimes shudder when I remember poor Judd's last shrieking moments, and wonder whether anything more terrible than putting it out to nurse was ever done to the child. I believe Bannister wanted to marry money, and, having concealed his real name and identity from his victim, thought it best to wipe out all record of his guilty intrigue by allowing her to imagine that he was dead."

"An ugly business," murmured Jack. "But, surely, Mabel should not be blamed for her father's youthful sins. Nobody has anything to say against Mr. Bannister now. He is most popular. He is received everywhere. Surely, you wouldn't visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unnecessarily?"

"It is the divine law."

"But, father, you're judging Mr. Bannister, on your own showing, solely from the ravings of a dissolute wreck who had lost all sense of accuracy and fair statement."

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"My boy, I cannot forget that betrayed, deserted, ruined woman going through life with her sin heavy upon her. I believe she was a lady of position. And of the little child—where is it now? Grown to womanhood with the passing of years, with neither a mother's nor a father's care, and living a life of penury, if not of shame. What becomes of the children of dissolute men farmed out among harpies and murderesses? You know as well as I do, Jack. You saw something of it at St. Saviour's. You remember the woman I got prosecuted at George Street—the one who got rid of five children in a year, and not one of them her own?"

"The picture you draw is an exaggerated one, father. Men who move in the smart set in London do wild things in their youth, and grow to middle-age as respectable citizens. If you were to drag out all the skeletons from the cupboards of Mayfair they would make a sorry exhibition. Can I love Mabel less because her father was dissolute in his youth? No!" cried Jack hotly.

"Tut-tut, my boy, don't shout at me. I'm not deaf. I told you that I—er—might have been un-Christian and uncharitable. God forbid that I should defame the character of any nice girl because of her father's early sins. Miss Bannister's mother is dead, I understand. No doubt she was well-bred, and brought the money to her husband that he needed. But I don't like the man's record. Is he rich?"

"I don't know, father. You ought to meet him. I'm sure you'd change your opinion. And nothing will alter my regard for Mabel. Your opposition, father, only postpones the day when we come together, in spite of you. We are pledged to one another. But

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Mr. Bannister naturally refuses his consent to our marriage until you also agree."

"That is very proper of him."

"You really must know Mr. Bannister, father."

"I will."

"Ah!" cried the bridegroom, hugely relieved. His difficulties were already dwindling. In imagination he saw himself and Mabel going again to the altar, and his secret marriage ratified in a full blaze of Episcopal publicity.

"The diocesan conference takes place the week after next," said the Bishop thoughtfully. "We shall have to entertain many people then. It would be easier to ask Mr. Bannister in an informal manner to come to one of the meetings."

Jack smiled grimly at the idea of Mr. Bannister at a church conference.

"He might stay the night," added the Bishop. "I don't want to have to entertain the man alone. Your mother may not like him."

"I'm sure she'll be only too pleased to meet Mabel's father," cried the enthusiastic lover. "No one can be fonder of Mabel than mother."

"Very well, then. He shall be asked."

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CHAPTER V

MR. HORACE BANNISTER was one of the most perfectly groomed men in London, a familiar figure in Bond Street, and an assiduous student of modern art. His chambers in Stratton Street reflected the man—a roomy suite in correct taste, not too severe, but just masculine enough to give no hint of an effeminate touch, although luxurious to a fault. Choice water-colors, pencil sketches, and rare prints lined the walls, so close to one another that all other mural decoration was superfluous. Huge lounges filled the corners of the sitting rooms, and the original windows had been replaced by something latticed and quaint. The rooms were on two floors, and only one manservant lived upon the premises. All work of a feminine kind was done by a visiting charwoman accustomed to "the best families."

There was not a picture gallery in the West End where they did not know Mr. Bannister. Each fresh exhibition advertised in the gutters on the boards of the sandwich men extracted his shilling, and he could often be seen critically examining a Sainton silver point through the large eyeglass that he always held at a little distance from the eye, as though it were a magnifier. He would go into raptures over enamels and *repoussé*. Inlaid precious stones positively fascinated him (and he always made a point of discovering who bought the specially valuable ones). When the exquisitely beautiful necklet of pearls and diamonds in silver designed

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by Fallerie was stolen from Barwell's Gallery, he almost wept with vexation—so they say.

He was singularly good looking, with black, waving hair and pointed beard of the same glossy texture and color. Not a tinge of grey; not a wrinkle of age. On the wrong side of forty, he remained young, and looked like one who lived well and easily. The eyeglass gave a slight severity and hauteur to his bearing when in repose; but when he smiled he was irresistible.

Wherever fashionable people foregathered — or, rather, moneyed people—there Horace Bannister was to be found. He lived in clubs, and played bridge incessantly, which made him also an acceptable guest in many large country houses. When he traveled, he was always accompanied by Voss, his man, the most perfect, self-effacing, impenetrable gentleman's gentleman that ever drew breath.

It was only natural that Mr. Horace Bannister and Voss should not regard the presence of tall, slim Mabel at the Stratton Street flat as altogether convenient. Bannister, apparently, was delighted to have her whenever she came—until she had been there a few days, when he always jumped at the suggestion of her going anywhere else—much to Voss's relief. The presence of the bright-eyed, light-hearted girl, singing about the place and setting things straight, and prying into corners, drove Voss almost wild, to the complete destruction of his wonted imperturbability. She had already stumbled upon several strange things, the use of which was quite unknown to Voss, but which he stored away again with alacrity; yet she suspected nothing.

On the same day that Jack returned home, Mabel arrived at Stratton Street. The four days' bride chose the hour when her father would be taking his morning

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stroll, and crept guiltily into the house. Voss was startled, for he had received no intimation of her coming; and she blushed crimson, as if her secret could be read in her face.

How dingy the dark rooms seemed. She found herself wondering how long she would be obliged to live here before Jack could have her always; and fell adreaming at once.

She got through the ordeal of facing her father very well. He greeted her languidly, and taking her soft cheeks in his supple white hands, kissed her affectionately, yet with that leisurely deliberation which characterized all his movements.

"So my little girl has come home from the dear Bishop's palace."

"Yes, father," responded the bride, flushing hot and cold at the unavoidable lie.

"And Jack Cardew, the Bishop's son, wants to marry my little girl?"

"Yes, father."

"All in good time—all in good time."

Then he laughed, a rasping laugh, and threw back his handsome head as if the idea tickled him immensely.

"Why do you laugh like that, father?" she asked.

"It's so funny. But never mind. There's no need to talk about it—not yet."

He wheeled round an armchair preparatory to settling himself for a dip into his *Times*. Voss, like a shadow, glided to his elbow with cigars, and found excuses for remaining in the room.

"Let's have a look at you, Mabel," observed the languid father, as Voss held a lighted match to his cigar. "Stand there. Ah! Good figure, but slender—fine hair—good teeth—eyes not too virginal—almost too

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deep and understanding for an innocent school girl." A crimson flush dyed the bride's cheek, and the man frowned a little as he watched its sudden rise. "Ah, and no fool either!" he continued. "Frocks? Rather simple and short, but that can be remedied. I think we'll be able to develop you."

"Have you done, father?" she asked, with an awkward laugh. The laugh died away, and the flash of timidity turned to anger as she saw her father's eyes seek those of the wooden-faced Voss, as if in confirmation and approval of his words. This was a little trick of his that had worried her before. It seemed so ill-bred, and futile, too, for Voss might have been stone for all the response he gave.

"We'll have to find a few men to amuse you, Mabel. You must make the most of yourself. Darken those eyebrows a little. The dark eyebrow with the light hair gives more directness to the appeal of the eye. Cheeks a little thin in color, my dear. You must call on my friend Madame Beatty, at No. 206. She will give you a few tips on coloring that will be invaluable. She will explain how to make the flush spread from the cheek back towards the ear artistically. It gives the effect of youth in fullest bloom, and helps the glitter of the eye. Be careful with the tinting. You mustn't overdo it at your age."

"Father, you horrify me."

"My dear girl, that is quite the mildest horror that you will encounter in the next few weeks."

Again his eyes glittered and turned to seek the other man's, as much as to say, "Eh, Voss?" But Voss was carrying an ash tray to the table at his master's elbow, and would not see.

"Try a different dressing of the hair. It is becom-

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ing enough like that, but too girlish. Study the fashion papers and the Gibson girls—the real ones, I mean, not the picture post-cards. Now run away, there's a good little girl, and study your mirror for awhile. I want you to make the best of yourself for my sake as well as your own."

He hid himself behind the ample pages of the *Times*, and the girl swept from the room shocked and offended. When the door closed the paper dropped sharply and Mr. Bannister consulted Voss.

"Well, and what do you think, Voss?"

"I think she'll fetch 'em all right," replied the stony-faced one. "But you'll have trouble with her. Better let her work in the dark. Don't expect her to help you with the cards yet. She'll kick. I can give you the old tip as usual." Voss stroked first his little left whisker and then the right with a significant gesture.

"Yes, but we can't win much that way."

"Better go slow at first—until she's broke in."

"Has the Bishop's son got any money, Voss?"

"Not a cent."

"Then we must rule him out of the reckoning. What about young Blunt?"

"The Kaffir plunger. Yes, he'd do to go on with."

"Very well, I'll bring him round at about three. I shall say nothing to her. You can casually mention that I am bringing a friend for a game of cards, and I should like her to give him tea."

"That's right. Go easy."

"Sir," corrected Bannister.

"Go easy, sir," replied Voss with a grin that showed how wonderfully expansive and expressive his face could really be when the locks and bolts were undone.

"You are apt to forget the proper way to address

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me," continued the master. "As you get used to the girl being here you'll drop into the old way as if we were quite alone if you are not careful."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Bannister returned to his *Times*, and after a casual glance at the headings of the principal columns, confined his attention to the law reports and police news.

* * * * * *

"Mabel, this is Mr. Blunt. Blunt—my daughter."

"Daughter? Good lord! Didn't know you was old enough to have a daughter, Bannister. How d'ye do, Miss Bannister? Pleased to make your acquaintance."

She saw before her a short, thick-set, sandy-haired man of thirty, with a brick-red face, the bluest of blue shirts, a light, woolly suit of blanket-like texture and color, bright yellow boots, and an enormous gold watch-chain. He offered her a big, fat, moist hand, and gave her a rough grip that made her wince.

"She's going to give us some tea," observed Bannister, wheeling round a chair for his guest.

"Some what?" queried the guest, in mock horror. "I thought you knew me better than that. Can't play cards on tea."

"Voss, the whisky."

"Ah, that's better, eh, missy?"

At a loss for words, she gazed coldly upon the young man, who had commenced to ogle her admiringly, and was expanding visibly with the intention of being very friendly.

"No, no; not that nasty, fiery stuff, Voss," cried Bannister, in sharp reproof, as his man brought forward a tray; "let's have the old 'pot still.' Mr. Blunt knows whisky when he tastes it."

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"STUDY THE FASHION PAPERS AND THE GIBSON GIRLS . . ."

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"Rather!" ejaculated Blunt, with a wink at Mabel that started at the corner of his mouth and absorbed the entire side of his face.

"Blunt generally knows a good thing when he sees it, eh, Blunt?"

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Mr. Blunt, nodding to Mabel, "that's one for you. Know a good thing when I see it, eh? Ha! ha!"

He was the most odious young man she had ever met, and the commonest. She was glad that in the conversation which followed her father left her out of it. Blunt vainly tried to win her approval and draw her, but she applied herself to making tea. Voss mixed the guest a very stiff drink, with more whisky than soda, and unobtrusively prepared the card table by the window.

"Your little girl going to join us?" asked Blunt genially, when play was about to commence.

"As you please, Blunt. I'm afraid she's rather green; but you can teach her a thing or two, eh, Blunt?"

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Blunt again, hugely gratified. "There ain't many girls I couldn't teach a thing or two, eh?"

The girl voted him a vain, vulgar booby, but he seemed very smart with the cards. She took a hand at poker reluctantly, after many excuses. Voss hovered round, apparently unnoticed by the men; but to Mabel, whose eyes saw everything, he was a perpetual irritation. Twice she saw her father glance at his man rather strangely during the early deals—that questioning look which had irritated her in the morning. Each time the fellow took no notice, but stood rubbing his little side whiskers while gazing thoughtfully at the door. Then her father played his hand—and won. He

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had the most marvelous luck. Blunt grew savage when he lost, and the stakes rose to a height that alarmed the girl, although she was accustomed to card parties in country houses. Once Blunt's luck turned, and he regained a very large sum. Voss coughed and dropped a tray, and Bannister scowled at him as though it were his fault. Voss looked up at the ceiling next time he scratched his left whisker, and his master's spirits rose. He scratched his whisker deliberately and slowly as often as nine times.

Bannister protested that this was his lucky week. He certainly seemed unable to lose.

Voss replenished the men's glasses assiduously, his master's from one bottle and Blunt's from another, the latter's in huge quantities, until Mabel herself cried out to him in protest. Her father gave her an angry flash that withered her up—and Blunt gurgled thickly over his cards. He lost again and again, and cursed, utterly regardless of a lady's presence at the table.

Bannister's eyes sought those of the watching Voss, and Voss cast swift glances at the guest's hand as he passed, and signalled. It must have been a signal.

The girl's color faded. She grew faint with horror.

"Attend to your cards, Mabel, darling. Remember that your losses are mine also, because I shall have to clear off your liabilities," said her father, sweetly. "Blunt is a wonderful fellow for sudden changes of luck. He has twice cleaned me out at the club."

"There's d——d little luck coming my way this afternoon," growled Blunt, sorting his cards.

That deal, and several others were disastrous to him, and he flung down the cards at last, protesting that he never could play in the afternoon. When he rose from the table he staggered. Mabel, sick with disgust, wel-

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comed the relief, and rose too. Her heart was beating painfully, and her head throbbing as if it would burst. As soon as she conveniently could, she slipped from the room.

* * * * * * *

My father a cheat!

The thought was treachery; the idea preposterous. Yet her eyes had seen. She could not doubt the evidence of her senses. Her delightful, fastidious, tactful, suave father, who could not bear a jarring sound or a false note of color, and was scrupulously nice in all the small things of life, could not possibly condescend to work in league with a common manservant and cheat at cards.

A cheat?

No. He must be an instinctive gambler, who played as one under the influence of an overmastering passion, one of the gamblers she had met in novels, who would sell their souls to win at any cost. If he cheated, it must be because he could not help it, as the kleptomaniac steals, because he must. Any other idea was monstrous. The collusion of Voss—if there was any collusion at all—must have been due to the man's own eagerness for his master to win.

It was so petty, so horrible, that the more she thought of it the less real it became. With true feminine inconsistency she resolved to believe only what she wanted to believe—that she had made an absurd mistake, and misjudged her father terribly.

Nevertheless, the idol was cracked. Her immaculate parent was under suspicion. It was wonderful how many things, that hitherto troubled her not at all, suddenly demanded explanation. Why had she always

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lived apart from her father? How did he live? Upon what income, and how derived?

Her talks with her husband had done much to stimulate these inquiries; but the possibility of mystery and ugliness in the background of her father's life had never suggested itself before. Jack had asked a dozen questions that she could not answer; and had seemed surprised at her ignorance of such vital matters as the maiden name of her mother, and knowledge of any kinsfolk of her father. She had explained to Jack that she had no relations. Her mother died abroad at the time of her birth—place unstated—and her father was, so far as she knew, her only relation. She had been taught to regard this as sufficient.

It was when Jack began to talk about his people, to tell of his aunts, uncles, and cousins, that a curious sense of aloneness came to her. She was astonishingly ignorant of her antecedents.

Her father's intimates, whom she had seen at foreign spas, and fashionable centres during her brief holiday visits, always seemed a little too intimate. They ogled her and annoyed him; yet he had seemed unable to check their familiarity. There were no women with whom she was allowed to be friendly, except titled and well-known people whom she met on the promenades and other public places. They were civil but bored, and evidently found her *de trop*. The homes of her schoolfellows were opened to her, warmly at first, and sympathy for a motherless girl made her many friends. She was clever, and possessed that unusual charm that drew women to her, and bound her to them, if not with hoops of steel, at least with an indulgent intimacy that ripened with time, and assured her of a friendly welcome at several houses in England and on the Conti-

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nent. A few of these friends had dropped away suddenly. Her father had charmed them at first. He was delightful. He was everybody's friend. Then he moved on, and a strange constraint fell upon everybody, definite but inexplicable, and through this iciness there came a tinge of sympathy and sorrow for the motherless girl. All this Mabel had felt in a vague way. Now, reviewing the past by the light of present suspicions, these lapses became pregnant with meaning.

A horrible and definite explanation of these strange rebuffs was afforded by this glimpse behind the scenes of her father's life. If he were a gambler, and sometimes a cheat—it could only be sometimes—— No, the thought was unthinkable, and she put it away.

It is surprising what four days of matrimony will do in altering or awakening a girl's point of view. Four days with Jack had stirred all the latent energy of her young brain. Love had aroused mothering instincts and a passionate desire to better the world and all the people in it, especially Jack, and her father, and the obstinate Bishop. She had dreamed of this marriage as the turning-point of Jack's undistinguished career. He was to be appreciated and helped by everybody, her father most of all. And now!

She shuddered, then laughed at her own morbid folly in making mountains out of molehills.

She heard Voss go out—then her father and Blunt. All was quiet, and the sudden tumult that had worked in her brain died down; but she felt the need of physical activity. She must find something to do. She entered the sitting room, which still reeked of smoke, and saw the spirit bottles on the side table. Her curiosity was aroused, and it conquered her loyalty. She examined

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the bottles. The darker liquid, which had been given to Blunt, was undoubtedly whisky. The lighter, in the other bottle, had a faint unpleasant odor much less definite. She poured out a little and tasted it.

It was not spirit at all—it most resembled sherry and water. Bannister evidently kept a cool head while he plied his guests with spirits. Deception again, treachery, and lies.

It was horrible; it was mean, cunning, vile. And she—what was she?

"Oh, Jack, Jack, what have I done!" she cried, and buried her ashen face in her hands.

* * * * * * *

Tears would not come. She sat shrivelled up, her youth gone, swept away forever by this fateful knowledge.

Many unintelligible things now flashed up clear and terrible. Her father had always been so very anxious to get her into the houses of the rich and those who squandered money. He had taught her card games as though they were an indispensable science; and he had shown her with elaborate care how to beware of cheats at bridge—how to cheat, in fact. She had laughed innocently at the time. Now it seemed to have a painful significance.

"Oh, what would Jack think if he knew? And the Bishop? And Lady Hester? My father a cheat—in league with a common servant."

Blunt had obviously been plied with drink, and drink of a different kind to that taken by her father. She wished with all her heart that she had remained in ignorance; and, as is often the habit of those who suddenly come upon painful knowledge, began to juggle with facts. Perhaps she was mistaken about the sig-

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nals. And, after all, her father could choose his own drink. Why should he be held responsible if his friends drank more than was good for them? That was their affair. She tried to think so. She compelled herself to think so, diverting her attention by "tidying up" in the grateful absence of the officious Voss.

The room was littered with cards and cigar ash, but she knew the cabinet where Voss kept the cards. She found it almost full of new packs, enough to stock a shop. At the back of the drawer was a broken packet, half full, from which cards had been withdrawn.

"The commonest and crudest form of swindling, chiefly practiced upon drunken men, is by using concealed cards, a scheme at once simple and dangerous."

Her father's own words recurred to her, and she ran through the packet. It contained only the lesser numbers; all the Court cards were missing.

The packet dropped from her trembling fingers and scattered on the floor. At the same moment the key turned in the outer door of the flat, and her father returned. Guilty self-consciousness overwhelmed her. She scrambled them all back into the cabinet anyhow, but too late to escape detection.

Bannister gave one glance, and frowned. Then he smiled, and looked another way.

"Always busy, little girl," he murmured, as he drew off his gloves languidly. "There's nothing like it. If we could afford a staff of servants you should recline on rose leaves and sup on honey. But alas! we must work. Talking of roses——"

"You never work, father."

"Never work, my child? I've had a most laborious afternoon—and I've made four hundred pounds. Four hundred pounds, little girl!" He pinched her cheek

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affectionately. "And what is more important to you, I have been to Solomon's to buy something that will cancel the commission due to you, an exquisite bunch of roses. You can have a new dress, too, if you like, for your next visit to the dear Bishop."

"Father," she cried, with a gulp of stifled indignation. "I think it wicked to win so much as four hundred pounds in one afternoon from a man who—well, he was almost drunk."

"Shocking exaggeration, my child. Don't glare and choke over your words like that. Why is it that virtuous indignation—and everything else virtuous, in fact—is so horribly distorting and self-torturing?"

"It was monstrous. It was—dishonest."

"My child, I am tired. Don't bore me with schoolgirl ethics." He dropped softly and wearily into a comfortable lounge, and pulled up a pillow for his head.

"You are old enough to observe the ways of the world now without making injudicious observations and comments. Discretion in a woman is more valuable than beauty. You have the latter—cultivate the former quality."

"Father, you can't expect me to sit by and see abominable things done, and——"

"Little girls should be seen and not heard. I've only half glanced through my *Times*, and in a few minutes it will be time to dress for dinner."

* * * * * * *

A letter from Jack—a big fat letter. The color rushed to Mabel's face, and her fingers trembled as she opened the envelope. It was like a breath of fresh air from the Chilterns. From Jack! the same Jack that she had left behind. But was she the same woman? Ages seemed

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to have passed, mountains to have arisen, and the distance between them had widened to the width of an ocean.

"*Ripley, Wednesday.*

"My Dear Sweet Secret,

"It is dreadful down here without you. I can't think now how I tore myself away just to put in an appearance at home when I might be in London, where I could at least see you sometimes. It's an awful strain keeping up the delusion with Lady Hester that we are painfully waiting, like good little children, till the apples are plucked for us by other people. She almost wept over me when I returned a bachelor (!).

"I have one good piece of news for you, sweetheart. I sounded the governor, and found that he was not nearly so dogmatic and obstinate as I thought. It appears his objection to you was due to something he had heard about your naughty papa—something that occurred probably twenty years ago, when he was young and wild. It was an ugly story. Perhaps it wasn't true at all. He only got hold of it from a dying man who was half mad and trying to make a good end of things after a life of evil. Father so far melted before we had done our talk as to be charitable, and promised to meet your dad. The governor is really an awfully decent sort, but he's an awful stickler for form and family and all that sort of thing, you know. And if he had the slightest suspicion that your dear papa was not all that a good-looking, popular widower ought to be, he would be very nasty.

"That little crib at £300 a year, which I told you looked like coming my way, is off. Bates has got it. I'm bitterly disappointed. It places me more than ever

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at the mercy of the old man, who is really very conscientious about money. So prime your gay papa for a dull time at the Palace; and if he could rail against the Education Bill and the Radicals he would go straight to father's heart at once.

"Warn him not to mention bridge; for it is father's pet aversion, and he is preaching against it at the present time. There is nothing else I can suggest. Whenever I close my eyes I hear the ripple of the trout stream and the kissing of the leaves overhead. Oh for an hour under that weeping willow with my head in your lap! But I am forgetting our compact of secrecy. This is not a proper letter to write to Miss Bannister. So good night, sweetheart. Write and tell me where I can meet you on Thursday.

"Your loving, ——ahem!

"JACK.

"P. S.—An awfully queer thing happened last night. Father, being in an expansive mood, showed me some old photos of himself taken long before I was born, and a miniature which, at first, I mistook for you. It was the very image. But it was only Lady Hester in a nurse's uniform taken when she was about twenty. The likeness was really amazing. So much for coincidences. Of course, I didn't fail to drive home the moral that being the son of my father it was only natural that I should admire that style of beauty."

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CHAPTER VI

MR. RICHARD BANNISTER sat in a hard but comfortable chair while Voss brushed his hair with a pair of exquisite tortoise-shell brushes. He held a letter in his hand which seemed to amuse him. By the reflection in the mirror Voss was able to watch the supercilious curl of his master's thin lip, and the whimsical puckering of the crowsfeet about the eyes.

The valet paused in his labors and peered over his master's shoulder at the letter, a brush poised in each hand waiting for the next stroke and oscillating in mid-air, while he also read from beginning to the end of the epistle. The brushes remained inactive so long that Mr. Bannister became aware of the impertinent scrutiny. Instead of rebuking this man he handed the letter up over his shoulder for the servant's more comfortable perusal.

It was only a formal invitation from Lady Hester Cardew to Mr. Richard Bannister, begging him to come to Ripley, and make the Palace his headquarters for one night. Voss gripped the letter with an inactive finger and held it aloft, brush and all, to get a clear perusal. He smiled thoughtfully as he handed it back, and put extra vigor into the finer manipulation of the glossy hair.

"What do you think of it?" asked the master, with a whimsical smile, surveying his man in the mirror.

"Seems all right," was Voss's comment. Then, after a pause, "Going?"

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"Haven't made up my mind."

"It's the right set. Most respectable, and wonderful soft."

"I'm afraid 'soft' society doesn't stimulate me to a properly adventurous spirit, Voss. I get bored and impatient."

"Not impatient," chuckled Voss. "There never was a chap so patient. I thought I knew how to wait; but you, oh, lor'! You make me ache."

"The man who follows a profession at once difficult, artistic, and dangerous, should never rush at anything, Voss. One good coup in three weeks, carried to a successful issue and finished out of hand, without the slightest trail for anxiety left behind, is far better than a dozen rash, hasty ventures and hairbreadth escapes, leaving behind a gnawing consciousness that some false step, some forgotten clue, may bring retribution and disaster. Have you ever had an uneasy conscience, Voss?"

Voss was puzzled. He paused in giving a pleasing twist to the front lock, and gazed into the mirror inquiringly. Seeing there only a quizzical smile, he asked with a grin—

"Who're you getting at?"

"I mean what I say. Have you ever had an uneasy conscience?"

"Maybe—occasional."

"A rare luxury, evidently. Now, I'll warrant that the sensation was entirely due to the dread that some act or avoidable indiscretion might bring trouble in the uncertain future."

"How will that do?" asked Voss, combing the lock uninterested. "Is that front bit too high?"

"Of course it is." Mr. Bannister seized the comb

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petulantly. "Hair should fall softly, in natural fashion. Only a butcher or a hairdresser likes his hair to resemble oiled wood."

The dandy caressed his beautiful front lock, with the grey strand in the centre, and studied the effect at different angles, like a woman. His soft, slender, white hand rested on the comb in a manner that suggested an acute sensibility of touch, combined with cat-like deliberation of movement. The interest he took in his appearance was keen; but he looked well pleased when he had completed his toilet.

On the table in front of him was a large framed photograph of Mabel, taken by the most expensive photographer in Paris. It was a really charming picture, and his gaze was held by it. Then he sighed and bent nearer the mirror to examine the crowsfeet about his lustrous Italian eyes.

"Of course, you'll go?" queried Voss casually. His mind had been running in the same groove since he last spoke. His master's had floated over the whole range of paternity, youth, love, marriage, old-age, palsied limbs, and chilling death. He wondered if paternity really did bring any compensations in declining years—whether the love of a daughter was more worth winning, and keeping, than the love of a wife or a passionate houri. Voss's query brought him back. He sighed and allowed his servant to help him on with his faultless morning coat, but made no reply.

"Bishop Cardew is one of the Northallerton family," observed Voss; "the chap who used to do the hero in the East End—the one old Judd went to when he took on religion after the drink had done for him. He married a nurse, or a sister of mercy, or something of that sort—a woman with a title. She's his second wife.

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He's a cousin of the Marquis of Northallerton. I read it in the paper the other day. Caught my eye 'cos it mentioned the Cardew emeralds, which was left away from the marquis's side of the family, and now belong to the Bishop's lady—which is a waste, as she never wears 'em. In the paper it said there was twenty thousand pounds' worth at the Palace from year's end to year's end and never worn, only kept in a glass case. Lord! some people is fools. Emeralds is fetching a bit just now—fetching double, some say."

Mr. Bannister was listening, but he appeared to be taking more interest in the last touches of his toilet. While his back was turned he casually remarked—

"Would you be surprised to hear, Voss, that my silly girl is going to marry the Bishop's son?"

Voss paused in the act of folding his master's dressing-gown and looked up, his face as expressionless as a mask of wax. Then surprise gave place to another emotion, and a curiously foxy and cunning look crept into his eyes. Speech came at last.

"Garn! you're getting at me."

"'Tis true, and funny 'tis, 'tis true. That's why I'm invited to the palace; the palace being, I am given to understand, a large, uncomfortable, dreary mansion, in a sleepy, stupid town."

Voss indulged in a rare luxury; he laughed. He sometimes chuckled, but rarely did mirth commandeer all the muscles of his face.

Bannister flashed round angrily.

"D—n you! what are you laughing at? Do you think my daughter isn't good enough for a jumped-up Bishop's son? Gad, man, is there a girl in the peerage more fitted to wear a coronet, or as well fitted?"

"I ain't got nothing to say against her looks," replied

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Voss sulkily, as he took up his master's silk hat and brushed it mechanically. "But I thought you was going to turn her into money. If she'd only top the wink to young Blunt and keep him dangling, you could get a clear thousand out of the silly mug."

"A girl in love is not likely to easily lend herself to vulgar intrigue, Voss. You never calculate for the existence of finer feelings. Be careful, that hat had three ugly scratches on the front yesterday. If you can't get them out throw the hat away. There's another waiting in my box at Scott's. Allow me. The brush this way, if you please. Not so rough." He took the hat with a touch that was a caress, and delicately smoothed it, while Voss looked on superciliously.

"I thought you reckoned upon the gal as an investment," observed Voss, when the hat was in proper order and the brush handed back to him; "that you was going to get back all you'd spent on her and more, and she was going to increase your respectability and give you 'tong.'"

"Ton," corrected Bannister, with a twinge. "Voss, you were in Paris long enough to get a better accent than that. And to think that you swindled English hotel keepers as a French count before I took you in hand and made a gentleman's gentleman of you! I can hardly believe it when I hear your accent."

"Broken English is a simple lingo, but to talk French as you do, easy as whistling, requires eddication."

"Ah! that's so. You're in your proper sphere as my valet. But I wish you'd curb your natural vulgarity of idea, and not gurgle at the mention of jewels. To use one of your favorite expressions, 'I am not on that lay now.'"

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"Bah!" exclaimed Voss; "clubs and play and city companies and all them things is finnicking."

"A steady income, Voss, a steady income."

"Yes, and what do you do with it? That's what I can't make out. You must be making a tidy bit."

"You get your share, my good fellow," snapped the master, with unusual acerbity. He only allowed his servant and partner a certain limit of familiarity.

"Oh! I ain't complaining. But you don't spend like you used to, not of late years."

Mr. Bannister poised his silk hat at the proper angle on his head, and intently examined his reflection in the full-length mirror at close quarters and for quite a long time.

"What's the matter?" queried Voss.

"Sir," corrected the other sharply.

"Sir."

"It's the flight of time that is worrying me, Voss," sighed Bannister. "Age is creeping on me. I've no intention of ending my days in discreditable obscurity."

"Why, you're not much over forty yet. That ain't old."

"Have you noticed my recent interest in land agents' catalogues and *County Life?*"

"Yes, I've seen it. I thought you was thinking of crib-cracking?"

"Voss, you shock me; your instincts are so abominably low. I'm thinking of settling down as a country gentleman."

Voss raised his eyebrows. He was past being astonished at anything.

"A new lay," he observed wearily, "and in the country?"

"Not a new 'lay,' as you call it, but a retirement from

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business. I'm going to buy a nice little place in the country, just large enough for my old age, with a little land and some shooting. By that time I hope to see you, Voss, installed as an honest publican in some thriving inn—near a race course, say—at a convenient distance, a very considerable distance."

He paused in the act of drawing on a glove, and picked up a copy of *County Life* which lay open on a side table.

"Here's a little place, £7,000. Six miles from Ripley, one mile from church and post."

"And how far from the county jail?" asked Voss, with obvious anger. Evidence of Bannister's affluence always annoyed him. It gave extra strength to the master's whip-hand, for money is power, even against the law, and much more against an humble law-breaker.

"I could buy the place, Voss, but I couldn't keep it up. It looks pretty, and shooting pheasants is, I'm sure, a better game than fleecing pigeons."

Bannister held out his hand for his cane.

"I don't want to meet Miss Mabel this morning. She's looking red-eyed and worried. She saw too much when Blunt was here."

"That was your fault," replied Voss sharply.

"Sir."

"Your fault, sir," corrected Voss, polishing his master's malacca vigorously. "You got into a paddy, and you wouldn't see my signs. I went as close as I dared. Cards is nasty things when women is about. Jewels is better."

"Voss, you're a thief by instinct. I am an artist. I see and understand how easy it is to convey wealth from one owner to another. I use the same ingenuity

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and thought that financiers apply to the amassing of wealth by so-called honorable means. The jewels of the Bishop's lady, for instance, are no more hers than mine. They are in reality a part of the wealth of a nation —the wealth that ebbs and flows with the tide, and is cast here and there, in large waves and little eddies, ever changing, ever shifting, according to circumstance and the luck of birth, marriage, and death."

"Here, stow it!" growled Voss savagely. He, too, allowed only a certain measure of superiority in his master, as his master allowed only a certain familiarity. "Talk sense. What about the Bishop's emeralds?"

"Twenty thousand pounds did you say they were worth?"

"So the papers said. That was the face value when they last changed hands, twenty years ago. Twenty thousand pounds' worth of emeralds! Lord! it makes your mouth water. They must be worth at least forty thousand now."

"But if the Bishop's son marries my daughter they'll be hers in due course."

"I ain't dealing in futures, or floating in fairy tales," retorted Voss irritably. To him the marriage of Mabel with a Bishop's son savored of rank absurdity; yet it frightened him a little, for he had long ago learned to dread the bold flights which the master mind of Bannister occasionally sprang upon him.

"Well, at least I think I'll go down and visit the Bishop," observed Bannister at length. He surveyed himself again in the full-length mirror with evident satisfaction. "The Bishop's lady is delightful, I am told. Order me the last six numbers of the *Guardian*, the *Churchman*, or any standard religious paper. I must read up my subject."

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"You're a fair wonder," murmured Voss, as he rubbed his hands softly.

He saw emeralds in the air, and they meant excitement and change of scene.

* * * * * * *

The same post that brought Mr. Bannister his invitation to the Palace brought Mabel a letter from Lady Hester. The sight of the familiar writing was enough to set the girl palpitating. It brought back her last interview—the pale face, the urgent entreaties, the nervous, hysterical warning, and the amazing confession.

Whatever Lady Hester might say or do in the future, Mabel felt some satisfaction that she at least had been honest and faithful to Jack. She had married him without reserve or deception, believing her father to be an honorable gentleman, and her own life had been blameless; whereas Lady Hester had suppressed the most vital of all facts in entering matrimony—she had been married before, and did not speak.

To a young girl it seemed incredible that any one could be so charming as Lady Hester and at once so foolish and wicked. She gave little thought to the natural shame and despair of a woman of Lady Hester's social position who finds herself allied to a social pariah, a thief, or to the wild cravings for peace when chance freed her and allowed her to go back to her own world, unsmirched in conscience, and safe from the pointing finger of scorn so long as she remained silent. True, Mabel herself had acquiesced in the wilful deception of Lady Hester after having given a promise, but she salved her conscience by regarding that as Jack's affair, and there was nothing for it but to go on with the deception.

It was not the need for hiding her marriage that

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troubled her so much now as the awful discovery of her father's real character. The horror of it was intensified when viewed in the light of her new relationship to Bishop Cardew, the noble, upright, zealous enthusiast, who loathed shams and every form of wrong, and would cut off his right hand rather than that his son—whom he loved devotedly, in spite of his apparent severity—should ally himself to one likely to bring discredit upon the Bishopric of Ripley, the great position which he held in trust from heaven.

Lady Hester's letter was bulky and long, and Mabel began it with bated breath and considerable trepidation.

"My Dearest Mabel,

"I've been thinking about you ever since you left, and oh! you don't know how relieved I was to find that my advice had been taken. It makes me think that the sacrifice I made was not in vain. Mabel, dear, don't think any more about what I told you. I shall tell the Bishop some day, but just now is not the time; he is so overworked, and must not be worried. I know that he will judge me more leniently than I deserve. Oh, Mabel, don't, don't think about it. The dreadful skeleton has lain dormant so many years. This affair of yours has brought it all back. I am working steadily in your favor. The Bishop is really very fond of you, and he misses you. But he thinks that you have not received as much spiritual guidance as a girl should in her early education. Still, he is the last man in the world to raise violent, unreasoning opposition to Jack's marriage with the woman of his choice. But you mustn't deceive him—at least, Jack mustn't. He would never forgive that. He likes to think of his son as the soul of honor, in things both great and small. Jack is no

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longer a boy, but there is no overlooking the fact that he is dependent upon his father for his income, and you'll ruin him if you allow him to deceive the Bishop. An early, rash, secret marriage could but spoil his career at the Bar, which is only just beginning. Keep a clear conscience, and you'll have the joy of a light heart —a priceless possession, never sufficiently valued until too late.

"I have asked your father to come down, and I leave it to you to manage the rest. I understand from Jack that your father was rather wild in his youth, and that he mixes with a set against whom the Bishop has been preaching very vigorously of late; but both are men of the world, so there ought not to be anxiety about their meeting. Personally, I am looking forward to meeting him. From what you have told me, I'm sure he must be a particularly charming and fascinating man. I confess to a little nervousness, for I'm afraid he will find us dull. I forgot to mention that the Bishop has written to him forbidding any engagement between yourself and Jack, and your father has replied that he, too, would not think of 'sanctioning any such union'—I am quoting his own phrase, dear—unless it seemed advisable after mature deliberation on both sides, and there were proper settlements, and so on. So you see, Jack having no money at all, and not being in the position to make settlements, makes things all the more awkward. Nevertheless, I fancy your father's letter has impressed the Bishop. I am writing all this in the strictest confidence and with the greatest frankness, dear, because I want you to marry Jack. Don't have any doubts on that point. Come down with your father if you wish, but I should advise you to stay away, and Jack too.

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"Don't meet Jack in town, there's a good girl. Wait, and let everything be honest and above board. Don't deceive anybody; it doesn't pay in the long run. Convention is a terrible octopus; its claws reach out in every direction.

"By the way, Aunt Caroline is here. You will have heard Jack mention her. She has wormed out all there is to know about you already, and she is very curious about you and your family, and especially about your mother, your upbringing, schooling, and all that sort of thing, you know. She's not really a spiteful person, her intentions are always good; but, like many good people, she arrives at her results by particularly uncomfortable methods. Give your father a hint to secure her good opinion.

"Mabel, it will all come right, dear. Spur Jack on to work. Marriage will be all the sweeter when it comes from the consciousness of having earned the right of independence and love.

"You see I am confident for your future, and I sign myself in anticipation, your loving mother,

"HESTER CARDEW."

Mabel shed a few tears over this letter. It wrung her heart both ways, and, instead of making the way seem easier, only softened the quicksands.

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CHAPTER VII

MABEL was constrained and nervous in her father's presence. A barrier had arisen between them which neither flowers nor smiles could displace. The beautiful blooms which he had ordered as her "commission" on the infamous card-sharping business were untouched until Voss discreetly distributed them about the rooms, where their odor sickened her, and recalled unceasingly the things she would forget.

She was to meet Jack in town to-day—their first meeting after the all too brief honeymoon—and instead of the delicious flutter of joy and expectant excitement that should have been hers by right, she was trembling, sick with apprehension, guilty, and ill at ease. Lady Hester's letter was as salt in her wounds. The enormity of her folly in marrying Jack so hurriedly seemed to have grown into a crime. She set out to meet him, nevertheless, and, like all criminals, was sufficiently vain of her appearance to wear her prettiest frock—a muslin thing that hung cloud-like upon her swift-moving, graceful form. As she stepped into Bond Street, pale, except for the sharp flush on her cheeks, and with sparkling, troubled eyes, nervous and roving, many a head was turned to gaze after her. When she hailed a cab the knowing ones guessed that her errand was not a prosaic one.

The cool air beat upon her hot brow, and her tired eyes opened wider, as from a cleansing breath. She heard again the ripple of the trout stream and the whis-

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per of the wind amongst the leaves. She was going to meet Jack—her husband—and what else mattered? He and she were one, bound indissolubly. The troubles and scruples of Lady Hester and the backslidings of her father were but pawns in the game. Life was love and love was life, and it was only in the beginning.

As the cab turned into Piccadilly she passed some people that she knew, and dropped her head nervously so that the brim of the large Romney hat screened her face. There was a block in the traffic later, and a cab drew up almost opposite her containing an overdressed bounder, who stared impudently through his eye-glass and smiled after surveying her. He guessed that she was off to meet a man; it was written all over her.

If Jack had been there the insolent fellow would not have dared.

Yes; Jack was all she had. When the dusty green of Hyde Park came into view she strained her eyes for the first glimpse of the lithe, tall form of her lover—her husband.

Husband!

She murmured the word and lingered over it fondly, and laughed the low, soft laugh of careless excitement. With an insouciance worthy of her father she flung care to the winds, and forgot the card-sharping, the Bishop, and Lady Hester.

She leaned forward eagerly at Prince's Gate, and was ready to cry with delight at the sight of Jack restlessly pacing the shady plane avenue and switching the grass viciously with his stick. Her blood tingled hot and eager. She could not keep still. She waved her little handkerchief wildly. When they came face to face, she was all smiles, happiness, and love. She almost leaped

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into his arms, and evidently expected to be embraced, but Jack, with true British marital self-consciousness, drew himself up stiffly, looking nervously to right and left.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" was all she could say as her hands rested in his. His eyes showed how delighted he was to see her again. The cabman surveyed the meeting with a critical, fore-calculating eye, wondering whether the gentleman would pay or the lady. After they had walked a few yards he called after them.

"Beggin' your pardon, miss——"

"I must pay the cabman and send him away, dearest," whispered Jack, and Mabel came down to earth—or nearly.

The cabman did not drive away. He waited and watched the lovers pass into the gardens. Jack felt almost nervous.

"We've got to be careful," he whispered anxiously; "there are such an infernal lot of people about that I know, and people who know the governor too. They mustn't see us, or there'll be the dickens to pay. It's deuced hard on a chap that he can't walk with his own dear little wife in a public park without having to play the fox. But there, it won't be for long, little one. My clever little girl is going to see to all that. She's going to get round the old boy, and then——"

"And then?" she asked, and she shivered as from a cold wind. She came right down to earth with a dull, heavy thud.

"Why, then we'll own up. Oh, darling, you don't know what it is to be married and live in chambers, and go on with the old life just the same."

"Yes, I do, Jack. You don't suppose that I find Stratton Street a paradise."

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"It's home, though." She shuddered again. "Home! How often I've thought of home since last week, Mabel, and dreamed of it, and imagined my little fairy presiding at the evening meal. Then comes disillusionment, and I eat my solitary chop in a gaudy restaurant, where men are dining with their wives and sweethearts, all jolly, and off to the theatre. And from my corner I sit and groan and think of—my wife."

"Don't, Jack, don't! You mustn't grip my arm like that. That woman over there in the blue frock looks very much like Mrs. Selwyn Carton. She'll see you. She is looking this way. Let's take the other path."

Jack rattled on, grumbling and laughing by turns, until he had exhausted his small stock of news. Then it occurred to him that he had done all the talking and Mabel the listening.

"Well, little one, and what is your news? How goes it with your adorable dad? What would he say if he knew you were shopping in Kensington Gardens—eh?"

"I don't think he'd mind very much," replied Mabel, with a gasp and a horrid choking in her throat.

"Then he's not a very particular chap—eh? Rather a good sort, though."

"I—I don't know."

It was on her lips to tell Jack everything, but loyalty, pride, and shame impelled her to hold her peace. Why should she worry Jack with her troubles when he had so many of his own?

Perhaps if she had spoken then things might have turned out differently.

Woman-like, she tried to change the conversation; but Jack wanted to know if his father-in-law—how strange it sounded on his lips—was going down to the

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Palace. When she told him that the invitation had been accepted he laughed joyfully.

"That's ripping, little girl. You're a rare little schemer, full of tact and artfulness. You'll be a gold mine to me when I'm made a judge. Once let our fathers meet, and imagine they are settling our affairs for us, then all will be well; though I think I'd better see papa-in-law, darling, and coach him up in the part he has to play—without letting him suspect it, of course."

"I don't think I would, Jack, not yet."

Again she struggled to explain, to confess, to warn him. Her tongue was tied. She laughed frivolously instead, and talked of Weybury and the incidents of the honeymoon—of anything that would help her to forget the awful tangle into which things were drifting.

The Long Water gleaming in the morning sunlight reminded them of Weybury and their stolen holiday, and fired Jack with eagerness for new indiscretions. He was rash enough to suggest another brief escape from civilization, but Mabel vetoed the project with a firmness that hurt his vanity.

"No, Jack—impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible when one really loves," he retorted loftily.

"Don't be silly, Jack. We must be very careful—for your sake."

"Why should I be compelled to live apart from my wife?" cried Jack contentiously, as if demolishing the arguments of the plaintiff. Why should I suffer tortures of loneliness? Why——"

"Jack, you must, you must. One false step, and we shall be discovered. Oh, dear! I am already weary of deceit. I wish——"

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"Don't say that you wish we hadn't been down to Weybury. That would be unkind, Mabel. I thought you were happy there."

"Of course, Jack, of course. You know I was. But you must understand that a woman, when she's married"—Jack grinned delightedly—"must make her husband's welfare her first thought."

"Mabel, I don't care a hang for my welfare just now, or the world, or father, or anything else—but you."

They were standing facing each other, and he excitedly seized his wife, careless of eye-witnesses, but sheltered by a screen of close-growing rhododendrons. "Mabel, I can't do without you. You must come down to my chambers in the Temple. I want you to see the place. You know you said you wanted to."

"Jack! After all our noble resolutions at Weybury? How patient we were to be, and how strong!"

"Mabel, don't look at me with serious eyes like that. They were never meant for anything but laughter. There's something about you this morning that makes me reckless. You're looking such a picture of restrained devilment that——"

"I don't feel it, Jack."

"Well, never mind, you look it. You're such a queer mixture of demureness and diablerie. I'm sure if I suggested to you that we should run a race down to the Long Water, and play touch like little urchins round the penny chairs, you'd enter into the fun and enjoy yourself like the dear little kiddie that you are."

Mabel was excited more than elated. The rhythm of Jack's full baritone vibrated in her very heart-strings; when he was in high spirits and reckless his mood was contagious. And what woman in love can

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resist high spirits? Frivolity and coquetry were ever twin sisters.

The abandon of mutual proprietorship suddenly seized them, and they walked hand-in-hand like any park lovers—or husband and wife. They drifted back to honeymoon manners, oblivious of their surroundings or the dangerous proximity of the carriage drive, and were only brought back to earth by a sudden start from Jack, who relinquished his hold and hurriedly raised his hat to a passing vehicle.

"Confound it!" he growled, with set teeth. "Aunt Caroline."

The carriage sped swiftly by. A pale-faced, hook-nosed, elderly lady with an eagle eye bowed stiffly, and raised her pince-nez rather pointedly to get a better view of the smartly dressed girl. It was the Bishop's sister, of whom Jack had often spoken in accents of doubtful praise as "an awfully good soul," devoted to his father and himself, but showing it in ways chiefly irritating.

"Well, she doesn't know me," said Mabel comfortingly.

"All the worse," groaned Jack. "They'll hear at home that I spend my mornings in Kensington Gardens strolling hand-in-hand with an unknown female. You will be described, and then——"

"Jack, we ought to be more careful. We oughtn't to behave like this at all. I wanted to talk to you very, very seriously about—about lots of things."

"Interfering old—busybody!" exclaimed Jack, still running on Aunt Caroline. "She knows everything and everybody, and turns up everywhere. A wonderful old girl for her years—but I wish she'd leave off nosing into my affairs. Depend upon it, she knows there has

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been a row about you at home; and trust her for guessing who you are."

"And Lady Hester begged me not to see you, Jack," observed Mabel, with a woebegone look. They stood and looked at one another foolishly. Then they both laughed at the absurdity of their position—husband and wife in a fever of anxiety at having been seen together by a maiden aunt.

"Mabel," cried Jack, with a sudden burst of desperation, "if you don't promise to come down and see me in the Temple, I'll just hug you where you stand, before all these people." He seized her arm, and she jumped away in mock terror.

"I'll come, Jack, I'll come. I'm bewildered by the difficulties that beset us. But there is love." She slipped her arm in his. They passed again into the shelter of the trees where the shadows were deeper, and only a few nurse maids and their charges disturbed the solitude.

Gone were all her fine resolutions, and the half-formed notions of abandoning Jack forever and freeing him from the incubus of a disreputable father-in-law. After all, their world was themselves, and they must revel in the sunlight. Let to-morrow bring its burdens and responsibilities. To-day was theirs.

The day after would be Aunt Caroline's.

Jack was feverishly eager that they should snatch a few hours of wedded bliss in the Temple, despite resolutions to the contrary; and it was when urging this sort of indiscretion that Jack showed that great facility of argument and fluency of persuasive speech that had already stood him in such good stead at the Bar.

Mabel protested that it was horribly indiscreet, but he demolished her weak arguments by the most ele-

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mentary logic. He talked long and eloquently; and what could a young and infatuated wife do but submit?

Her father's erratic manner of life and the absence of any female relatives left her very much her own mistress to come and go as she pleased; so that she, personally, ran very little risk in visiting a supposed bachelor in chambers, and would find little difficulty in absenting herself from Stratton Street. As for Jack, he argued that, though brick walls might have ears, they had fewer eyes than London streets. He declared that with a wife's occasional counsel he would be another man. The future would hold no terrors for him, and the high pinnacle upon which the woolsack rested was at once lowered to a quite moderate elevation. Despite their experience with Aunt Caroline and the danger of being observed, they kissed farewell beneath the trees, in full view of Mrs. Selwyn Carton's maid, who was airing her mistress's discarded blue frock in sequestered paths.

Mabel parted from her husband with her head in a whirl, cheeks crimson, and eyes glistening. She walked all the way home, and only in Bond Street became really conscious of the presence of other people in the world. She suddenly caught sight of her father gazing in a jeweler's window, and halted guiltily, uncertain whether to slip by or to join him.

He had seen her reflection in a window mirror, and was watching her approach. At the psychologic moment he turned and greeted her affectionately, and drew her to the window.

"Look! is it not beautiful?" He pointed to a glittering ring, which caught a ray of the sunlight as it nestled on its white velvet cushion. "The design is an in-

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spiration—so simple, yet so elegant. Mabel, you must have that ring."

Before she could protest Bannister drew her into the shop, where, apparently, he was well known. He entered with a languid air, and smiled genially on the fussy manager.

"Good morning, Bowman. You're looking well."

"Pleasure to see you again, sir; such a long time since we had the pleasure. Saw you looking at that ring we have just received from our Paris house. It's quite in your style."

"Let's see it, Bowman. I haven't bought a jewel for weeks. I've successfully mastered my infatuation for beautiful gems for at least twenty-one days."

Mabel looked up at her father in some mystification, knowing so little of his habits and moods.

The jeweler saw the look, and explained:

"Your father, Miss Bannister, has a wonderful taste in this sort of thing." He gently put forward a tray of gems.

"Ah, I've bought many a jewel from Bowman," observed Bannister patronizingly, as he drew forward a chair for Mabel; "and I've sold him a good few, too. I never keep them long."

"Well, it's a pleasant hobby, sir, collecting jewels."

"Deuced expensive, Bowman."

"Oh, no, sir," smiled the jeweler deprecatingly. "You're a good hand at a bargain, sir. The things you've sold me brought their value, I'm sure."

"I only bring Bowman my bargains," explained Bannister to Mabel, who was looking at the ring with natural delight, but with a tremulous fear of she knew not what. "When I see a thing like that going at a reasonable price I must have it. And when I grow tired of

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it I bring it back to Bowman. Gems of all kinds have a wonderful fascination for me—haven't they, Bowman? —till I weary of them. But of late I've held myself in check—eh?"

"Well, you haven't brought us anything lately, sir. We were almost giving you up as lost."

"And how much is the ring, Bowman?"

"Well, to you, sir, fifty guineas. You know its value too well for me to ask you more."

Bowman purred as if he were being very clever, and Bannister smiled languidly as though he were flattered.

"Do you like it, Mabel?"

"It's lovely, father, but I have five already."

"Discard the one you like least and Bowman will buy it—won't you, Bowman?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, my daughter likes the ring, Bowman, so we'll have it. By the way, I haven't a check-book on me."

"That's all right, sir. Your convenience is ours, sir."

"Is that an emerald?" asked Bannister, screwing his eyeglass on more tightly, and pointing to a gem in the glass case on the counter.

"Yes, sir, a particularly dark one."

"They're worth their money now—emeralds?" queried Bannister casually.

"Yes, indeed, sir. We could take more emeralds than we can get just now. There's a run on them."

"Indeed, is that so? I believe I've quite a number in my collection—foolish big things I bought years ago."

"Really, that is very interesting."

"In my ignorance I bought them because they were big. The settings were atrocious, and I had them unmounted."

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"I should like to see them very much, sir. But when you tell me the jewels are ugly I can scarcely credit it, for it is not like you to buy ugly things, sir."

"Ah, I bought them years ago, when I thought the price of more importance than the setting—when I first began collecting, and got the gem mania badly."

Again Mabel looked wonderingly at her father.

"Miss Bannister would probably like them cut down," said Bowman, expanding genially towards Mabel.

"Oh, no; such things are not for little girls," said Bannister sharply. "The ring is enough. If you have a blank check, Bowman, I'll settle for the ring out of hand."

"By the bye, sir, I believe we owe you something. We bought something of yours a month or two ago, and we never settled."

"Oh, I can't be bothered now, Bowman. You must still owe me the balance on that transaction. You know how I hate bothering about money."

"As you please, sir, as you please. But I would rather——"

"Nonsense, Bowman, you're as safe as the Bank of England."

"It's very kind of you to say so, sir." Mr. Bowman smiled again, and produced a blank check book.

Bannister dashed off a check, talking all the while, and forgot to sign it until he was reminded.

"Dear, dear, I am so careless in these matters," he explained with a drawl, and signing with the weary air of a man burdened with superfluous wealth.

Mr. Bowman packed the ring for Mabel, and bowed them out with a very sweet smile for Mabel. He admired her exquisite grace, especially the poise of her

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beautiful neck, which seemed, to his eyes, especially designed to display a diamond necklace to perfection—and he had several in his shop that might tempt the fastidious Mr. Bannister. But so far he had bought more jewels of the gentleman than he had sold him.

Mabel walked home with her father as beside a total stranger. He talked amusingly and cleverly on every subject except jewels and his recent purchase. But the suspicion was deepening that the idol of her school days had more than feet of clay. He was hollow, unreal, mysterious, terrifying. She knew that, in his own cynical way, he was cunningly revealing to her his real personality. She shrank from the revelation with terror. That he had been lying to the jeweler she was certain, but to what end?

She escaped from him as soon as they arrived home, and shut herself in her little bedroom—her only refuge in their very confined flat.

The imperative necessity of understanding more, of knowing all that there was to know about herself, her father, her dead mother, her lack of relatives, gripped her with a keen desire to probe. She was in the toils of mystery, and everything about her assumed a new aspect.

Voss from an obsequious man servant had become an enigma, a factor in the household to be reckoned with, an unknown quantity, and a venomous influence. He was with her father now.

Voss was reading something aloud to his master, and she caught the word "Cardew" and "emeralds."

She stepped softly from her room. The corridor was dark and narrow, but it was covered with a thick carpet, so that her foot fall was inaudible. A paroxysm of inquisitiveness had seized her. She must know at all

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costs the things she dared not ask. But the wildest nightmare never approached the horror of the revelation that was to follow.

Voss's unpleasant voice was raised to a high-pitched, inexpressive monotone, and he gabbled as he read aloud. He had rediscovered the paragraph concerning the Bishop of Ripley's family jewels which he had previously quoted to Bannister, and was now reading it with a considerable amount of noise intended for emphasis.

"The Bishop is one of the Gladstone creations, and as a Churchman a Tory, but distinguished by his plain speaking and unconventional sermons. He owes not a little of his success to his charming wife, the only daughter of the late Marquis of Cromarty, the Irish peer. She is a most popular figure in society, but brought her husband no great dowry, for the poverty of the Lennox estates is proverbial. Her interest in church work, however, is as keen as her husband's. She is the fortunate possessor by her marriage of the Cardew emeralds, which were once famous at Court. These emeralds, by the way, came to the Bishop through his mother, and are reported to be the finest in the world, the value of one necklace alone being estimated at £20,000. Although possessed of exquisite taste in the matter of dress, Lady Hester has affected puritanical severity of late years, and the famous Cardew gems are never worn. But they are always available for the inspection of connoisseurs at the Palace, where they are kept on show as part of the family heirlooms."

"There you are," said Voss triumphantly. "What did I tell you? They don't keep 'em at the bank."

"I only said it was probable," replied Bannister irrit-

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ably. "Don't talk so loud. I've not made up my mind at all."

"The old dodge will work," urged Voss eagerly; "it worked before. A chisel in the window, a wire across the path, a duster round my boots, and a walk over the flower-beds to make it look as though the business had been done from the outside; then Mr. Bannister's valet will tell a fairy tale about a man creeping along the corridor, the alarm will be raised, the sparklers gone, and the police will rush off and scour the whole country for a burglar. I'll take good care not to go near the swag, so they can't suspect me. But you, being a gentleman, no one will question what part of the house you was in. Once get 'em out of the house and cut 'em up, and the rest is as easy as winking. Why, then you'd be able to buy your place in the country."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," hissed Bannister, with an impulsive, angry movement towards the door. "Haven't I told you before that I won't allow business to be discussed while there is a third person in the house?" Do you want the girl——" The rest was inaudible, except when Voss's voice broke in again, rather insolently—

"How was I to know the girl was in? I thought she was out. I didn't see——" The door closed with a bang, and silence followed.

Mabel tottered back to her room, trembling and white, and understanding, yet stubbornly refusing to accept the wild suggestion that was forming on her brain.

Thieves! Common thieves!

Lady Hester's story came back—the sudden disillusionment when she discovered that she had married a plausible scamp. The coincidence was ghastly in its

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suggestiveness. But for that story she would not have believed it possible for a man like her father, who moved among the best, and professed the most fastidious refinement, to be a social vampire, working in league with light-fingered rascals of the class of Voss.

She laughed hysterically at the absurdity of the idea, and gazed round with blanched face at her luxurious surroundings. Here was no sign of poverty, no sign of war with mankind. Her own life, as far as she remembered it, had never rubbed shoulders with low and vulgar associations. She had moved only amongst the rich. Her intimates belonged to the most favored class. And yet—the daughter of a thief! Horrible!

The noble image of the fine old Bishop of Ripley flashed up like an ogre of condemnation. What would he say if he knew? And she, his son's wife, his daughter, walking perilous paths with an unscrupulous, unabashed fraud of a father. It was no use shirking the awful truth. Many things, hitherto inexplicable and mysterious, were now made clear. She flushed, now hot, now cold, as queer memories surged through her brain.

Her father's affection for herself was undoubted. He had given proof of it in diverse ways. But she understood now the meaning of many strange moods and fits of irritation that would come over him when he had been lavish with his caresses. She remembered scenes long ago, when she was a little girl, and there were tears in his eyes at parting from her at the convent gate—genuine tears, such as a mother might shed. Could a rogue be sentimental?

She had always imagined that her likeness to her mother had endeared her to him. He said so once, and

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could not bear to talk of the dead. Was it true? Was anything true or real about her?

The shock was overwhelming. She was helpless and panic-stricken. She could not face a meeting with him any more that day, and, pleading a sick headache, remained in her room, wrestling with the awful problem. If she had not been Jack's wife it would have been less terrifying. She could have disappeared utterly—where to, when, or how she did not speculate. In the great revolt panic succeeded panic as she considered the wheels within wheels, the mesh in which she was entangled by her rash marriage with Jack. She was numbed with fear at the thought of her father visiting the Palace. He and his rascally servant were going there as honored guests—to steal. No other construction could be put upon their talk.

To steal! From Jack's father!

Oh, the mad indiscretion of her marriage! She had ruined Jack utterly. She faced the worst bravely and desperately, and resolved that no one must know of that dreadful false step. No one knew; no one must ever know. That was her first and dominant idea.

A night of broken rest with dreadful dreams, a morning grey and hopeless, with no course of action decided upon, no fixed resolve, and the necessity of attending to bodily needs in the way of food.

The woman who came to the flat to cook by the day when required brought her breakfast, but she sickened at the thought of eating the bread of sin—of crime. Her father sent an affectionate message, with some beautiful flowers, and a more practical mark of concern in the shape of a prescription made up by a neighboring chemist. The exquisite rogue was a man, after all, with the same instincts, affections, and sympathies

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as his fellows. He, too, suffered from headaches, and could not bear to think of his beautiful Mabel enduring physical pain and spoiling her flower-like beauty. He supposed that it was the Blunt incident, which her sharp eyes had detected more by accident than by design upon his part, and was genuinely sorry. He had encountered the symptoms of revolt and horror in a high-spirited woman before—many years ago—and knew the virulence of the poison. He instictively dreaded that the malady would take the same course and end in the same way, unless he took steps to throw dust in his child's eyes and enabled her to recover her lost self-respect. He had no notion of the real extent of her knowledge.

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CHAPTER VIII

"I SAY, Mrs. Maguire, can't you hear me?"

Jack thrust his head through the narrow opening of his bedroom door and shouted for his ancient laundress, who was always in the way except when wanted.

"Did you call, sir?" inquired a pale woman with a thin voice, as she shuffled into the sitting room, which adjoined the bedroom. "I've got a nasty return of my last winter's cold. I'm a bit deaf on the left side, sir—the side what's mostly against your door, sir."

"Sorry you're not well, Mrs. Maguire, but I want you to give me a little extra time this morning. You see, I've a friend coming to tea—a very particular friend—er—ah—a lady, and I want the place to look clean, tidy, and decent. It isn't what a lady would call clean, Mrs. Maguire."

"If I can't satisfy you, sir, there's plenty others waiting for my services. I know my business, sir. Twenty years come Michaelmas, and never no complaint before. Not clean!"

"Oh, lor'!" sighed Jack, as he waited for the lady to pause for want of breath. "You quite misunderstand me. What I mean is this: I want all my old bits of things to look like new this afternoon—polished and all that—and some flowers and plants put into the vases."

"Oh, if that's what you want why didn't you say so at first? And before you goes out, sir, if you could give me the money to get the flowers, being, as it were, a bit short. It's nearin' the end of the week."

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"Right you are, here's a sovereign. Get some cakes and things, and—yes—better buy a pot of jam. Ladies like jam sandwiches—don't they? Sort of afternoon tea is what I want for—for a lady. My aunt, you know."

"Oh, indeed, sir, your aunt. It's wonderful how fond of the Temple the ladies is. But there's many stairs, if she's elderly."

"Yes, yes; get on with the preparations and clear out by two at least."

"I'll be finished, sir, never fear. Mr. Newbolt below is going at two to-day, and I've got to clean his stairs, so I shall be 'andy if you should want me."

Jack said angry things internally and retreated. But he was soon singing and whistling with amazing lightheartedness, and brushing his hair with unwonted vigor. This was the great day that was to bring the wife of his bosom home to the domestic—and much-neglected—hearth.

His chambers in the Temple were not particularly luxurious or artistic. They could hardly be said to reflect the man, because the general design was some hundreds of years old, and the furniture, though of less antiquity, showed signs of wear by a previous tenant. It is not possible to impress one's personality upon a second-hand tenement without fair time and a clean sweep of the previous owner's leavings.

Jack spent as little time there as possible—much less time, perhaps, than his future career needed. But all that would be altered. Mabel would come, and with one touch of her magic fingers transform the place into a paradise. She was to bring in the sunshine, and not be shocked at the paucity of the furniture for the sun to shine upon. There was one easy chair, certainly,

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and a horsehair sofa that would support one person when the hollow in the centre was filled with a cushion. There was a charming old window much in need of cleaning, a mantel shelf loaded with pipes, and papers, and china ornaments that were once worth sixpence-halfpenny each. Several pictures were pinned upon the wall, and the large pedestal desk looked like business; but the mass of documents upon it allowed no room for the breakfast tray, which, perforce, stood upon a rickety card table in a dark corner.

Mrs. Maguire did her best—or her worst—with the place, and Jack was beginning to count the hours to the time of Mabel's expected arrival. He stood in the centre of the sitting room with a feeling that it was not altogether gay. Despite the flowers, which he had rearranged himself rather clumsily, and the clean white tablecloth with two large holes in it, and the pile of stale restaurant pastry that was to tempt the appetite of his "maiden aunt," there was no air of festivity about the place. An extra vigorous sweeping of the carpets had caused the dust to settle on everything, and Jack thought with dismay of Mabel's white muslin, fully expecting her to appear as he had seen her last and continue exactly where they had left off.

His heart was throbbing almost painfully when the actual hour arrived and passed by. He listened for her step on the stairs, and inwardly cursed Mrs. Maguire's scrubbing brush. Presently there was a pause in the stair washing, murmuring apologies from Mrs. Maguire, and a light, quick step.

It was she at last.

He flung wide the door, and wanted to shout like a school boy. His arms instinctively spread out to receive his wife with a great, joyous hug, but he received

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a check when a dark-clad figure, with a pale face and great woebegone eyes speaking nervous terror, came faltering towards him.

"My darling!" he cried, and folded her to his heart. "Welcome, little wife! Why, what——"

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Maguire, ten stairs below, despite her deafness. "Little wife, eh? Another of them hussies! He's as bad as the rest."

"So you have come," he cried, as he closed the door. But his voice dropped; he was chilled.

"Jack," she quavered, without so much as looking round at his festive preparations. "I have come, but I am going away again. I must go—at once."

"Go at once, darling! But why? What have you come for?"

"Only to go away again, Jack—only to say good-bye."

"Come to say good-bye!" gasped Jack, in dull amazement.

He was not quite sure of her meaning.

She turned her eyes to his face piteously. "Yes, Jack, you'll be surprised, and shocked, and heart-broken, and angry, I know. But I can't stay. I must get back at once. I oughtn't to have been seen here. That horrid woman on the stairs was quite rude to me, and told me you were expecting your aunt, and I'd better not go up."

"Oh, that's all right!" laughed Jack. "I thought to stifle her curiosity and get her out of the way by a fiction. You are the aunt. But why this state of excitement? What has happened?"

"Jack, you'll think it very strange; but I can't tell you what has happened. Things are different with me. I'm not the person I was—or rather, I thought I was.

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We made an awful mistake in not taking Lady Hester's advice. Oh, Jack, I have ruined you. But it is not too late."

"Ruined me? What do you mean? Have they found out at home?"

"No, not at your home."

"Ah, at yours? Pshaw! Papa turned up rusty? Well, we'll soon talk him over."

"My father doesn't know, Jack. God forbid that he should."

"Then what is there to worry about?"

"Jack, Jack, I am almost crazy! I've thought everything out from every point of view until I'm nearly mad. Our marriage was a mistake—a hideous, awful mistake."

"Mabel!"

"Nobody knows but Tom Nestor, and he must be sworn to silence. Nobody knows. Nobody ever must know. It's for your good, Jack. You're a man, and you've got to live and make a career for yourself. You mustn't be ruined by—oh, how can I tell you!—I can't tell you—I can't—I simply can't!"

"Look here, little girl, you're upset and talking in riddles. Come here—let me put my arms about you and sober you. You're excited."

"Jack, Jack, I am heartbroken. You don't understand. I've really come to say good-bye—no, don't touch me. Keep away! I can't bear it."

"Oh, if it's like that, I'll hear your explanation from the hearthrug," observed Jack, rather testily. He took up his position in front of the mantelpiece and rammed his hands into his trousers pockets. "Come now, what is it? What have I done? What have you done? What has happened?"

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Mabel sat with writhing hands clasped in her lap, shoulders bent, and eyes cast on the ground. She wrestled manfully with her torturing sorrow, yet true to the quixotic resolution she had made, to keep her own counsel. She had nerved herself to face Jack and deny him so much as a touch of the hand lest she could break down in hopeless despair.

"Jack, I know you'll think me strange—mad if you like, but I can't explain. I am not the person I thought I was. My father is not the man I imagined. I don't know who my mother was, and whether I have a right to the name I bear. I am nobody—nothing—worse than nothing. I should bring discredit upon you. Your father would never forgive me, and Lady Hester—ah, well, Lady Hester might understand. But we must part, Jack. Yes, don't look at me like that, as though you were amused. It is breaking my heart, but it will have to come, and better now than later, when people had found out and I had compromised you by—by coming here, for instance."

Jack's face grew serious. The tragedy in Mabel's eyes was too real. The determination of her little mouth was grim and threatening.

"Look here, Mabel, I see you're upset, and it's no good my being angry with you. But I'd prepared tea and got the place ready for your homecoming, and was looking forward to a jolly, happy time, when you burst upon me with mystery and threats that stagger a chap. Take off your hat, little girl, and settle down and recover your balance. Here's a nice, comfortable chair I've had recovered for you. As for saying good-bye—well—it's all tommyrot, you know. There can be no earthly reason for a husband and wife to part unless love is dead and they are sick of one another. Even then

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they don't generally part until one or the other has had too much of it. And we haven't begun."

"Oh, if I had only known!" sobbed Mabel, bursting into tears at last, and burying her face in her hands. Her grief was so tumultuous that Jack caught his breath in alarm and stood staring helplessly.

"What's the matter, Mabel? What have I done? You can't have repented in this short time. Why, how many hours is it since we parted in Kensington Gardens? Explain yourself. Here, don't cry. Tell me what you want. What is it? You've no business to keep me in the dark. Look here, Mabel, I say, don't cry like that, for God's sake! I don't know what on earth to do or say to comfort you."

He dropped on one knee before her and tried to draw her to him. But she shrank away. "No, no, don't touch me. It is all over. It must be. It is your only chance, Jack. It isn't too late. You've got to forget me."

"But we're married."

"Yes. I know. But I never intend to be your wife."

"Never intend? Why?"

"I cannot explain, Jack. It would only mean needless misery for me and sorrow and disgrace for you."

"Needless misery for you? Is your love for me dead, then?"

"Y—yes."

"Oh, that's comforting. You seem to have arrived at that frame of mind rather quickly."

He returned to the hearthrug pale with anger and mortification.

"Jack, I—I am a disgraceful person. You would be ashamed of me. You could never own me. You

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would be ruined socially, and in time you would come to despise me."

Jack scratched his head and showed signs of rising temper. He kicked away the hassock beside the arm-chair, and took a turn up and down the room.

"I know you've a right to be angry," faltered Mabel, raising a trembling hand. "You will think dreadful things of me, and there will come a time when you'll curse the day we ever met; we mustn't meet again."

"Mabel, you're talking nonsense," cried Jack, with gathering anger in his fine eyes.

"Don't look at me like that, Jack, I can't bear it. I don't want you to think hardly of me. It is not altogether my fault."

"Is it mine, then?" he blazed out. "What have I done in heaven's name that my wife comes to me in this amazing, sensational fashion, and coolly tells me that I must regard my marriage as nothing, and forget her, and go through life as though I'd never known the love of a wife. At last, I thought I'd known it. Were you playing with me? Did you treat it as a joke? Do you suppose the bond tied by Tom Nestor isn't really binding?"

"People have married before," she faltered, "and have lived to regret it, and parted, and—and the mere ceremony can't much matter to a man after the first twinge of sorrow is over, especially if the woman never raises her voice to say a word, or admits that she is his wife. I've thought it all out, Jack. I am impossible to you as a wife. Your family would disown me. It is good-bye."

"You appal me."

Poor Jack felt cold shudders down his back, as he saw the implacable earnestness in his wife's face. She

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meant what she said, and he knew enough of her already to understand that she had a will of her own when her emotions were roused.

"Jack, you wouldn't like them to say that you had married an adventuress?"

"An adventuress?"

"Yes, and the daughter of an adventurer. You think my father is a gentleman—oh, I can't, I can't tell you. Those four days at Weybury were the happiest in my life."

"Mabel, you don't mean it!" cried Jack, triumphantly, in accents of real relief. He rushed to her and folded her in his arms.

"Don't!" she groaned, as though his touch were agony. "I shall never know happiness again. I must forget the past."

He clasped her to his heart and pressed hot kisses on her cheeks. "Mabel, you've been hiding something from me, something I ought to know. But I don't care. You are mine—mine! I love you. You are my little wife, and I've got you here imprisoned in my arms and you cannot escape me. I don't believe your stories. You love me. There was no sham. Kiss me, darling. You are in my arms. We're here alone, away from all the world, and whatever your trouble is, it is mine."

"Let me go!" she gasped, thrusting herself away from him whitefaced and terrified as though his lips were afire. "Let me go! I'm too horrible and loathy. I am a living fraud. I can never look again into the faces of those who have been kind to me—and you, Jack, you'll drive me to kill myself if you don't let me go. Let me go, I tell you. You are killing me."

"I won't. I won't!" he cried passionately, holding her to him in a grasp of steel.

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"Jack, you shan't!" she screamed in a wild outburst of hysterical frenzy. A mad cry that was almost a shriek escaped her lips, and Jack's blood ran cold. He released her like a hot coal, for an instant, almost doubted her sanity.

The tense moment was startlingly relieved by a dull thud on the outer door. One heavy bang at the knocker was followed by another a trifle louder. It was Mrs. Maguire's accustomed summons, and usually heralded her imminent entry without further ceremony when Jack was alone—and the door was not locked. He had forgotten to turn the key, and Mrs. Maguire's head appeared with startling suddenness. Jack strode to the door with a curse upon his lips.

"What the——"

"Your aunt, sir," announced Mrs. Maguire calmly, quite unmoved by the outburst. "She's come. I told her that you was engaged for a few minutes; but she's got as far as the second landing, and says she finds the stairs so trying she'd be glad if you'd give her your arm."

"It's nobody for me, you idiot! Go away."

"Beg pardon, sir, she asked for you. 'Tell him it's Aunt Caroline,' she says; 'he doesn't expect me, but as I was passing I called,' and she ain't got no card."

"Aunt Caroline!" groaned Jack, vaguely recalling a long-forgotten promise of his aunt to visit him in his chambers and be shown over the Temple Church.

"She mustn't see me!" cried Mabel, recovering her equilibrium in the face of danger.

"No, miss, that's what I thought," observed Mrs. Maguire tartly. "She is trying the next flight, sir."

"Let me go," whispered Mabel appealingly.

"You can't go down; you'll meet her on the stairs,"

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groaned Jack, and, of course, he fell back on the ancient and convenient expedient much beloved by writers of farce, and occasionally resorted to by bachelors and owners of chambers with limited accommodations. He pointed to the door of the inner room, and Mabel vanished.

Jack smoothed his ruffled hair, and tried to recover his balance and his breath. Surprise was following upon surprise so rapidly that it was not easy to assume composed features. He quite forgot to hide the evidences of festive preparations, but he was sufficiently a humbug to play his part well. As soon as he could control his voice and rearrange his tie he dashed down the staircase to greet his father's sister.

"Well, aunt, this is a surprise! How are you? Who'd have thought of expecting you?"

"Who'd thought of finding you at the top of so many stairs, Jack—and such dirty ones?" This with a withering look at draggled Mrs. Maguire, who sniffed her resentment.

"Is it much further up, Jack?"

"Only a few stairs, aunt. That's my door there, at the top."

"With your assistance I can—(puff)—get up. I'll never attempt it again."

"I wish you had not attempted it now," thought Jack, but he declared that it was very good of her to have tried.

"I was passing the Temple, and we drove through. When I saw the name Middle Temple Lane I remembered my promise to call, and yours to take me over the church. I think it's the only important church in London I have never yet seen, and I regard its inspection as a duty."

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"It's a bad day to-day, aunt—that's right, only two more stairs—and—and if you're going over the church wouldn't you go before tea and save a double climb? I can soon get my hat and come down to you. Don't come any higher."

"What! struggle up these stairs again for tea? No, Jack, thank you. I suppose this person who attends to your comforts can make a cup of tea?"

"Oh, that'll be all right, aunt. Mind the bend, it's rather dangerous."

Aunt Caroline was a very severe, prim, upright old lady of more than medium height, good-looking in her way, but pallid, sharp-eyed, hook-nosed, and hawk-like. She was never strong, except in mind. She was dressed in a black, close-fitting costume, that displayed a figure still handsome. Her head was set upon her shoulders uncompromisingly, and her black chiffon bonnet was by no means frumpish, and harmonized well with her sombre appearance. A lady undoubtedly, but one of the old school that considers it bad form to bend the back and droop even in declining years. Her eyes usually missed nothing, and her tongue was nimble. Jack trembled inwardly as he led her into the sittting-room.

"Is this where you work and live?" she asked, pausing on the threshold and raising her forbidding pince-nez.

"Yes, aunt, this is my humble abode. Not very gorgeous—is it?"

"It looks comfortable enough. Humph! flowers. Never knew you were fond of flowers."

"Oh, yes, aunt—always," cried the truthful nephew eagerly; "always fond of flowers, but never took much trouble about the place—always did at Oxford. It re-

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lieves the gloom a bit—doesn't it. Sit down, aunt, and we'll get you some tea."

"I never saw any flowers at Oxford."

Aunt Caroline waved away the newly-covered arm-chair in favor of a hard, wooden-backed thing near the wall, from which point of vantage she could survey everything. Her eyes alighted first upon the holes in the table cloth, then she stared at the two cups and the plate of indigestible pastry, the thin bread-and-butter, cut by Jack himself—also full of holes—and at a wine-glass, from which a beautiful red rose drooped gracefully, set beside one of the cups as a mark of favor to the expected guest.

For whom else but a woman?

Aunt Caroline was transfixed with astonishment and discreet horror, and it was a full minute before she could withdraw her frigid gaze—a minute of cold terror for Jack, whose brow grew clammy with the mental effort of groping in the mists of self-consciousness for a suitable remark to break the spell. Aunt Caroline came to his rescue adroitly with a cold, steely utterance.

"It is remarkably fine weather, Jack."

"Yes, aunt, awfully fine; so—so good for roses. Awfully fine weather for roses!" exclaimed Jack, repeating himself stupidly and putting a boisterous emphasis into his remarks, when Aunt Caroline's eyes turned once more to the wine-glass. "There's a chap comes here sometimes to tea with me who is awfully fond of roses. I picked that one out for him in case he should come."

"Then you are expecting him?" queried Aunt Caroline icily.

"Yes, he may turn up at any moment. But it is uncertain."

"And does he eat that peculiarly repulsive pastry?"

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She bent down and examined Mrs. Maguire's purchases through her lorgnette.

"Oh, he can eat anything. So can I."

"You have changed then, my boy. You used to be a particularly dainty feeder."

"Oh, you get cured of that in chambers, you know. Burnt bacon for breakfast and emaciated fried eggs."

Aunt Caroline looked at the clock, wondering mentally how long she could keep her carriage waiting in the hope of being on the spot when the gentleman with the cast-iron interior turned up. Jack busied himself with the kettle on the gas ring to hide his constraint. He knew perfectly well that Aunt Caroline did not believe a word he had said. The pause gave her eagle eye time to sweep the apartment, and in a moment she detected the presence of a thing under Jack's boot which a mere man would never notice—a woman's veil, light as gossamer. She gave a little snort, and Jack turned inquiringly.

"Did you speak, aunt?"

"No," she replied, with a sniff, again surveying her surroundings and diagnosing the building structure. "That must be his bedroom," she thought, "that the kitchen. If I stay here long enough I shall make myself very much in the way, and perhaps learn something."

Jack talked volubly about Ripley and the Temple, and churches, and everything likely to interest his aunt; but her answers were monosyllabic, and she fell into long abstractions with her eyes glued upon his bedroom door, as though her piercing gaze would penetrate the panels. He devoutly hoped that Mabel would not make a sound. Aunt Caroline paid very little attention to his conversation, for, during a pause, she blurted out without any preamble—

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"You ought to get married, Jack. This is not the sort of place for a decent man to live in."

"No, aunt; I agree with you. It is not; and I want to get married. I can't imagine a more blissful state; but father has other views."

"Does he know the life you're living?"

This was rather disconcerting, and Jack was flustered.

"The life I'm leading? Oh, yes. I've told him how miserable it is in this ghastly place; but, you see, I can't afford anything better. Not only does he scout the idea of my marrying, but he refuses to sanction even an engagement."

"I should think so, indeed!"

"Yet you say I ought to get married, aunt."

There was an awkward pause.

"Who's the girl, Jack?" snapped the old lady, biting off her words one by one, with her eyes fastened upon the rose. He positively gasped. He could not answer. He ran his hand over his hair uneasily, and stammered before he could reply.

"The—the—lady I am in love with is—is the most charming girl imaginable. Father likes her, and mother simply adores her.'"

"So I've heard. Is she respectable?"

"Aunt!"

"Does she dress in clouds of white muslin, and go about unattended in the park in the morning, holding hands with men?"

"Ah, you've seen her!" cried Jack, with a wonderful burst of memory, and beaming genially. "Of course, you passed us."

"If she is the person I saw with you in Kensington Gardens, I don't think much of her. Your father is

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quite right. Matrimony is a precarious business, and a man's wife should bring him credit and not be a gay flyabout who has never known a mother's care, and runs wild meeting men in the park."

"But she was meeting me, aunt. We love each other."

"Yet you promised not to see her for the present."

"I am not aware that I promised anything. Father made some absurd stipulations, forgetting that I am no longer a boy."

"Jack, that's not the sort of woman for you. Have you forgotten that you have no money?"

"Am I likely to forget it here?" he groaned gloomily.

"Have you forgotten that you are my heir, Jack?"

"Well—well, I never thought about it, aunt. What has that to do with it?"

"It has this to do with it, my boy, that if you showed any promise of succeeding in your profession and applying yourself to the serious business of life, I should be quite prepared to supplement your father's allowance by another equally large——"

"Oh! aunt, that's wonderfully kind of you! I never thought of such a thing."

"No, nor I, till it came to my ears that you were philandering with women instead of attending to your work."

"Philandering, aunt? I am in dead earnest. There *is* only one woman for me——"

"Yes, and that is Beatrice Carew," snapped the old lady. "The girl has been in love with you for years. She is well connected, and a splendid match in every way."

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"Beatrice, my wife!" exclaimed Jack, with a smile of incredulity. "I never thought of such a thing."

"Yes, you did, until this fluffy schoolgirl person with her foreign ways came along from Italy, or wherever she came from, and fooled you by a display of frivolity and animation to which you were not accustomed. Beatrice Carew is in every way desirable.

"I care nothing for Beatrice, aunt. Besides, she's Mabel's dearest friend. I never cared a rap for Beatrice."

"Nonsense! You hunted with her, played tennis with her, walked with her, fished with her——"

"But you were always there, aunt. You know that very well——"

"Yes, and if this Mabel person hadn't come along you would have married Beatrice. I should have seen to that."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and smiled with a superior air that irritated the elder lady.

"Jack, who saw to your bringing up?"

"Why you did, aunt—after mother died."

"And before that, too. Your mother, poor thing, was always helpless; and I'm afraid you're the same, unless you're looked after."

Again Jack shrugged his shoulders. Aunt Caroline glared once more at the rose. "I brought you up with decent ideas, and I intended that you should marry as early as possible a decent woman."

"There's only one woman for me, aunt. I am resolved."

"Oh, yes, love in a cottage on nothing a year. Poverty, squabbles, and a good man spoiled by a silly wife. I am quite in accord with your father. You must cast this Mabel person out of your mind."

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"This Mabel person, as you call her, is all the world to me."

"Nonsense, my dear boy. There are more women than one in the world, and I'm sorry to see that you've already found it out."

Jack, with an apparently absent-minded movement, pushed the wine-glass with the rose behind the teapot out of sight.

"You'll be easily consoled, Jack; and, what is more to the point, you'll be able to marry Beatrice Carew comfortably. She has a reasonable income, though a small one; and as for you—well, do you know how much I'm worth?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, aunt. I never thought about it."

"How do you think I manage to keep up a house in town and the cottage at Ripley, and horses, and servants?"

"I never really gave it any consideration. You and father have never known the want of money—that's all I know. I supposed that father——"

"Perhaps you'll be surprised to hear that your father's private income is less than mine?"

Jack opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

"Would you be surprised to know that it was I who paid for your education and your debts at Oxford—everything?"

"Well, aunt, you know, you've been such a mother to me—that—that——"

"That you have set no value upon services rendered. So like a man! Jack, my income is three thousand a year—and I don't spend two. I am your father's elder sister, and most of the money was left to me for fear he should squander it in the fantastic philanthropic

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schemes which absorbed all his interest as a young man. I've looked upon the money largely as left in trust. I have no other nephews and nieces, and your father has enough now for all his needs. I can spare at least a thousand a year for you, Jack——"

"Aunt!"

"When you are married."

"You overwhelm me."

"Don't be overwhelmed. Money never changes hands without conditions. It is Beatrice Carew or nobody. If you marry this foreign-bred, frivolous person with the loose manners, not a penny will you get, now—or hereafter!"

"Then, aunt, I can only thank you for your good wishes and decline."

"Tut-tut, boy. Don't make an absurd parade of sentiment. You haven't an ounce of it in your nature."

"I'm sure I can't see how you arrive at that estimate of me."

"Can't you?" snapped the old lady, bristling. "That's how I arrrive at it," dragging out the rose. "Will you kindly explain to me how a man who professes to be irrevocably lost in love with Miss Mabel Nobody can fill in the hours with this sort of thing—and this?" Aunt Caroline made a dive with her umbrella and raised the trampled veil which had been torn from Mabel's hat in the struggle with her husband.

"Where on earth did that come from?" queried Jack, screwing up his eyes, and peering at it with wonderful innocence. "What is it?"

"A woman's veil. You can't deceive me. Ah, I know the sort, my boy. I've not lived in the world for over fifty years with my eyes shut, although I *am* your maiden aunt. And, what is more, the sort of woman

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who likes to eat that stuff," indicating the plate of horrible Fleet Street confectionery, "must be of the lowest type."

Jack was completely nonplussed. He bit his lip, and choked, and tried to protest, but the old lady hushed him down. Yet, despite her assumed anger, there was just a twinkle of amusement in her stern eyes. Aunt Caroline could be surprisingly human at times. In fact, the humanity came uppermost rather suddenly.

"Who is she, Jack?" she asked almost confidentially, and with an eager, feminine curiosity which suggested that Aunt Caroline had a certain sporting instinct. "Is that the one?" indicating with her umbrella the portrait of a buxom minor actress peeping out from behind the corner of the picture of the cathedral. It was only a card from a cigarette packet; but Aunt Caroline didn't know that.

"Aunt, your suggestions wound me. They are so abominably low," cried Jack, with hauteur.

"Where's your friend who adores roses, then, eh? He hasn't come yet. And does this belong to the lady who scrubs the stairs?"

She spread out the veil and examined it before the light. "Yes, it looks like it, doesn't it? Shall we ask the stair-lady? Or shall I go into that room there, and tell your actress to come out? No, my boy, it's no good blustering, fuming, and grinding your teeth like that. I'm not preaching any sermons"—again she smiled that queer smile—"or saying that I'm shocked beyond words, because I'm not. I suspected it. I was afraid of it. I know you better than you know yourself, Jack."

"Wonderful penetration!" sneered Jack, now thor-

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oughly roused, and bubbling over with injured innocence.

"I never made unfounded assertions; and I'm quite prepared to admit that, after all, it may be only a harmless tea-party of two that an old woman has disturbed. Your sleeping apartment has, in the emergency, been turned into a hiding-place, regardless of appearances. We will assume it is nothing worse than that."

"Aunt, you are jumping at conclusions."

"I'm not," contradicted the old lady, snapping out her words; "I'll prove them, if you like."

Without any warning, she stepped over to the bedroom door, and with the heavy, cat's-eye knob of her parasol banged once, loudly, upon the thin oak panel, which gave out a sound like a pistol shot. A startled cry escaped Mabel involuntarily.

Aunt Caroline laughed—not a pleasant laugh,—a rasping, acid chuckle that set Jack's teeth on edge.

"Now, then, Jack, we'll go and look over the church. I'm sorry to be a nuisance. But I cannot risk coming here again; and I must see the church. If I'm making demands upon your time, I consider I am entitled to it. You owe me something, my boy. I gave you a good training, which seems to have been of little value. If you'll go over the church with me, it may bring you to a more sober frame of mind, and allow the lady to escape and go home quietly."

Jack sighed despairingly. He was cornered.

He was accustomed to obey Aunt Caroline from childhood; and to irritate her further by a refusal would only prejudice his case at home. That her silence was to be bought by discreet behavior he did not doubt. Aunt Caroline had a way of rising to amazing

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heights of discretion in times of crisis, and could be blind and deaf at will. She stalked with dignity to the door, and waited for him to open it, then out on to the landing, surveying everything as she went, and shuddering at the dirt on the walls. Jack lingered, and she knew why. She smiled sardonically and waited at the top of the stairs. He stepped to his bedroom door and whispered, "Wait for me, darling, I shan't be long;" then followed like a school-boy taken to church for punishment.

Mabel had heard everything through the slender wooden partition which divided the two rooms. All that had passed only seemed to confirm the wisdom of her decision to release her husband. She had already injured him and lowered him in the eyes of his foster-mother by coming to his chambers unattended; but she burned with indignation at the old woman's horrible insinuations. She longed to rush out into the fresh air. She had regarded herself as vile enough since her discovery of her father's infamy, but there were others ready to consider her viler.

She looked round for her veil, and her eye caught sight of the rose in the wine-glass. She seized it and pressed it to her lip, sobbing quietly.

The worst part of her task was over. She had prepared Jack, but she could not face a continuation of the interview so rudely interrupted. She could bear reproaches; but Jack's arm about her, and his wild caresses would utterly break her up.

She sat down at the writing-table and pencilled off a note, saying good-bye, with a promise of a letter; then, taking the rose, fled down the damp, newly-scrubbed stairs, out into the roadway.

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CHAPTER IX

To a stranger the Temple is a labyrinth of passages, with the maximum number of corners and the minimum number of exits—a weary maze for those who would escape its quiet in haste. Mabel hurried on guiltily, striving to find a way out, and flushing hot beneath the gaze of every inquisitive man who stared at her. They seemed to be questioning her presence in a place given over to men. Aunt Caroline's sneers were still fresh in her memory. When at last she escaped through a dirty iron gateway into a stuffy court, and thence into the Strand, she was well-nigh desperate. An idle cab conveyed her home, and the glances of the passers-by intensified her feeling of isolation. She had been accustomed to go about alone before, but since Aunt Caroline's scathing comments she was horribly self-conscious.

Yet what did it matter? She was alone forever now, and could not expect to go about wrapped in cotton-wool. An adventurer's daughter! A nameless thing in pretty clothes, unfit to associate with even the shabby City clerks or the humblest shop-girls!

A chaperone indeed! A wife without a husband, a daughter without a father, eating the bread of sin. She sought consolation in the fact that Jack had escaped. His aunt had not seen her, and apparently had no suspicion of their marriage. At any other time she would have laughed at the suggestion of Jack and Beatrice

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Carew marrying; now it was with a twinge of jealousy she realized that by opposing his aunt he would forfeit wealth in the future and very necessary comfort in the immediate present.

Yes, it was fortunate that she had not ruined Jack utterly. She choked down her sobs and set her teeth, and tried to look upon the world from a new point of view. So far she had been dependent upon friends for human society and sympathy, with the crowning joy of Jack's love. It was hard to realize that she was now but a straw on the current of the great stream of London life—homeless almost, for she could not stay at Stratton Street. The very clothes she wore belonged by right to some one else, since they must have been secured with tainted gold.

She wondered where she would be in a year's time, what humble, honest post she would be filling. Would it be in a dreadful shop? She was not skilled enough for a clerk, and even a girl in a shop must have a training and a beginning and honorable antecedents.

She thought of appealing to Lady Hester, as the only person who could understand her terrible plight. Lady Hester had faced a worse situation and come through the ordeal unscathed. But then Lady Hester was somebody before she fell into the toils of a bad husband, and could go back to what she had left. She was not leaving a man she loved to set behind her all that was worth having and go back to nothing, penniless, friendless, and helpless, with that ignorance of the way to work which comes of a life of comfort and luxury.

On her arrival home Voss opened the door of the flat, and a rank odor of cigars puffed into her face. She heard voices, the loudest of them easily recog-

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nizable as Blunt's; he was laughing and shouting triumphantly.

"The master wishes to see you the moment you return, miss," said Voss softly. "Mr. Blunt is here."

What a sickening memory the name recalled! She had no intention of watching the pigeon being plucked again, and would have escaped to her room; but her father heard the door close, and cried out—

"Who is that?"

Voss barred her progress to her room, and she was forced to enter the sitting-room.

"Ah! how d'you do? Good afternoon," cried Blunt, who was beaming. He gave one look up from his cards, crossed his right hand over his left to offer her a hand, and hardly took his eyes from the cards.

"I'm winning," he explained. "There you are! Fifty again. Ah, yes, I am winning to-day. My luck has turned, and your dad is fair wild. He can't win even on a bluff."

"Sit down, Mabel. That's a pretty rose you've got," observed Bannister, motioning to Voss to wheel forward an arm-chair.

"I think I'll take off my things," murmured Mabel, eager to escape, yet interested, in spite of herself, to hear that Blunt was winning.

"No, don't go," urged Blunt. He shuffled the cards and stuck his cigar in the corner of his mouth, and found time to give her an admiring glance. "Yes, a very pretty rose," he murmured, shifting the cigar to the other side with his lips and puffing out clouds. "Fair as the bosom that bears it—eh? Ha, ha! Not exactly what I meant, but—you know."

"I expect Blunt would like the rose if you could spare it, Mabel. He's a grower of roses, you know.

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A wonderful chap for flowers. Look at that bunch of lilies over there—his own growing, and brought for you."

"It was very kind," murmured Mabel mechanically. "But the rose is falling already. I—I think I'll put it in water."

"Ha, ha! Given her by some johnny!" chuckled Blunt. "Won't give it up—eh?"

She colored deeply, and Bannister gave her a swift look.

Blunt won again, and Voss hovered round. Mabel watched the fellow as a cat watches a mouse, but though he passed a sidelong look at the cards, she saw no secret signs. The stakes were very high, and her father would, of course, win in a minute. But he did not. She was puzzled. Was it, after all, a delusion? Had she jumped to dreadful conclusions without sufficient evidence?

She dropped back in the easy-chair and took up a newspaper, watching her father stealthily all the time. The genuine concern on his face was very puzzling. He seemed to be trying hard to win, and the cards were always against him. Voss brought forward whisky and her father drank freely, forgetting his guest in the interest of the game.

She went cold all over with doubt and fear. She had not yet measured her father's genius for deception. He was losing for Blunt's benefit and for hers, to throw dust in the eyes of both by losing heavily for once in a way, and making a great fuss about it for Mabel's edification. He had repented of his haste in allowing her a glimpse behind the scenes of his life. He liked everything to go smoothly and softly, for he was genuinely fond and proud of his beautiful daughter.

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There was really no need for her delicate susceptibilities to be wounded rashly.

He had decided many things in the last few hours. He, too, had been taking stock of the situation, and had made several noble resolves—noble, that is, for him.

Resolution 1 was that it would be wiser to keep the ugly side of his life from Mabel altogether.

Resolution 2: She should marry the Bishop's son at all costs.

Resoution 3: He would economize and labor feverishly for one year more, until that substantial dot at the bank was large enough for him to turn respectable.

Resolution 4: He was going to purchase the little place near Ripley, if on examination it proved to be all that the advertisement represented.

The idea of abandoning for ever the dangerous profession by which he had become rich had been steadily maturing for three years now—ever since Mabel had grown to womanhood. But it needed several big successes, several risky ventures yet, before he could amass the proper amount to maintain himself in respectability and luxury commensurate with his needs and usual habits of life. Each year he needed less and saved more, but it was slow work.

Voss brought in tea. Mabel poured it out with a trembling hand, keeping an eye on the game all the time. Voss waited near, in full view, behind Blunt's chair, and scratched his cheek idly, as if bored and indifferent. Bannister flashed an angry look at him and played his hand and—lost, muttering, "Extraordinary luck! extraordinary luck!" At which Blunt chuckled and jumped in his seat in ecstasy, like a delighted school-boy.

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"It's turning at last—my luck's in! I told you it would. Thank you, I'll take tea. Don't often touch it, but from your fair hands—eh?"

She passed the cup, and her hand shook so badly that Voss raised his eyebrows in respectful surprise.

Gone was her wild resolution to denounce her father, regardless of consequences. The dust thrown in her eyes did not blind her, but it dimmed her vision, and caused her to flounder. She had too much sense to utterly disregard the evidence of her senses upon previous occasions; but somehow things did not seem so dreadful, and she quaked at her rashness in jumping to such frightful conclusions.

Oh, if she could only doubt more! If she could allow but a glimmer of hope! It meant—Jack and love!

Her father won the next deal. Blunt pushed aside his tea rudely. "I always lose if I touch the d——d stuff."

Mabel trembled again. Her father won once more, but it was only a temporary change of luck. Blunt grew desperate, doubled the stakes, and played excitedly, like a novice, and won. He laughed derisively in his joy, and Bannister pretended to lose his temper, which pleased Blunt almost as much as winning, for the languid exquisite usually never turned a hair. It was a triumph to excite the imperturable Mr. Bannister.

Mabel would have escaped, but her father called her back. "We shall be done in a minute. Once more, Blunt, and then we stop, or you'll clean me out."

Play finished, Bannister rose and stretched himself and smoothed his pointed beard, and looked with pleasure upon his daughter. He recovered his broken

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spirits very quickly, and picked up a copy of a land agent's catalogue from the side table to show Blunt.

"Blunt, you're a man from the country; I want your advice. I'm thinking of buying a little place near Ripley. This is the advertisement, with a good photograph of the place. How does it strike you? I know nothing about the value of land and house property. My father discreetly left me his little fortune in funds."

The two men looked over the catalogue together, while Mabel surveyed them with growing stupefaction.

"You see, I'm going to settle down as a respectable old widower, with some good shooting to offer you youngsters. I shall want you to come down, and shoot with me, Blunt."

"Delighted, though I ain't much of a hand at that sort of thing. We kill our chickens in Africa by screwing their necks. None of your hand-reared stuff for me. But I suppose it's classy, and I've got to take to it. Oh, yes; I'll come down and see you in the country, especially with such a hostess," turning to Mabel with a grin and an offensive wink.

"Oh, Mabel won't be there," laughed Bannister; "she's going to marry Bishop Cardew's son."

"Indeed? You surprise me. My congratulations, miss."

Mabel was tongue-tied. She flushed painfully, yet managed to flash an angry glance at her father, who only looked amused.

"She's blushing, Blunt," he cried, playfully seizing her arm and drawing her in front of him so that he could place his hands upon her shoulders—a favorite trick with him when he wanted to survey his lovely possession with fatherly pride. She could have screamed. She held herself in check and bit her lip,

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resolved at all costs to suffer all that was demanded of her until the proper time for rebellion.

"Yes; she's going to marry the Bishop's son. It is all settled."

"Father, you are premature. You know it isn't settled."

"Oh, yes; Jack's father and I settled it this morning."

"This morning!" she murmured in surprise.

"Yes; I breakfasted with Panoli, the dramatist, this morning. He gathers to his table all the notabilities of the day, and the Bishop was in town and going to be there, so I invited myself. I was dreading my promised visit to the Palace; churchmen are not in my line. But when I saw the jolly old Bishop—fine old fellow he is, too,—and put the matter sensibly to him as father to father, he came round to my way of thinking. You see, it was all a matter of settlements. They're devils for cash, those church boys. He didn't want his son to marry a penniless nobody; but I explained that I could spare you a thousand a year, and he was as meek as a lamb. As a matter of fact, he didn't intend to allow his son as much as that, but he'll have to. You can manage on a thousand, Mabel." Then, turning to Blunt, "It ought to be enough for a girl—eh, Blunt?"

"Well, I reckon if she's got her father's tastes and freehandedness with money, it won't go far," chuckled Blunt, counting up his winnings on a bit of paper at the card table.

This indiscriminate revelation of family affairs before Blunt was done to disarm questioning on her part. She understood that; but her consternation at this news was written on her face.

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"Then—then you are not going down to the Palace?" she stammered.

"Oh, dear, yes. I want to see your friend, Lady Hester. The dear old Bishop is a man of the world, and a jolly old boy. I've accepted his invitation there for a week."

Voss, who was clearing away the tea things, almost dropped a cup in his astonishment and joy. This was the first intimation he had received of his senior partner's next move.

"I think I'll put that rose in water," murmured Mabel chokingly, and rendered utterly dazed by the conflicting ideas aroused by these surprises. She was almost on the verge of a faint. The ground seemed to turn to cotton wool, the pictures on the walls swam before her eyes; she overturned the wine glass and dropped the rose. How she escaped from the room she scarcely knew.

When she came to herself she was seated on the side of her bed, with Jack's rose all crumpled in her hand.

Everything settled—and a thousand a year!

Either she had been the victim of an absurd delusion about her father's manner of life, or he was lying for Blunt's benefit.

The situation was confusing in the extreme. Doubt surged on doubt until she floundered in a sea of conflicting emotions. She recalled her father's lies to Mr. Bowman, the jeweler, about his collection of gems. Was this last pronouncement of the same order? Yet he never lied deliberately to her.

She had no knowledge whatever of his finances. He might be rich, for all she knew. She had supposed him to be a beggarly adventurer, living from hour to hour upon what he could filch from honest men. An al-

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lowance of a thousand a year sounded large, but not so large to a girl accustomed to the conversation of very wealthy people. Yet she knew school girl friends who had embarked on matrimony with three hundred for pin money from their parents, and considered themselves fortunate. Jack had talked of making a thousand a year at the Bar in the dim future, as though it would mean unlimited riches.

Again, her father's promises to the Bishop might be wilful deception. Yet the talk of buying property near Ripley argued considerable wealth, and she knew that it had been a cherished ambition with him to own a place in the country. His continuous interest in land agents' catalogues and occasional journeys, and oft-expressed admiration of places he spied from the railway carriage windows, all colored his assertion that he was in a position to become a landed proprietor. Before she would have taken all these things as a matter of course, never questioning where the money came from. But now the hopeless mystification of everything was maddening.

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CHAPTER X

FOR a brief hour Mabel managed to delude herself into the belief that her infamous suspicions of her father were groundless, and the future was rosy; but feminine instinct was stronger than reason. She suspected that his estate near Ripley and the thousand a year were only items in an elaborate fraud of which the unsuspecting Bishop and herself were to be the victims.

Any doubts she might have had about his meeting the Bishop at the dramatist's house were set at rest by an impetuous telegram from Lady Hester, which arrived as she was dressing for dinner.

"Bishop just home. Have heard the news. Said it would come all right. Come down with your father to-morrow.—HESTER."

To-morrow—as soon as that? It was like him to give her no warning of his movements. She could not demand his refusal of the Bishop's invitation unless she gave reasons; and when it came to speaking out, her accusations seemed too preposterous and terrible. It would mean a heart-rending scene with one inevitable end—flight from her father's roof.

They now dined frequently at the houses of her father's friends, or at some West End hotel, where he generally managed to meet people he knew; for the culinary arrangements at the flat were very variable, and quite inadequate to satisfy Mr. Bannister's fastidious tastes, and he shunned *tête-à-têtes* with his daughter. He ate little at home, and Mabel put up uncomplainingly with whatever she could get when her

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father's engagements made it impossible for her to accompany him.

This evening he had announced, on passing her door, that it was to be "dinner at the Berkeley," and Lady Charley's afterwards—Lady Charley being a well-known and rather rapid person at whose house a mixed gathering assembled nearly every evening for play, and where stakes ran high. Her father's luck at cards was proverbial; it had a terrible significance now; and she shuddered at the thought of accompanying him. Yet it had to be faced. It would give her one more opportunity of watching him. Voss certainly would not be there; and, if he won—well, how was she to know the means employed, when others, more experienced, gamblers by instinct and hard-headed men of the world, were taken in.

She looked five years older as she stood in the little sitting room waiting for him, a motionless figure in shadowy black draperies, against which her white shoulders and arms and colorless face gleamed like ivory in an ebon setting. The red-shaded light of the electric lamp, an exquisite bronze figure holding the light aloft, sent a soft and mysterious glow over everything, and intensified the pallor of the drawn, anxious face. Her eyes glowed large and luminous with a flickering, uncertain, dangerous light in them. She moved mechanically towards a little table containing a collection of Japanese curios—tiny opium bottles of green jade, pink coral, and amber, and some wonderful little ivories and bronzes, and her nervous white fingers played over these treasures with an indefinite fluttering movement which told of mental pre-occupation. Then her eyes traveled round the room, the contents of which she seemed to be really seeing for the

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first time. Everything about her told of wealth, of refinement; and there was that undeniable restfulness about the place which at once satisfied the mind and the eye. She looked round wonderingly and critically; there was no jarring or false note anywhere. A beautiful landscape by Corot set the key for the whole room; its silver-grey tones intensified by the soft red of the heavy silk with which the walls were covered, the rosy glow of which also emphasized the delicacy of some flower studies by Fantin Latour—queer pictures for a man's room. There were quaint, antique silver vessels filled with flowers on every table. He loved flowers. Remembering this gentle trait, she again set the balance in his favor; for by some odd method of reasoning women are always willing to believe the best of a man who is fond of children, dogs, and flowers; and they always associate crime with reserve, ferocity, and ugliness.

Her reverie was broken by the sharp tinkle from the little Empire clock upon the mantel-shelf. A thin, shuddering sigh came brokenly from her lips, which again grew hard in expression, and the dangerous gleam leaped back into her eyes as she heard Voss speaking to her father. She drew on her long white gloves; tugging at them in a sharp, impatient manner quite new to her, like a woman of action, not the lackadaisical, pleasure-loving, feminine, flower-like thing she had always been. She had dressed with unusual rapidity, and her whole being was alert, ready for action. The wife and woman in her were awakened. The lowest depths were stirred. Her whole life hung in the balance.

If her father could wear a mask and make his moves stealthily in the dark, so could she. She was powerless

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to control anything, but at least she could watch the current and peer into the eddies, and decide whether she was to go helplessly on the bosom of a raging torrent or strike boldly for the shore.

"I am a wife—a wife!" she murmured inwardly. "I must be forbearing. I must risk nothing, and be patient for Jack's sake. I have been rash; I must be cautious, and cunning. If I make a mistake I lose all and gain nothing. But I must know, I must know."

Voss followed her father into the sitting room, carrying his evening coat and hat. Bannister looked his best in evening dress, so *distingué*, so slender, so restrained in movement. There was something foreign —or perhaps better expressed in the word "cosmopolitan"—in his bearing. The sharp pointed crimped beard, the dark eyes, the graceful black hair with the grey tuft over the forehead, and the white effeminate hands suggested the foreign diplomat, or Italian or Russian aristocrat, rather than a trim, well-groomed Englishman. He was humming lightly to himself, and gave no greeting to Mabel, although his eye swept over her in a swift, comprehensive glance of approval. He acted as though no cloud existed between them, and no change had taken place in his light-hearted daughter. He addressed all his remarks to Voss, however, and with a final "Come along, child," led the way down stairs to the cab.

They drove in silence to Piccadilly. The hotel porter smilingly assisted her to alight. The head waiter received them genially, and ushered them to the table which was always reserved for Mr. Bannister till after a certain hour.

"No, no, not there." He waved his disapproval. "Not to-night. I am expecting a guest. The other table, if you please."

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"Who is the guest, father?" she managed to ask.

"All in good time, little girl—all in good time. I invited no one; but I have a suspicion that a gentleman who knows where to find us at this hour will turn up by accident and join us."

"You don't mean Mr. Blunt? We can't be seen with him here. He is so dreadful."

"Blunt—good heavens, no!"

She was not left long in uncertainty. Before the soup was removed her father's eyes glanced quickly towards the door, and he waved genially to some one who immediately made his way across to their table. Her back was turned towards the newcomer, and she dreaded to look round. She feared everybody now, and trembled at the sight of a friend.

"Mabel, my child, a friend of yours," murmured Bannister, with a smile as he rose. Mabel looked up, and, to her amazement, saw Jack bending down with outstretched hand and beaming face.

"Jack?" she gasped, looking very frightened.

"I got your telegram, Mr. Bannister," explained Jack, wringing his future father-in-law's hand genially. "It was very kind of you. I also had a wire from Lady Hester," this with a meaning look at Mabel, who dropped her eyes, and went paler than ever.

Jack joined them for the meal, and he tried to cover his disappointment at Mabel's strange, cold timidity by an excess of amiability and boisterousness, and she could not help comparing his rough, British gaiety with her father's suave self-possession. Bannister talked of everything but the subject which was uppermost in the minds of all; but as the meal progressed Jack broached the subject of the recent meeting with his father. Bannister at once enlarged upon the

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Bishop's charming personality, and declared that he was looking forward to going to Ripley with the greatest zest. Mabel was coming too.

Jack gave a swift glance across; and she explained that Lady Hester had invited her by telegram.

"I wish I could come too," he declared sadly. "But I've unfortunately got a brewery case coming on that will keep me busy for a week. If I can get away for the week-end I shall certainly run down."

Mabel was eating nothing, and her husband, who was by no means blind, saw that there was a change in her. At the mention of her father's visit to the Palace she gave him a frightened look; a strange expression of bewilderment swam in her eyes. Remembering his extraordinary interview with her in the Temple, he knew that something was wrong, but was quite unable to imagine the source of the trouble. Bannister kept the conversation running on the Palace and Ripley, and made many inquiries concerning the surrounding country and the little property known as Dingle Hall. Jack knew the old place well, and described it. When Bannister casually remarked that he was coming down to purchase the place if it came up to his expectations, Jack stared in obvious surprise.

"Ah, you think an idler, a town idler like me, has no need of a place like that. I'm a town bird, I admit. But I have accepted so much hospitality from my friends that the time is coming when I must return it, or they will grow tired and forget me. You two young people won't be able to afford an estate in the country yet awhile—so I understand from your father, Jack—but when I'm under the ground Dingle Hall may come in useful to you."

"You speak as though everything, even to details,

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had been settled between you and father, Mr. Bannister."

"Well, practically so, my boy. You see, it was a question of settlements; and when I told the Bishop that I was prepared to make Mabel an allowance of a large slice of my income, he withdrew all opposition at once. I can't spare her more than a thousand a year, Jack; but she's very dear to me. It will mean the curtailment of a good many unnecessary extravagances, a little less play, and a little more sport in the fresh air of the country. By the bye, who's going to win the Hunt Cup?"

"I never bet," replied Jack tamely, rather staggered, and subdued by Bannister's easy way of talking of money and country estates.

"Racing isn't much in my line, either," observed Bannister. "But I always have a hundred on the Hunt Cup. It gives one an interest in the running. Let me see, who won last year? Ah, I remember, I went down on the Duke of Redmond's motor. There's a fellow for you, one who ought to be worth a gold mine to a lawyer. Always in litigation. You know him?"

Jack humbly disclaimed any knowledge of so exalted a person, but thought his father knew the duke. Mabel listened in increasing wonderment and confusion. How impossible it seemed that a man moving in her father's set could be the scamp adventurer that she had imagined from the overheard conversations with Voss. Once more she choked down her wild doubts, and tried to smile and be natural, and the color returned to her cheeks.

Jack's eyes had been greedily devouring her. She was in a charming gown that he had not seen before,

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and her hair was dressed in a manner new to him. She seemed less girlish, but exquisite.

"My wife—my wife!" he was saying to himself whenever there was a pause; and her mysterious hysterical outburst of the early afternoon receded further and further into the back ground. Bannister's announcement that he was going to allow Mabel an income much larger than his own, a sum that would make marriage pleasant and easy, moved the young man to almost affectionate geniality.

What a handsome pair they were, and what a bore he felt beside the polished cosmopolitan! How ignorant he was on even such trivial matters as the delicacies of the table. Bannister made a splendid host, and had selected strange, fascinating dishes and rare vintages for Jack's benefit. Mabel was sufficiently wide awake to know that her father did not take so much trouble over everybody, but that he could take a great deal of pains in this fashion when he had an object in view. It was reasonable enough that a man should desire the esteem of his son-in-law; yet, to the suspicious, watchful girl, he seemed to be overdoing it; and Jack was surrendering to his blandishments with almost boyish simplicity, and drinking an unusual quantity of champagne.

The favor was all on Bannister's side; yet the arch-rascal managed to convey to Jack the idea that the penniless barrister was conferring an honor in seeking Mabel for a bride. Once in discussing love and marriage Jack was so moved by his host's broad-minded views that he was on the point of dropping a gentle hint, and there was one reckless moment when he almost blurted out the truth—that they were married. But a look of terror in Mabel's eyes warned him

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to desist. To him there seemed to be no time like the present for revealing the inevitable secret; such a good opportunity might not come again; and Mr. Bannister would be an invaluable ally against Aunt Caroline; but his solemn pledge to Mabel that he would not divulge anything until they had both agreed upon the moment of revelation kept his tongue quiet.

Bannister appeared to see nothing of the looks that passed between the young people. He pretended to be examining the ceiling and caressing his beard when Mabel was darting her warning glances across. He was puzzled. There was something between these two —some secret understanding. He rather dreaded that Mabel might have injudiciously told the story of the Blunt incident. Yet, if so, it must have had very little effect on Jack.

He tried to draw the two together in conversation, and so discover the lie of the land; but Mabel had scarce word for her husband, and Bannister fell back upon trivial conversation again. He laughingly told them some anecdotes about well known people, especially a story concerning a rather flighty lady who was dining in a far corner of the room with a gentleman who certainly was not her husband. His remarks were chiefly directed to Jack; but once or twice the young husband's eyes twinkled as Bannister hinted at a certain suspicion that the lady had been out of town when she was supposed to be in London. In an unguarded moment—and being well primed with his father-in-law's champagne—Jack gave a sly look at his wife, and dropped certain references that would have been in bad taste uttered in the presence of an unmarried girl. Mabel looked down at her plate, blushing deeply, and Bannister was staggered. The under-

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standing between the lovers was amazingly intimate, and there was a subtle change in his child. She was no longer a girl. What was it? What was behind the veil of that new modesty?

All at once the truth flashed upon him. He almost cried his thought aloud.

"Egad—they're married!"

He breathed heavily with the astonishment of it; but the next instant was smoothing his beard and surveying the ceiling decorations absently, while Jack talked foolishly of the delight of honeymoons—obviously for Mabel's edification. She went hot and cold at his reckless allusions, and at last found her voice to change the conversation.

It was too late. Bannister understood now the meaning of all the things that had puzzled him, of the sudden mental change in his child—the leap from girlhood to womanhood. Yes, it must be that. They were married. It was obvious.

When he recovered from his surprise, he laughed in soft triumph; and, as Jack gazed inquiringly, the elder man pointed across the room to a queer headdress, which, he pretended, had evoked his mirth.

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CHAPTER XI

THE Bishop of Ripley had dined well; but he was tired. He had traveled from town after breakfasting there with Mr. Panoli, and later attending a meeting at the Sunday School Institute. On his arrival he learned that his sister Caroline had come down by the previous train to consult him and stay the night. She always came thus without invitation. She had done it in the time of his first wife, and Lady Hester had been powerless to alter her ways. Her room was always ready for her, and she used the place rather freely.

Perish the thought that the Bishop was not pleased to see her! Nevertheless, he would have been just as comfortable if she had not arrived. Dinner *tête-à-tête* with his charming wife would have been pleasanter than with Caroline sitting like a death's head at the feast. He knew why she had come. It was about Jack. He was weary of her letters on the subject, the last of which he had not answered; and it was awkward that she should arrive on this day, of all days, when he had practically withdrawn all opposition to Jack's marriage.

The quiet satisfaction in Lady Hester's face, and the relish with which she imparted to Aunt Caroline, before dinner, the joyful news that all friction between Jack and his father was at an end, and the engagement a settled fact, was particularly galling. Aunt Caroline never did, and never would, approve of her brother's

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choice of a wife; and now he had chosen one for Jack, of the same worldly, sensuous, ornamental type, Caroline felt it her duty to bring her heaviest guns into action.

The Bishop wanted to talk to his wife at dinner about Mr. Bannister, who had made a remarkable impression, and Lady Hester would have revelled, woman-like, in every little detail of the business of Jack's engagement. It was an event in their colorless, domestic life. But Caroline's grim, uncompromising stare all through dinner had compelled the conversation to turn upon other matters. The Bishop pleaded fatigue, and betook himself to the library, leaving his wife to face the music and give Caroline what details she thought wise.

Jack's aunt had not been consulted at any point. Everything had been rushed through, apparently, in a deceitful, shame-faced fashion. That the engagement should have been sanctioned by her brother, without his introducing Mabel to his sister—to whom he owed so much—was, from her point of view, little less than an insult. Having had views of her own concerning her nephew's welfare, this upsetting of plans was very provoking, and merited the most uncompromising opposition.

Lady Hester led the way after dinner to the gaunt, white drawing room, where a particular chair was always reserved for Aunt Caroline to doze in for an hour after meals. But the good lady was not dozing any more, and she was not going to be carried off by Lady Hester. She followed her brother into the library, where he had subsided into a spacious lounge with a coffee and a liqueur by his side.

"Ah! Caroline," he murmured drowsily as she en-

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tered. "The evening papers are on the table"—yawn —"I don't think you'll find them interesting."

"I was looking for *you*, John, not the papers. You are avoiding me, and I can guess the reason why. No, don't get up. This chair by the table will do."

It was a sombre, old, brown room, completely lined with books in gilt-edged bookcases reaching to the ceiling, and in the centre was a large, oval table with the heavy, high-backed, carved oak arm chairs upholstered in red leather set at equal intervals round it. The ample floor space was broken by spreading lounge chairs of greater comfort, and large writing desks occupied the spaces in front of the two wide windows. Aunt Caroline dropped into one of the high-backed seats, which harmonized appropriately with her gaunt, uncompromising figure.

The Bishop settled himself doggedly, and stared straight ahead, with his hands folded on his waistcoat, compelled to listen when he would rather be deaf.

"John, this preposterous engagement of Jack to the Bannister girl is a mistake."

"It is late, my dear, don't you think, to take up that attitude. The matter was settled to-day. Perhaps Hester hasn't told you what a good match it will be for Jack. The girl will have a thousand a year, and a reversion in Dingle Hall estate, or some other place equally good—which Mr. Bannister is negotiating for, I believe. Jack is not brilliant, Caroline, and we have always been agreed that marriage is the very best thing for a young man, provided that he incurs no burdensome obligations likely to handicap him in his career. My son, I'm happy to say, has not altogether disappointed me. He is not, as I said just now, brilliant, but he is busy with his fourth large brief, and he has won all the other three."

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"He is reckless and inclined to pleasure——"

"And so were we, Caroline, at his age." Caroline sniffed and shuddered. "Miss Bannister is a very charming girl."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Don't you, Caroline?"

"I've never seen her," snorted the irate lady, sitting more erect and growing stiffer. Her nostrils dilated, and her grey eyes flashed.

"Dear me—dear me, is that so?" murmured the Bishop, with assumed surprise.

"When I say I have not seen her, I mean under proper conditions. I admit I saw her in the park the other morning, unattended—except by Jack—and behaving atrociously."

"Well, lovers, Caroline, lovers. When the cat's away, you know——"

"There is no cat in this case. The girl has no mother, and her father is a profligate and a gambler."

The Bishop shifted uneasily, and showed signs of growing irritation.

"In his youth Mr. Bannister may not have been all that one would have desired; but you cannot deny that he has brought his daughter up as a man should, giving her every opportunity, every accomplishment, every care, spending money lavishly——"

"Have I not done the same for Jack?"

"That is beside the mark, Caroline. What is your objection to the girl? If you have any, say it outright."

"Who is she? I mean, who was her mother; and who was her mother's mother? Who, if it comes to that, is Mr. Bannister?"

"Well, really—er—I didn't acquaint myself with the

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whole genealogical tree of the Bannisters. The man is a gentleman, and a widower. He is going to settle down in the country, and that is why he is buying Dingle Hall."

"Buying Dingle Hall doesn't give the girl a mother," Aunt Caroline snorted.

"Hester and I both like the girl. Jack is in love with her. What would you have me do?"

The old lady tapped irritably on the newspapers lying on the table at her side, and her fingers worked faster and faster as her anger warmed. She struggled with herself for a few moments, then blurted out her next remark with all the intensity of long pent-up irritation.

"Hester likes her!—of course, always Hester. John, I have never said anything to you about your own foolish marriage—your second marriage, I mean—or your wisdom in the selection of a wife; but you know you've made a mistake, and I've helped you to recover. I've kept things straight for you, and guided your frivolous wife through the quicksands for more than fifteen years now; and I thought you had learned a lesson. I even imagined you had bought sufficient experience to withstand the wiles of a cooing, simpering, sensuous woman, and had mastered and outgrown worldly lust and admiration."

"Caroline!" he cried, passionately thumping the table.

"Oh! yes; we've got one over-dressed, powdered, perfumed, social fly-about in the family. We don't want any more. The world has forgiven you, John, and they made you a Bishop in spite of your second wife. But you surely are not going to let your son follow in your footsteps——"

"Silence, Caroline!" thundered the Bishop, starting

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up. "How dare you talk to me like this—you, who have known nothing but kindness and consideration from Hester ever since we were married. Your jealousy is ludicrous after all these years. There is a limit to your interference in our affairs, my good sister."

"I've never interfered."

"Thanks to the good sense and tact of my wife you have not been able to. Caroline, I've known for years that you have hated my wife, and I chose to ignore it, out of consideration for your sincere love for Jack. Keep the wicked thing in check. It is an ugly sin."

The irate lady tried to speak, but rage choked her utterance. The Bishop rarely put his foot down, but when he was roused he was not always judicious in his choice of words, outside the pulpit.

"If you had been at home, Caroline, you might have seen Mabel Bannister, and have judged for yourself. The boy is hopelessly in love, and the girl too. They rushed into things. I couldn't send the girl to Switzerland to receive the seal of your approval; but I called a halt. I never really intended to refuse my consent; but I did think it right and proper that Jack should not be engaged till he was in a position to support a wife. At that time I believed the girl to be the daughter of an impecunious idler."

"A profligate and a gambler, a man who lives by playing cards, cried Caroline.

"Really, Caroline, your freedom of assertion is appalling. Where do you get these notions?"

"Never mind how I get them. I have them."

"That is very feminine."

"And you are a very masculine fool, John."

"Really, Caroline! Confound you!"

"Really, John!"

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She rose and faced him, white and glaring.

"Tut, tut, tut, tut!" cried the Bishop, waving her impatiently back to her seat, and turning his back upon her to pace the long room. "Don't let us quarrel, for goodness' sake. You set your heart upon Jack marrying Beatrice Carew, and he has chosen some one else. My wife and I approve of his choice. The matter is settled. I admire the boy's determination and singleness of purpose! And, if you must be told everything, he would have married her without my consent. I am letting you into the secrets now, for Hester has confided to me that she was only just in time to stop them marrying on the quiet. What do you think of that?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried his sister shrilly, and tearing holes in the *Times* with her fingers to relieve her feelings. "The boy is fooling away his time in London with loose women."

"Caroline!" cried the Bishop in horror. It was his turn to go white, and distend his nostrils, and frown fiercely.

"I tell you it is true. I've come down here straight from his chambers this afternoon. I paid him a surprise visit, and found a woman hidden in his rooms. I took them by surprise, and there was no time for her to get out. Oh, yes, it's true. But I wasn't as surprised as you are. He ought to have married Beatrice before he took up his residence in London alone. I was prepared to resign part of my income in his favor, and give him a fair chance. But you and your wife, with your quixotic notions of liberty and independence and romance, and seeing the world, allowed the boy to go out into temptation——"

"Caroline, Jack is not a child," shouted the Bishop angrily. "And I won't have you traducing him by infamous assertions that you can't prove."

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"I tell you there was a woman in his chambers this afternoon."

"You saw her there?"

"No, I didn't. But I heard her; and Jack lied to me, as he was bound to do."

"Caroline, your imagination has run riot," gasped the Bishop, who was more staggered than he cared to admit. "You have no proof."

His sister tugged at her skirt to find a pocket, and took out something which she flung upon the table, where it fell noiselessly.

"Is that a thing a man wears?" she asked, pointing to Mabel's veil. "I found that in his rooms. The boy has got into the mire, and doesn't know where he is. The disposition to petticoat influence is hereditary. You were wild once, John—before you were ordained. You remember how you broke out——"

"Silence!" thundered the Bishop, stamping his foot, and clenching his fist, ashen with passion.

"Oh, you don't frighten me, John, for I know I'm in the right. A young man in love who can entertain that class of woman to tea in his rooms——"

"Was there no man there?"

Aunt Caroline smiled pityingly and superciliously.

"But you didn't see any woman, Caroline?"

"No, but I made her cry out by striking the inner door and frightening her."

"There might have been two women there," suggested the Bishop helplessly.

"There were only cups for two, John. One for the person, the other for poor Jack, who can't live without Mabel Bannister."

"Stop, Caroline, stop! Don't talk to me any more! Leave me alone," groaned the Bishop, waving towards

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the door. "Send Hester to me. I must talk with her. This is awful."

"Hester—always Hester," sneered the jealous sister. "Can't you discuss a simple matter like this with me frankly, and decide what is to be done?"

"Frankly, Caroline? Your speech is much too frank, and your suspicions too vile. Ah! I see it all. The whole thing is plain as a pikestaff. Jack and Mabel have been meeting in London. I forbade it. It was an absurd condition to make. Yes, they've been meeting."

"Well, that is no news."

"Can't you understand, Caroline? They couldn't meet where they would be seen, and—and—the girl has gone to tea at his chambers. It is very simple."

"Good heavens!" gasped Aunt Caroline, who with all her perspicacity never dreamed of this. "John, you make it worse and worse. You're now insinuating that Jack is a cad, and the girl—well—I'll send Hester to you. This is not a fit matter for me to discuss. She probably understands that sort of thing."

Left alone, the Bishop gave way to a sudden outburst. He stamped his foot and ground his teeth, and his lips seemed to be shaping words of unchristianlike violence. His fingers clawed the air, and he looked as though it would have eased him considerably if he could have seized somebody's throat.

His eye caught the veil on the table, and he picked it up. Its soft, filmy texture on his fingers must have had a soothing influence, for he stopped, and smoothed it out, and examined it. It was undoubtedly a woman's veil, and a very pretty one. It seemed a familiar veil, too.

When the door opened quietly and Lady Hester en-

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tered, reposeful and slow of movement, a slight smile upon her lips, she almost laughed to see her husband standing in comic dismay with a gauzy veil spread out on his fingers.

"What have you got there, John—my veil?" she asked, coming up and putting a gentle hand upon his arm.

"Hester, this is a woman's veil, isn't it?"

"Of course it is."

"A young woman's veil?"

"Well—it's mine," with a laugh.

"Yours?"

"Well, it isn't Caroline's, is it, with those gold threads? By the bye, Caroline seems excited. Have you been having words about Jack?"

"This veil, Hester, are you sure it is yours?"

She took the gossamer thing into her hands, and examined it more closely. "Well, it looks like mine, though it seems large. But it must be mine, because it is a piece from the length I brought from Geneva. I shared it with Mabel. We halved it. But as she is not here it can't be hers. What's the matter, dear? You look worried."

"Hester," groaned the Bishop in sepulchral tones, "Caroline has been to Jack's chambers and surprised a woman there—with this veil. The woman dropped this veil."

"Oh!"

This evidence concerning the ownership of the veil was all that was needed to endorse Caroline's spiteful assertions. She fingered the veil for a few moments, then she spoke her mind.

"The old cat!" she exclaimed passionately. But, seeing that she had shocked her husband, she laughed.

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Then with that dreadful inconsequence which was one of her charming traits, she whispered confidentially, "John, they must be married at once."

"And are you not shocked, Hester?"

"Good heavens, no! Jack is always having tea parties at his chambers. Why, Beatrice and I went there the first week he got the place to himself. Jack is a gentleman, and Mabel the sweetest and proudest of girls. But for me they would have been married now. I really wish I hadn't interfered. Caroline must be suppressed. She has come down here with the deliberate intention of wrecking Jack's engagement and preventing his marriage. If she intends to stay over to-morrow, when the Bannisters come down, I shall ask her to go."

"Hester, you can't do that. I quite agree with you that they should be married as soon as possible, or there will be a scandal. Jack ought to know better."

The Bishop paced up and down in his favorite way with his hands behind his back. "I'm surprised at him. I'm shocked. It was ridiculously weak and foolish. It has given Caroline a stick to beat the girl with, and she won't scruple to use it. Not that I think Caroline will continue her opposition when things are settled, once and for all, by a wedding. Yes, Hester, you are right —the wedding as soon as possible—that is, if Mr. Bannister is agreeable. He rather hinted at a long engagement, and spoke of the folly of hasty marriages, but I've no doubt that when he understands Jack's peculiar, impetuous temperament, and sees that there is nothing to be gained by waiting, he will raise no objections."

Aunt Caroline did not give them long alone together. The door opened and she appeared once more. Hes-

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ter's lips were hard set, and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"Well?" asked the old lady, with the air of one who has come for the decision of a judge. "Well?"

"What is it you want, Caroline?" asked Lady Hester sharply. "You told me that John wished to speak to me alone. I have hardly had five words with him."

"Well, and have you decided?" asked the eager old lady, quite unabashed. "Have you settled the fate of the gambler's daughter?"

Hester paled with anger, and the Bishop, who hated scenes, turned away, sniffing and coughing, as though he were clearing his throat for a sermon. His wife spoke first, and to the point courageously.

"John and I have decided that the sooner Jack and Mabel are married the better. The less delay, the fewer secret meetings there will be between them."

"Then you approve!" cried Caroline, aghast, displaying the palms of her hands in astonishment.

"Certainly not, neither of their actions nor yours. No one with proper feeling would approve of a young man's maiden aunt going uninvited to his chambers to pry into his private affairs, and collect evidence of nothing like—like a detective."

"Hester, Hester," protested the Bishop reproachfully, "remember my sister's views are strictly orthodox in these matters."

"They're just horrid, and spiteful, and unkind," cried Lady Hester, losing all patience.

The Bishop prepared for an explosion; but Aunt Caroline only snorted contemptuously, and turned to her brother. "John, your wife surely does not voice your sentiments when she says that you would hasten this preposterous marriage——"

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"Caroline, you must leave this matter to me and my wife. Jack is not a child. He will probably settle the matter for himself. The Bannisters are coming to-morrow, and it will be time enough then to reconsider things—if any reconsideration is necessary—after you have seen the girl herself."

"I don't want to see her, or her father either. This house is no place for him. He's a rascal. I don't believe his name is Bannister at all. He is strongly suspected of being a card sharper, and in one London club there has been talk of asking him to retire. Besides, he hasn't been Mr. Bannister all his life. There was a time when he posed as a 'Mr. Gordon' in Vienna."

"Hester, Hester, what's the matter?" cried the Bishop, running to his wife's assistance. She had turned angrily upon the elder woman; but the torrent of her words was stemmed at the outset by the name of Gordon. She went white to the lips, and faltered. Aunt Caroline supposed that wicked passion was choking her brother's wife; but the Bishop knew better. She seemed really ill.

"Don't bother about me," she murmured, sinking into a chair, and recovering very quickly. "Arguments of this kind always upset me."

"But you are quite white, my darling. Caroline, how dare you upset Hester in this fashion? I forbid you and everybody else to say anything more about Jack's engagement. There seems to be need of a little more Christian charity and forbearance. Mr. Bannister's daughter is not responsible for her father's weaknesses."

"No, she only inherits them."

"Silence, Caroline!—or you will exasperate me beyond endurance. If you don't like the Bannisters you'd

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better not be here when they come. Hester, my dear, sit in a lower chair; you will feel better."

"Oh, it is nothing—nothing," cried the startled wife, with a forced laugh; but all the while that name was ringing in her brain—Gordon!—Gordon! Her own name. The name taken on her first marriage. Aunt Caroline had rapped it out with such strange, marked emphasis, accompanied by a withering, triumphant look, that, for a moment, the veil seemed to have been ripped from the past. Of course the coincidence could have nothing to do with Mabel and her father; but her nerves were raw from much anxiety. That dreadful time, which had been swallowed up in the mists of forgetfulness, seemed to be coming back daily, hourly—nearer, nearer. She could almost hear Richard Gordon's voice suggesting that she should accompany him to Vienna and prey upon the traveling Americans, who at that time were beginning to overrun Europe and flood Continental towns with their dollars.

Aunt Caroline subsided obstinately when the Bishop shouted and dictated in his pulpit voice, as she always did. She swept from the room, muttering that she intended to see both Mr. and Miss Bannister, and would on no account lose the opportunity.

Lady Hester was powerless to put any pressure upon the lady in matters concerning Jack's welfare; for Jack had always been considered Aunt Caroline's property since his mother's death; and her position in the household was that of Jack's wealthy guardian. Whenever the son of the house was coming home, Caroline was informed as a matter of duty, and she put in an appearance as though she were his natural mother. The sincerity of her love was her excuse; and of late years she had interfered very little with Lady Hester, or

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even intruded upon her social gatherings. She held aloof, keeping largely to her own room in the west wing, and only appearing at intervals. Unfortunately for Lady Hester, Jack's affairs were to the front just now, and so was Aunt Caroline.

Next morning found the old lady pottering about Jack's rooms, straightening up with her own hands, and running over his spare linen and dress ties to see that all was ready. She laid out and brushed his extra dress suit, and even dusted his patents upon the boot-trees. These things were outside Lady Hester's jurisdiction altogether; but, if the door had not been locked, the mistress of the house might have seen the old lady drop a tear or two as she grappled with the demon of jealousy which was at the root of a good deal of her opposition to Jack's marriage. She was losing her boy, the boy for whom she had economized, and scraped, and saved for twenty years, in order to leave him a fortune and start him handsomely in life. He was in the toils of a strange woman, of an adventurer's daughter, and she had not been consulted at any stage. She alternated between tears and bursts of irritability, opening and shutting drawers with a bang, and doing small violences to the furniture like a man.

There was little or nothing for her to do there, but she could not do enough.

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CHAPTER XII

LADY HESTER had quite recovered from her guilty scare of the previous night. The mere coincidence of a name was enough to stop her heart beating just now; and she rated herself soundly for her weakness in the presence of Aunt Caroline. She was busy preparing for her guests, several of whom had been invited to dine specially to meet the Bannisters. She also lost no time in spreading the news of Jack's engagement in the neighborhood. Every outsider coming to the house with formal congratulations was an ally on her side against the enemy.

She was in a flutter of expectation and excitement. In brief intervals of rest her mind jumped forward as far as the wedding, and she had resolved exactly what she would wear, chosen the color for the bridesmaids' gowns, and settled the composition of the dinner party at the Palace after Jack and Mabel were one, and Aunt Caroline was squelched forever.

After the wedding the old lady would have no possible excuse for interfering with the domestic arrangements of the Palace, or harrying the maids under pretence of making things comfortable for Jack—for no manservant had been allowed to pamper the Bishop's son and encourage him in habits of indolence and foppery. Aunt Caroline did not believe in personal servants. No lady's maid ever dressed her; such affectations were the monopoly of the Bishop's wife.

By the time that Mabel and her father were due to

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arrive, Lady Hester had worked herself into a state of excitement. She wanted the dinner party to be a success. She desired with a woman's natural vanity to make a good impression upon Mr. Bannister, who, from all accounts, was a person who appreciated feminine beauty, and understood the worth of an exquisite gown as well as any woman. She had chosen a particularly artistic creation, quite her most effectual frock, and one that harmonized well with her wonderful hair, its pale gold surface covered with an exquisite tracery of softest orange velvet. The dress fitted her perfectly, too, revealing the lines of her figure somewhat generously, and falling about her feet in a foam of rippling flounces.

The room that Mabel occupied during her stay at the Palace was again at her disposal, although so far no communication had come from the girl to Lady Hester either as friend or hostess. Bannister had wired that they would be coming down by motor car in the afternoon, and pleaded for a little grace in case there should be delay. There had been heavy rain for an hour, and that probably accounted for his arriving at the Palace when the light was fading. Lady Hester heard the car enter the courtyard, and drew aside the curtains as excitedly as any girl. She saw the ponderous motor swing round the bend of the drive, with a faultless chauffeur in white overalls, and two people in the tonneau. Mabel's pale face was recognizable instantly. Her father's eyes were shaded by a large peak cap, but his eyeglass caught a glint of light, and his trim beard concealed the lines of his face. He looked young and interesting, however, much younger than she expected.

The house steward received the guests in the ab-

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sence of the host and hostess in their dressing rooms; and Bannister inquired anxiously if his man had come down by train.

His man had. Voss was there, and was already busy in his master's room—and several other rooms where the doors were open, peeping, prying, measuring, calculating, speculating, and generally making himself acquainted with the geography of the rambling old house.

Mr. Bannister was also concerned about his new car—he had only hired it for a month—and explained politely that he was very particular where it was housed. The Bishop kept no proper motor house, and he suggested that it should go to an inn in Ripley, within telephone call.

The car was sent away—which was convenient. It prevented the chauffeur from informing the staff of the household that he was not on the strength of Mr. Bannister's establishment in town.

Lady Hester heard the soft, drawling tones of the guest as he passed along the corridor outside her room in the wake of Gray, the butler. There was something strangely musical in the voice that was almost familiar. It was possible that she might have met him before at some social function, where he passed unnoticed among other guests; there was certainly something in his bearing in the car that was familiar.

Mabel had rushed up stairs without ceremony. Her previous stay at the Palace had made her more or less at home there. She was told that her old room was ready; but instead of going there she asked for Lady Hester. When told that her hostess was dressing, she turned her steps to the familiar room, and knocked without hesitation, a sharp, impatient rapping.

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"Who is it?"

"It is I—Mabel. May I came in?" said a tense, thrilling, anxious voice.

"Yes, Mabel, come in."

Lady Hester, although only half through her toilet, turned with open arms to greet Jack's future wife.

"Ah, my dear girl—at last!" she cried. "But how pale you are. Are you cold? Did you get wet?"

"Oh, no, no," replied Mabel, rubbing her cheeks. "I must apologize for coming to you like this. But—but I wanted to see you. Would it be asking too much to have my room changed?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. I thought you liked that room, because of the window seat."

"Can I have one next to father?"

"Yes, dear, if you wish it. Speak to Gray about it, or Harriet."

Mabel felt that some explanation was wanted for this unusual request, and stammered out an excuse.

"You see—you see, Miss Cardew's room is so near mine now."

"Oh, yes, of course, of course—I understand," laughed Lady Hester. "It will be nicer, perhaps, if you are near your father. Besides, you know the place so well, you can pilot him through the maze of corridors upstairs. You have plenty of time to get ready, Mabel. I hope you've brought a stock of pretty dresses, child. I've invited quite a lot of people to meet you, and we are to have a really festive gathering. I have spread the news of your engagement far and wide, because Aunt Caroline has set her heart upon wrecking it. Be civil to her, for heaven's sake. If she insults you, overlook it. If she ignores you, you must ignore her. She is quite helpless. When you are introduced to her, go

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up and kiss her—and may I be there to see the fun! She's a very good soul at bottom, but the depths are a long way down. You must manage the old lady skillfully. If there's any fighting to be done, leave that to me. You must make it all right with Aunt Caroline, because she's got heaps of money, and Jack must have it; or else it will go to a home for lost dogs, or incompetent curates. Stay with me awhile and let us discuss the wedding."

But the girl made excuses.

"I'm disturbing you. I shall be in the way while you dress; besides, it's late already, and I've a lot to do."

Lady Hester detected the change of tone instantly. A latent anxiety and apprehensiveness had crept into Mabel's voice, dulling its vivacity and youthfulness. She turned to the girl in kindly scrutiny.

"Mabel, aren't you happy? You look so worried and unlike yourself, child. You're not regretting?"

"No. Of course I'm happy now everything's settled. But the journey down upset me, I fancy. I'm not used to fast motors; and we came down at an awful pace."

"I didn't know your father had such a fine car."

"No?"

"Has he had it long?"

"I'm sure I don't know. He doesn't tell me much about his affairs. I'll go and dress now. We'll talk presently."

"He shall take Aunt Caroline out for a drive—and lose her," laughed Lady Hester, and Mabel escaped.

Lady Hester hurried feverishly through her dressing. The excitement had given her a rosy flush. Her eyes were sparkling, and she had never looked younger since she became Lady Hester Cardew. She seemed to have bridged the gap of years, and gone back to the

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days before sorrow and anxiety had thinned her cheeks, and darkened the shadows beneath her eyes. She was in the ripest maturity of womanhood, life's Indian summer. The girlish vivacity was gone, but the stately, graceful figure remained; and as she surveyed her full-length reflection in the long mirror she laughed triumphantly to think that Mabel herself, with all the bloom of youth, could not outshine her this evening.

One more critical survey, comprehensive and satisfied—her gown was a complete success, and its unusual gaiety of tone pleased her—and she hurried down. She rustled along the soft-carpeted corridor to the head of the broad, curved stone staircase that leads down to the oak hall of Ripley Palace. Some one was descending ahead of her, a perfectly groomed, broad-shouldered man, whom she guessed at once to be Mr. Bannister. She intended to introduce herself, and while he stood poised on the last stair, with his back towards her, gazing up at the grand oak carving upon which the light from the lamp in the centre fell softly and mysteriously, she ran impetuously down three steps. Her foot caught in the chiffon flounce of her dress—she stumbled—and put out her hand to save herself; but she was too far away from the balustrade. With a cry she went down, half turning as she fell, and measured her length upon the stairs with a dreadful thud.

It all happened in a moment. The man down below turned in astonishment, for he had supposed himself to be alone. He rushed up two stairs at a time. "Are you hurt?" he cried. "Let me assist you, madam."

She moaned in pain and tried to rise. He put his arm under her and lifted her up, so that his face came over hers; and when the first swooning sensation had passed, she looked up with a forced smile of apology.

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"It's awfully kind of you—but——"

Their eyes met, and the man gasped in startled confusion.

"Good God!—Hester!"

He almost let her fall, but recovered his composure with remarkable suddenness. His eyes were gazing into hers, but still she did not understand. The light shone down upon her face where she had fallen, whereas his was in shadow, with the lamp above him. He raised her gently, and, when at last she stood alone, holding on to the balustrade, and trying to laugh at what was a painful shock, she saw him plainly.

"Who—are you?" she asked, with growing uneasiness. He was familiar, yet strange. Memory found its tongue. She screamed—

"Dick!"

He seized her wrists roughly, and shook her back to reason. "Silence!" he whispered. "Don't be a fool. Don't give yourself away."

"Hester, my love!" said the voice of the Bishop, who emerged from the library, and stood with the handle of the door in his hand, looking upward anxiously. "Did I hear you cry out?"

"Yes—yes, I fell, dear. My foot caught in my dress——"

"A very nasty fall, a most dangerous fall, Bishop," explained Bannister. "Fortunately I was here to help her. I think you're better now, Lady Cardew."

"I'm afraid you're not, dear," cried the Bishop anxiously. "Look at her—quick!—she'll fall."

The Bishop ran forward, but Bannister was before him, and Lady Hester dropped fainting into his arms.

He held her to him, full of concern and sympathy, and carried her down the few remaining stairs, thrust-

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HE PUT HIS ARM UNDER HER AND LIFTED HER UP
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ing the Bishop aside. Even then he could not relinquish her. His arms would not unclasp from that soft, yielding form that once was his—that seemed to be still his. It brought back the old days with a rush—the painful, hysterical scenes—the last wild quarrel that had ended even as this fright had ended, in a fainting woman dropping into her husband's arms, mercifully dazed by a wild convulsion of emotion too terrible to bear consciously and live.

"Set her down—set her down!" cried the Bishop, helplessly waving his hands and fidgeting round, ready to lend assistance when the other had released her.

"There's no couch here. I can't drop her on the floor," snarled Bannister, as though he, and not the Bishop, had the prior right to take the lead in this emergency. Nevertheless, he allowed Hester's form to sink gently, and supported her head upon his knee.

"Bring water—bring water!" gasped the Bishop, turning to the first person near—Aunt Caroline.

"What's the fuss?" asked the old lady, levelling her glasses and surveying the strange scene, the deathlike woman in the yellow gown—a brilliant gleaming patch of color, relieved by the dark carpet and the black clothes of Bannister.

"Water, Caroline—water! She's fainted."

"Water won't help her. She's coming round. Let her head go lower, man. Don't hold her like that."

Bannister came back to the present surroundings, and Voss was at his elbow with a glass of water, coming from no one knew where.

Lady Hester was recovering with low moans, murmuring "Dick! Dick!"—but fortunately the words were inaudible to all but Bannister, who bent low over her, peering so close to her face, that Aunt Caroline took him by the coat and tugged him away.

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"Give her air, man. She won't recover if you smother her like that. Haven't you ever seen a fainting woman before?"

Bannister for once forgot himself. He gave Aunt Caroline a glance that was devilish in its angry remonstrance, but soon returned to Hester. "Pull yourself together, Lady Cardew," he said, putting considerable emphasis on the name Cardew. "The Bishop is here, and—and your mother."

"Mother?" murmured Aunt Caroline angrily.

"This is Mr. Bannister, Caroline. He caught Hester as she fell and carried her down for me. See, her eyes are opening now. Hester, do you think you'll be able to get up?"

"Oh, yes, John." She saw only the Bishop. Consciousness of her surroundings came back slowly; then Bannister's warning eyes came within range, and she screamed a little, drawing away, as from a spectre.

"It's only Mr. Bannister, Hester darling."

It was Bannister's hand that raised her to her feet. She tried to laugh, but it was a very sorry attempt.

They were joined by others now, news of the accident having spread through the household. Mabel came running down stairs, looking almost as white as her hostess, and dreading, she knew not what. As far as she could see, there had been a scene, and her father was in the thick of it; and Aunt Caroline, too, whom she now saw face to face for the first time.

"I'm quite all right," sighed Lady Hester, waving them all away. "I'm completely recovered. And I'm much obliged to—to this gentleman for his timely aid. Mabel—this is your father, I suppose?"

"Yes, dearest, Mr. Bannister," explained the Bishop. "This is a strange introduction, and I wish it could

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have happened under happier circumstances. Caroline, this is Mr. Bannister—my sister."

Bannister smiled sweetly, and advanced to the grim lady, instinctively divining where his chief difficulty lay.

"Miss Cardew, you spoke to me just now, and I fear I was rude. I should have given way to your superior knowledge. Allow me to offer you my apologies, and shake you by the hand. I have heard of you from your nephew; and if you are worthy of half his praises your acquaintance is indeed to be desired. Mabel, my dear, this is Miss Cardew, Jack's aunt, whom he has so longed for you to see."

"Sorry the desire was not mutual," sniffed Miss Cardew rudely, and raising her *pince-nez* to give Mabel a more discomposing stare. "Perhaps when I know Miss Bannister better I shall be able to meet her more cordially."

"Caroline! Caroline!" cried the Bishop in amazement; but Caroline had turned and disappeared into the library.

"Mr. Bannister, you must excuse my sister. She is impulsive, and—and very fond of Jack. She's jealous—that's the long and short of it," he whispered. "An old woman's jealousy is a strange and terrible infliction. Take no notice of it. You'll esteem her highly when you know her better."

Mabel could have cried with humiliation, but she set her teeth, and her pale face showed no trace of emotion. Her meeting with Aunt Caroline was a failure.

"Give me your arm a moment, Mabel," asked Lady Hester, rising from the chair into which they had put her. "I shall be all right soon. That's right. Take me upstairs—for a few moments—and all of you go away, and forget me for a little time."

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She bore up wonderfully. Only Mabel could see the awful struggle to be calm. Bannister drew the Bishop into the library with an easy, familiar clutch of the arm, intended to be sympathetic.

"It is so disturbing to see one's own wife lose consciousness," he observed. "I've been through it, Bishop. And the thing they hate most is to have a fuss made about it. Leave her to my daughter for a little while, and if she doesn't pull round, I should insist upon her going to bed. That was a nasty fall she had, and she must have hurt herself badly to have fainted so quickly."

"Of course she must. Hester never faints. You've no idea what a turn it gave me to see her so white. Poor Hester! She mustn't go through with a dinner party if she's in pain. They are nasty stairs, too, to fall down."

He went back to the hall to look at the stairs, and asked to be shown the point where she slipped. Bannister had to describe the whole thing in detail, with a little fanciful coloring. He threw in a few words of praise of Lady Hester's fortitude, and cleverly contrived to lead the Bishop to talk of himself and his wife when they returned to the library.

The Bishop fell into the trap, and, while imagining he was talking of Jack's future, told Mr. Bannister all that gentleman wanted to know about his past. Bannister vainly strove to draw Aunt Caroline into the conversation. She sat at the far end of the library behind a copy of the *Guardian*, over the top of which she watched as she listened. She saw strange lights flash in Bannister's eyes; a quizzical smile played round the corners of his mouth; and there were moments when he passed his hand across his hair, as if worried and be-

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wildered. But sardonic amusement was twinkling in his eyes most of the time.

When the Bishop was called away to meet some guests from the neighborhood who were arriving, Bannister forgot all about the old lady in the corner. He dropped into a chair and chuckled.

"You seem amused, sir," observed Aunt Caroline.

He was taken off his guard—but only for a moment. "It was this," he explained, tapping an open copy of *Punch* upon the library table.

"Humph! Clever of you to laugh before you saw it. Ah, you may well smile at my brother's absurd talk about his second marriage. And as there is a proposal to make you one of the family, I don't apologize for referring to it. It never had my approval, and it never will. But it did not provide me with as much amusement as you seem to get out of it. You evidently knew Lady Hester before her marriage."

"I?" cried Bannister, with barefaced innocence. "I never had that privilege, madam, or perhaps she would not have become Mrs. Cardew. A magnificent creature—a perfect woman!"

"Then why did she call you Dick?"

"Call me Dick?" he murmured in magnificent astonishment. "My name is not Dick."

"You are Mr. Richard Bannister, are you not?"

"True, my name is Richard. But I've never been called Dick—always Richard. Dick is horribly familiar—a sort of name that suggests everybody's friend."

"Don't try to fool me by prevaricating. She called you Dick; and you have never been known as Dick! Yet you remind me of Dick Gordon, of Vienna; perhaps you reminded her of Dick Gordon."

"Dick Gordon, of Vienna?" echoed Bannister, slowly

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and wonderingly. "Wherever have I heard that name before? Was he a jockey?"

"No, an adventurer, and a rascal."

"The scoundrel! Was he a friend of yours whom I resemble?" unable to resist the temptation to make Aunt Caroline furious. "Surely never an intimate of the Bishop's family! I've been told I'm like a popular actor, a French nobleman, and one of the Greek statues—but never like—like—what name did you say, 'Gordon?' Did the resemblance frighten Lady Hester, poor woman! Do you think it was that?"

"I'm sure of it," replied the old lady grimly, with the nearest approach to a smile that she could summon on this irritating day of days. She admired Mr. Bannister's *sangfroid*. His impertinence was superb; and Aunt Caroline was not utterly devoid of a sense of humor.

Further conversation was interrupted by the hasty return of the Bishop, who came to announce that Lady Hester would be obliged to abandon the idea of appearing at dinner. She seemed very much upset—almost hysterical, in fact, and begged to be excused. His guests came almost at his heels, and were introduced to Mr. Bannister, and all joined in commiserating their host, and expressing sorrow for Lady Hester.

"Caroline, my dear, you must take my wife's place, and look after Mr. Bannister.'"

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CHAPTER XIII

It was a strange dinner party. The guests had been carefully selected in order to make a more than usually genial gathering. Manipulated by Lady Hester they should have mixed excellently. For Aunt Caroline, Lady Hester had invited a particular *protégé* of the Bishop's sister, an elderly reformed bachelor, who had, of late years, given up wild ways—and drink—for active church work and mothers' meetings, and Sunday school organizations. Mr. Crick was his name, a small, white-haired, pimply-faced person of uncertain age, probably sixty; but with the small, spare figure of a boy. He stuttered slightly—unkind people said as the result of nervous debility following a life of dissipation. This person found himself without a partner now that Aunt Caroline was in charge of the lion of the evening—the elder lion, that is, in the second degree, for of course Jack was the centre of much interest and congratulation among the Bishop's friends, although he soon subsided into a secondary place, for Bannister outshone everybody.

It was a pleasant scene, the gaily decorated table loaded with white flowers, and rare fruits set in dishes of silver gilt, old family plate of which Lady Hester was especially fond, although it only saw light on special occasions. At one end of the long table the Bishop, with a stout lady on his right, the archdeacon's wife; and facing him Aunt Caroline, grim and severe; on her right the thief. Near the Bishop was the reformed character, Mr. Crick, looking down at his plate, and

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feeling exquisitely uncomfortable. Bannister—who knew several of the men at the table before he met them there—peered across at Mr. Crick with critical, inquiring eyes, in which there was a suspicion of latent recognition. Mr. Crick bowed his head as if prayers were in progress; but at last, in an unguarded moment, caught Mr. Bannister's eye.

A marked expression of severity transfixed Mr. Bannister's features. He paused in his conversation as if shocked to see Mr. Crick at the table of a Bishop, and, when the opportunity came, he bent over Aunt Caroline, and whispered—

"Pray, who is that person at the other end of the table—the man with the red face?"

"That is Mr. Crick. I see you recognize him. He is the gentleman who knew Dick Gordon in Vienna."

"Good heavens, you don't mean to say you got that ridiculous notion about my likeness to—er—what name did you say?"

"Dick Gordon."

"Ah, to Dick Gordon, from poor old Crick?"

"I did."

"Madam," whispered Bannister impressively, "I don't like to criticize my host's visitors; but really that person ought not to be at your table. When did they release him from the asylum?"

"From the asylum?" gasped Aunt Caroline.

"Yes. He was put away. Haven't you heard of it? He comes of good family, I believe; but he drank shockingly; and then he had delusions—that was why he was put away. His chief delusion was that he was being cheated when he lost at cards. He accused Lord Strathmeny of cheating at baccarat, and was promptly kicked out of the club."

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"Is that so?" murmured Aunt Caroline, rather disconcerted. The news did not surprise her so much as Bannister's amazing nonchalance and persistence in refusing to be insulted or abashed by his "likeness" to Dick Gordon. She was almost sorry for her haste in making rash assertions on the evidence of so unreliable a person as Mr. Crick. But it was odd that she had not heard of the asylum incident—and unfortunate.

Mr. Crick knew everybody in the great world of London—at least, so he pretended—and to him Aunt Caroline had gone, when she first heard of Jack's engagement, to learn all about Mr. Bannister. The information that Bannister was really an adventurer under an alias was stated with much emphasis by the little man—in Mr. Bannister's absence—and he had once made a similar accusation in a London club, while under the influence of drink. Unfortunately Mr. Crick himself was such a discredited person that—although he had undoubtedly recognized in Mr. Bannister a certain traveling American of years ago who passed as Mr. Dick Gordon, and fleeced him at cards—he was painfully uncomfortable now at having defamed one who was received everywhere, even at a Bishop's table. At the time of Aunt Caroline's inquiry Mr. Crick had no notion that Jack Cardew had engaged himself to Miss Bannister, or he would not have dared to make the rash accusation.

"Madam, you must confront me with that person after dinner," whispered Bannister, pressing home his advantage. "If you have anything to do with him he'll be making libelous assertions concerning your private life. By the bye, that reminds me, I think I've heard him mention you."

"Mention me?" gasped Aunt Caroline.

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"Yes. Surely you are the Bishop's sister whom he accused of eloping to Paris with a rascally curate—named Judd, I think—a bad lot who went utterly to the dogs."

Aunt Caroline gave an awful gulp. Mr. Bannister had pitched upon her one and only indiscretion of the past, a silly elopement at thirty with her grandfather's curate many years ago. They got as far as Dover, where she discovered that her lover had no intention of marrying her; on learning which she virtuously returned to her father's roof, and eschewed men and marriage ever after. How on earth Mr. Crick could ever have become possessed of this knowledge was not apparent; and it turned her quite green with faintness.

"Don't think for a moment, Miss Cardew, that I credit anything that person alleges," whispered Bannister. "We have both been fooled. I only mention this to show you how absolutely unreliable he is. I should give him the cold shoulder, if I were you; and drop a hint to the Bishop that the man he is entertaining is a rascal, although so very well connected. I'm sorry for his people; the Cricks are a proud family; but lunatics at the dinner table—well, I'll leave him in your hands, Miss Cardew. . . . Yes, Bishop, I heard what you said. Honeymoons are going out of fashion, but it was a good fashion in its day."

Mabel looked pale and Jack grinned.

"Ah, you are right," cried the Bishop heartily, "I can truly say that the pleasantest weeks of my existence were spent away from the hum and bustle of life in country lanes and green fields—eh, Mabel? What do you think? And you, Jack, you don't veto a honeymoon, surely?"

"I don't know," responded Jack sheepishly; and Mabel dropped her eyes, coloring for the first time.

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Bannister adroitly changed the conversation, and, between every few sentences, managed to glare with virtuous indignation at poor Mr. Crick, until the helpless little man wanted to crawl under the table with mortification. After dinner he managed to get nearer to the gentleman and whisper that he would like a few words with him in private. Mr. Crick declined the honor timorously, and began a lame apology; but Bannister looked so deadly and devilish that the words dried up in his shrivelled throat, and he almost felt Dick Gordon's fingers clutching him there.

* * * * * * *

Upstairs a wretched woman sat all huddled up on the bearskin rug before the empty grate in her husband's bedroom.

She had wandered there like a restless soul, pacing from room to room, and had dropped down overcome. The awful realization that she had no right under the roof of this house, much less in this sanctum—beloved by the Bishop because it was tended only by her hands—was slowly making itself felt. The flowers in the vases, the carefully dusted row of books by the bedhead, the little table with writing material by the window, on which the clean blotter was always ready, with a new quill by its side, in case he should want to put to paper his burning thoughts; the fine old chest in which she kept his vestments and linen softly perfumed; the big oil painting of St. Saviour's-in-the-East in the gorgeous gold frame presented to the Bishop by his late parishioners; the large Chesterfield lounge in front of the fire—all these brought back with a rush the beloved reality of her life for the last twenty years, the life that was ruined in one crashing collapse.

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She had been a good wife and a good helpmeet to the bluff, jolly vicar. He had brought sunshine into her desolate existence, and she had helped to make him a Bishop; yet all the while she had been a miserable dupe, living unconsciously in adultery with a man who would have died rather than take to his bosom another man's wife.

The sting of it all lay in the fact that in part she had consciously sinned—how grievously she now recognized for the first time. It was only in the intimate life following her marriage that she learned the Bishop's peculiar views on marriage, which were almost Oriental in their severity. If he had known that Hester Lennox had been a wife, although her husband had gone over to the majority, she would never have become Mrs. Cardew. That was really why the awful confession was postponed, and postponed, and never made. She had shut down the past, and for the last ten years it had seemed but a dream. No child was ever vouchsafed to her second marriage. Perhaps it was the grief of this that in time roused the demon of recollection in her, so that year by year, up to the time of Jack's meeting with Mabel, the weight of her guilty secret grew and grew, till the need of a confidante was sometimes almost maddening. The pent-up fires flamed out when Jack was going to deceive the Bishop too. Now——

She was completely stunned by the one appalling concrete fact that Dick Gordon lived.

He lived! He was not dead, as his friend the Rev. Silas Judd had assured her. The whole dreadful time of her rash, secret marriage and subsequent supposed release came back as vividly as if it all happened yesterday—the first stolen meetings with romantic Dick

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Gordon, the wild girlish love that she gave the plausible rascal, and the honeymoon in detachments—a few days at a time; then the brief period of married life abroad under the shelter of a friend's chaperonage, and the discovery of her husband's real mode of life. The horror of that revelation drove her well-nigh crazy at the time, and added to it was another problem looming. Motherhood had claimed her, and she went through all the horror of concealing the birth of a little girl, born in secrecy and knowing no father, and placed in the care of strangers.

Then followed the parting—the release.

In her present dazed condition she could only think of the one vital thing—that Dick was down stairs, Dick, her girlish idol whom she had loved with all a woman's passion even after the mask was stripped from him—loved him because, though he had shamefully dragged her into deep, dark waters, he was always kind, and seemed to have been genuinely sorry for the ruin he had wrought. Yet he had been crueller than the vilest betrayer.

She gave no thought to Mabel at present. She only existed in the demented woman's mind as Jack's sweetheart. That the beautiful girl was Dick Gordon's daughter, perhaps her own daughter, alive and grown to womanhood, was not yet a solid idea. Stupefied and stunned, it was Dick, and Dick only, that filled her horizon. She cared not how he had lived, or what ties he had contracted since their parting; he was not dead, and living he was a menace, and a terror. How often she had wept—even after her marriage—over the recollection of the reckless, contrite lover-husband, who had sworn before heaven that, if she no longer respected him, he would release her, because he loved her. Dick

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Gordon in those days was tender-hearted wherever a woman was concerned. He had a little pride too. He saw the futility of clinging to the beautiful girl whom he had ruined but could not degrade, and devised his own cunning, plausible scheme to release her. It cost him something to give her up. Their child was put out to nurse; but its baby fingers had tightened upon his, its eyes had smiled innocently upon him, and the rogue realized the existence of a passion hitherto undreamt of, the passion of paternity. In his despair at the failure of all his plans to secure a dashing, beautiful, reckless mate to help him prey upon his victims, he was faced with the necessity of giving up both his wife and child.

And Dick Gordon was never good at giving up anything.

It was a wonderful triumph over self that made him relinquish Hester. But the child was his; she could not take it back to her friends. He advised her to conceal it and go back to spinsterhood. She wanted to have it near her, but he had no desire for the child to be reared by a bitter, disappointed woman, and taught to hate him. It jarred upon his idea of what was nice and charming. His vivid imagination had depicted the child growing up into a little thing with golden hair, decked out in white and toddling after him; and later as a romping school girl—still picturesque and delightful; then as a daughter grown to womanhood, an ornament and comfort to his old age—for Bannister, who loved youth and hated grey hairs, dreaded old age, and, unlike most rascals, stuck rigidly to a banking account.

He was clever enough to know that he could not be a rascal all his days, and that money easily made was just as easily saved. He never considered himself as hav-

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ing anything in common with the white-haired, sponging, pathetic wrecks who were the grandfathers of his profession; and he had urged this fact upon his wife when she scornfully spurned him, as an inducement to wait until he could turn respectable.

Dick Gordon parted from his beautiful wife in the full flush of sentimental grief; and he wanted to do what he considered the right thing. The only service he could render her was to die and free her completely. That was inconvenient; but the renegade curate Judd was paid to tell the plausible tale of Gordon's and the child's death. The thing was carried through, like everything attempted by Dick Gordon, artistically, and with no loose edges.

At that time the sentimental rogue thought he would never enter England again, having made it rather hot for himself in one or two directions—and as Hester had violently declared that she, on her side, would never again leave English soil, the supposed death and a new alias seemed likely to answer all purposes. It left her free to live what life she chose; and at the same time give him complete liberty with safety, for she had threatened to expose him, and he was never quite sure what she might do.

They had met again, and she could not expose him now.

Little by little all that she had heard of Mr. Bannister from Mabel and Jack came back to her; the description of his luxurious rooms in Bond Street, his fastidious ways, his love of glitter and color and fine clothes, his love of art, his priceless collection of etchings—all these things belonged to the old Dick Gordon. He was more flourishing than ever, apparently, for he had motor cars now. For one brief moment she allowed

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herself to believe and hope that it might be an honorable life he was living, on wealth that had come to him by some lucky and legitimate channel.

There was not much time to speculate. The flood gates of memory were open, and a torrent of recollections swept onward, beating down all the barriers set up during the years of her second marriage. In her first panic and clear realization of the truth the present was as nothing, a background only for the past, all the details of which showed with startling distinctness. She even found herself recalling the gowns she wore on different occasions during her brief married life abroad; and especially one which Dick had always admired; and some orchids he had bought her to wear with it; magnificent blooms of flaming yellow. She looked down at the mass of billowy chiffon with which her fingers were playing. Yes, they were almost the same shade as the velvet on the gown she was wearing. A ghastly smile dawned in her eyes; to vanish again on the instant as consciousness of her surroundings brought into prominence the present, with its overwhelming crisis.

It was of herself that she must think. What line of action must she take?

Dinner over, the Bishop, she knew, would make an excuse to come and see how she was. She would have to face him, and look into those steady and kindly eyes and—lie.

She was not his wife now. The situation was wild and fantastic. As she compelled her mind to contemplate it, a wave of cold terror swept over her. It was as if the solid ground from beneath her had given away, and she had become the sport of some new element, with powers that she could neither gauge nor control.

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Of what account were the years that were gone, those years that she and the Bishop had spent together, planning good works and building up a grand reputation? It had been a life lived upon the thin crust of a morass. She had married Dick Gordon and loved him, and he died—but he was now alive. She recalled every word of the curt announcement of his death in the papers, her first sense of relief, and later a kindlier feeling and regret that she had not been with him at the end, to say at least that she forgave him. And now a vengeful God had brought him back—back to her. It seemed like a punishment for her wicked deception of the man who now loved and trusted her.

Dick Gordon alive! And Dick Gordon was the father of Mabel, the girl Jack was going to marry! Mabel was Dick Gordon's daughter!

His daughter!—Dick's daughter!

By whom?

Her own child had died, else——

She sat up suddenly, rigid and pale, every nerve and pulse in her body held tensely in the grip of a new thought. Her lips grew dry and dropped apart, and a thin scream came from beneath them; a cry scarcely human, save for its note of agony. Then her hands went up to her throbbing temples, and closed across her face, which was distorted and agonized. For a few minutes she remained in this position, then dragged herself towards the divan, where she knelt and tried to pray. She could not compose her thoughts. No words came. She rose to her feet and rushed from the Bishop's room to her own as though chased by fiends, her strangled sobs almost choking her.

A maid servant who was in the corridor hurried towards her; but Lady Hester passed quickly into her room, shut the door and bolted it.

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One idea alone possessed her. No one must see her like this. All self-control was gone, and she feared for her terrible secret. All she desired was time to steady herself and think out the situation in all its bearings.

The story of Dick Gordon's death was a lie and a fraud. Why not the story of the child's death, too? How she had wept over the lost babe, cursing herself for her weakness in letting them take it from her! And she had believed them when they told her it was dead. She let the child go—the precious gift vouchsafed to her by Heaven under circumstances of supreme trial, but none the less given into her sacred care, a trust from God. And how had she discharged this trust? She had let Dick take it away, and accepted a stranger's word that it was dead.

Mabel!—his daughter!

Mabel Bannister. She repeated the name to herself again and again. Perhaps Dick had taken a second wife. Yes, that was the solution of it. Then she remembered the Bishop's comments on Mabel's likeness to herself.

"My daughter!" she cried wonderingly. "Mine! He calls her his—she must be mine too—mine!"

Why did he hide the child away? He had spoken of it as an incumbrance to be got rid of; yet Mabel's life was a record of innocent girlhood and an indulgent father's love.

And Mabel was to marry Jack. It was amazing—maddening. Who was she?

It was Farce grinning through Tragedy's mask. Jack, the Bishop's son, was to marry Mabel, the daughter of the adventurer, Dick Gordon, knowing nothing of her antecedents, and believing her to be the child of a gentleman. And Bannister was going to buy Dingle Hall and settle a thousand a year upon his daughter.

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That must be all a fraud. He could not be rich. Yet he used to boast that, by the time he was forty, he would have amassed a fortune, and would be independent of his precarious, adventurous existence. He had a way, too, of achieving everything he set his heart on with real determination. It was just possible that he had grown wealthy; that he was now what he seemed to be. She had lived down the past—why not he?

She laughed at the absurdity of it; but her laugh ended in a scream the sound of which sobered her; and she hid her face in the lace coverlet of her bed, striving to stifle the choking hysterical cries. Reason seemed to be tottering. Like many self-contained and seemingly undemonstrative women, Lady Hester was extremely emotional. Circumstances had, in a great measure, altered her disposition, and now, when the guard arm was down, she shrank back, appalled at her own weakness. But she was not a weak woman, and she was supremely conscious that her only hope lay in self-control. She must pull herself together and meet Dick Gordon face to face. There must be no faltering, no hesitancy. One false move on her part, and she might bring ruin upon the life of the man who had given her the only peace and true happiness she had ever known, the man to whom honor was as the breath of life. She wanted, and must obtain at all costs, a respite from immediate ruin and exposure. Dick Gordon must be bribed or silenced somehow.

She owed the Bishop much before; she owed him more now; his good name must not be besmirched or his honor dimmed. She could die—she must die, if death would wipe out all offences; and by her own hand, if need be, to save him.

The necessity of uttering her thoughts to some one

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else was overmastering her. Her brain was racing, teeming with ideas; but they were nebulous, needing speech to make them concrete. She talked aloud, but her voice sounded harsh and discordant, and she clapped both hands over her mouth, and bit the flesh in her struggle to master her hysteria. It was the sight of her own reflection in the mirror at last that steadied her; for the face that looked into hers was haggard and drawn, a tablet on which any one could read that which she would hide.

Again she thought of Mabel—Mabel, who might be her own daughter, the babe taken from her, the child she had mourned as dead, accepting death as Heaven's punishment for her desertion. It was here, beside her, grown to womanhood. The long arm of coincidence and the remorseless chain of circumstance bound her with iron shackles from which she could not escape. She was tethered, no matter in what direction she struggled to get free.

Some one rapped at the door.

A definite and clearer appreciation of her difficulties came to her with appalling clearness. She expected the Bishop, yet dreaded to see him; and while she hesitated a moment, uncertain of the command of her reason, Aunt Caroline's voice made itself heard—a potent and cruel reminder of the vengeance at hand.

The Bishop, unable to leave his guests, had sent his sister to inquire after the invalid, and to see whether Lady Hester had dined. He had heard from the butler, who was devoted to her ladyship, that the tray sent to her boudoir had come down untouched, and that her ladyship had locked herself in her bedroom. The sound of Aunt Caroline's hard, clear voice gave back to the terrified woman the courage which had deserted her.

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"What do you want?"

"It is I, Caroline. My brother wishes to know if you are any better. Let me in, Hester. I don't expect to be kept waiting on the mat like a housemaid."

"I'm sorry I can't let you in. I'm coming down shortly, but I want to be left quiet a little longer." She spoke slowly, like a weary invalid. She was weary enough, God knows; but Aunt Caroline's voice and manner raised all the spirit she had in her. She would have given the world to shout at her and tell her to go away, for Aunt Caroline of all people would be the first to triumph at her downfall.

In this she did the old lady an injustice. As Bannister knew—and as his old colleague the Rev. Silas Judd knew—Aunt Caroline had, in her day, risen to amazing heights of indiscretion, and was only saved from a villain by her own level-headedness. If Lady Hester had only known, she would have been a valuable ally in the present awful crisis; for Caroline Cardew was one of those queer old women who go through life with an unreasoning suspicion of their own sex, and absolute distrust of the self-contained woman; but let them loose in the middle of a real tragedy and arouse their sympathy, and they will champion a woman against their better judgment, and, if need be, against the world. And such a woman was Caroline Cardew.

"If you don't want me to come in I'm sure I don't want to. But if you're ill, somebody ought to see what's wrong with you; and if you're not ill it's very bad taste on your part to select this particular evening to make a scene, when the house is full of all sorts of horrible people who are here at your invitation. I shall send your maid to you."

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"No, no—go away," groaned the wretched sufferer, and her misery must have crept into her voice, for Aunt Caroline's voice softened.

"You'd better have some one with you," she persisted.

"Then send Miss Bannister to me, please—that is, if she can come without being missed."

"Of course she'll be missed. But I'll tell her you want her."

The rest of Aunt Caroline's muttering was lost as she walked away with an angry frown that meant no good to any one.

Lady Hester rose quickly from the couch, where she had thrown herself, and lighting the candles on her dressing table, peered anxiously at the woman in the mirror. She was deathly pale, and there were heavy shadows about the eyes; but no signs of weeping.

She opened her bedroom door and looked into the corridor. Aunt Caroline was standing at the landing window gazing intently at something in the yard below.

"You needn't trouble to ask Mabel to come up, Caroline; I've decided to come down."

Aunt Caroline did not reply; a usual habit with her when she was displeased; but she had not, as a matter of fact, heard the remark. She was too intent in watching a man in the yard below, a servant who was apparently counting the windows, indicating them one after the other by the aid of a pencil in his hand. She could neither see the color of his clothes nor his face, but he looked like Mr. Bannister's solemn faced man.

"Queer," she muttered, as she walked slowly down stairs.

Somebody was singing in the drawing room, and she

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waited till the song was finished; then, passing in, went up to Mabel, saying icily, "Lady Hester requires your presence upstairs."

Mabel rose to go, quaking with apprehension.

The men in the drawing room were almost merry; they had warmed up after dinner; but, as usual, with the hostess absent, they had drawn together in a knot, and the women were left very much to themselves, with only Mr. Crick to entertain them.

Bannister was amusing the Bishop and the archdeacon and a very youthful curate with some good stories particularly appealing to churchmen, and they were laughing heartily. The Bishop forgot to be frigidly polite. He applauded all his guest's sallies with gusto; while Mr. Crick, on the other hand, was not at all brilliant or amusing, and a silence fell upon the women which had gradually made itself felt. Aunt Caroline, who had been very much disconcerted by Bannister's amazing knowledge of her past—learned by him from the rascal Judd of course—found that she could not talk herself or listen to other people. She sat glued to her chair, ever and anon turning her eyes upon Bannister with amazement. One moment she admired his incomparable *sangfroid;* the next she doubted whether after all he was a villain and a rascal. Then she glanced at the stammering, idiotic Mr. Crick, who was making feeble jokes and giggling over them to the point of suffocation, and wondered which of the two it was safest to trust to keep her awful secret.

As a matter of fact poor Mr. Crick had never said a word to Bannister concerning Aunt Caroline's early peccadilloes, and knew nothing of them; while she, of course, could not question him on the point.

The old lady's suspicions might have died a natural

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death but for the extraordinary conduct of Lady Hester herself, and her dramatic recognition of Mr. Bannister earlier in the evening. Hester must be very ill indeed to keep away from her guests and surrender the reins of government to her sister-in-law. Under ordinary circumstances she would crawl down if she were dying, rather than disappoint her friends and ruin a festive gathering like this. But fresh surprises awaited Caroline when Hester, pale as marble, calm and self-composed, entered the room, and walked up to the nearest guest as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, my dear—you're better? I'm so glad," cried the archdeacon's wife, impulsively going to meet the pale, calm looking woman.

The others of course crowded round. The Bishop jumped up, and hurried over to his wife, whom he seized by the arms gleefully, like a big school boy. "Ah, my darling—that's right. You're better now. You're looking pale, though. I hope you're not overdoing it."

"Oh, no, no—only a faint. When I caught my foot in my dress and fell, the shock was greater than I thought."

"If it hadn't been for me she would have fallen the whole flight," chimed in Bannister.

"Yes, Mr.—er—Mr. Bannister. I haven't thanked you."

"It was my privilege to be of service," replied Mr. Bannister, with a queer, complacent smile that was not lost upon Aunt Caroline and struck terror to Lady Hester's soul. He adjusted his eyeglass critically and almost rudely. Anger rose in the wretched wife's breast because he was obviously only amused. He was unabashed, perfectly self-possessed, and playing the polite guest in the house of his own wife as though it were

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the most ordinary thing in the world for a woman to have two husbands—and one of them a Bishop.

"Sit down and rest, my dear," suggested the Bishop.

"Yes, don't tire yourself," echoed the women.

"This chair is extremely comfortable, Lady Cardew," said Bannister softly; and he drew forward a big lounge chair, setting it beside a standard lamp.

She accepted dumbly, and tried to keep her eyes from his face. Curiosity, fear, hauteur, anger, all in turn flashed from her eyes; and Mabel, sitting by Jack's side at the other end of the room, turning over a pile of music for the benefit of a stout lady with vocal accomplishments who was going to the piano, looked across and saw the furtive glances passing between her father and her friend. They mystified and at the same time frightened her; for she guessed that the faint upon the stairs was due in some way to the meeting with her father. Lady Hester must have had some previous knowledge of him—and was it to his credit?

Bannister had carefully put Lady Hester's chair under the light that he might talk to her and look at her well—she was so changed; and the alteration made on a beautiful woman by the passage of years is always interesting—if it is not painful. The amazing novelty of it grips the attention. The woman is the same, yet not the same. The old ego is behind, but the outer shell breathes a different atmosphere. The eyes—those fine eyes!—moved in exactly the same way; the lips had the same curve; the cheeks were a little fuller, yet so slightly altered as to defy the minutest examination. The hair was differently dressed; the superb neck and shoulders were fuller, giving a new dignity to the torso, yet the graceful proportions were the same. The modern fashion in hair dressing had perhaps made

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the greatest change of all in the woman of twenty years ago. Dignity of design had taken the place of girlish curls; the amazing, beautiful, and unusual color was the same, and the complexion retained the old peach-like bloom, except for the heightened pallor of to-night, which he knew to be unusual.

Bannister's attempted *tête-à-tête* with Lady Hester was interrupted, and again he became the centre of a group. The men begged him to tell some more stories; and called the women to listen; but he begged to be excused, and protested that it might jar on Lady Hester. If she could have found it in her heart at that moment to thank him, she would have been grateful.

The stout lady having settled at the piano, with Jack on duty by her side Mabel was free to drop back into the cushions of the lounge and watch the issue of the tragedy.

So far the girl had been able to evade any direct questioning by Jack, who was burning with curiosity and eager for enlightenment. She had avoided sitting out with him in the hall, and carefully kept within earshot of the other guests. When he muttered sulkily about her want of feeling, she whispered that they must be more distant and avoid the watchful eyes of Aunt Caroline.

He was incensed at his aunt's manner of glaring at Mabel when they first met, as though she were a reptile, and he had an uncomfortable suspicion that she might have guessed her to be the lady discovered at his chambers. That, of course, would account for a good deal; yes, it was wiser to disarm her suspicion.

All her interest was now concentrated upon Mr. Bannister. Mabel had noticed this at dinner, and strained her ears to catch a little of her father's conversation

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with the old lady, but not a word had she heard, although she saw that Mr. Crick was under observation, and that Miss Cardew got up from the dinner table looking flurried and uneasy.

Finding it impossible to talk privately to his wife, Bannister joined the party who were at the other end of the room ostensibly listening to the lady at the piano; but his eyes were greedily devouring his wife, the new and more wonderful Hester. Mabel watched him in fascinated amazement. She had never seen him look like that at any woman, although she had seen many a woman try to win his approval. As he gazed at his wife's familiar, yet unfamiliar, charms, his color came and went, and his eyes glittered with an exultation that was unusual, disconcerting, and terrible to the woman.

A constraint fell upon the company after the arrival of Lady Hester. No one seemed quite at ease; conversation flickered and died, and at times there was a sudden hush in the great drawing room that was depressing.

Lady Hester felt it, and made a supreme effort, calling all her natural instincts as hostess and mistress of the house into play. But her faculties seemed numb and unresponsive. Yet nothing was really changed. All that was here was hers—except Dick Gordon. He was an interloper, an outlaw, a vulture.

He too had changed with the passing of years, but not for the better. His eye was keener, his cheeks thinner, his beard with the foreign point a novelty that offended. He looked harder, crueller, and more sinister. And, after all, he was as much in her power as she in his. She was no longer the impressionable, easily cowed, easily swayed girl of twenty years ago. Now was the time for her to show what she had learned by

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suffering, and let Dick Gordon see that she had developed character and courage, and a recklessness almost as daring as his own.

"I'm really feeling much better, and you're all so absurdly quiet," she cried, jumping up. "You're all thinking about me instead of amusing yourselves. Mr. Crick, you don't know Mrs. Harkaway, do you? I ought to have introduced you. Come over here. And Mrs. Bennett, you sing, don't you? That duet I heard at your house was charming. Won't you sing it now with Mr. Bennett?"

Mrs. Bennett explained that it was only a frivolous little thing. A cold had robbed her of her voice. Wouldn't somebody else step into the breach? Didn't Mr. Bannister sing? She was quite sure that he did—he looked like it.

Mr. Bannister smilingly disclaimed any talent in that particular direction, and said that he expected his daughter to take on her shoulders the burden of her father's share of the entertaining.

"Miss Bannister sings," exclaimed two or three people at once.

Jack, who had never heard Mabel sing, jumped at the idea. It was a novelty, and he was quite excited about it. Mabel gulped down an inclination to sob. How could she sing to-night, with Jack there—ruined, and Lady Hester shaking with terror at the sight of her father—and the Bishop blissfully unconscious that anything was amiss? The old gentleman was carrying on a rather heated argument in whispers with the archdeacon over Clause IV. of the Education Bill. To focus attention upon herself was the last thing she desired. But Jack drew her forward playfully, determined to dispel the clouds somehow.

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Lady Hester had forgotten Mabel's existence in these dazed moments of panic and mental confusion. She forced herself to attend, and smiled a mechanical smile.

His daughter!

This was the girl—the Mabel that she had taken to her heart of late in a way quite unusual with her, the girl whose voice and face had always seemed familiar as half-forgotten music—Dick Gordon's daughter. After all, maternity must be a divine instinct akin to inspiration.

Her daughter! Her own child!

The girl seated herself at the piano, and ran her trembling fingers over the keys. The music brought back a little courage. She began in a quavering voice an old Italian convent song which few of those present could understand, except the Bishop and Bannister. The former applauded vigorously at the end, and, turning to his wife, with beaming countenance exclaimed—

"Hester, for a few moments, when she began, I could have sworn it was your voice. How is it we never knew that she sang?"

"Yes, Lady Hester sings too, and we had forgotten it," cried Mrs. Bennett, who was very eager to be asked again. "Ah! how well I remember your singing in the anthem solo at St. Saviour's ever so many years ago. Dear old Saviour's! where you were married, too, wasn't it?"

Dick Gordon coughed behind his handkerchief, and reddened to the eyes. He was laughing. It roused the demon of resourcefulness in Hester, and her fear dropped away. She could have struck him. Her voice rang cold as steel and her eyes flashed as she demanded—

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"What amuses you, Mr. Bannister?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing," he replied, and darted an answering glance to her challenge. "The name of St. Saviour's recalled to my mind an old friend of my youth, a curate, a sad dog in his day. I remember his going to take duty at St. Saviour's, and he wanted me to come too. I'm sorry now I didn't. A queer fellow, but never intended for the church. He had a weakness for elopements"—Aunt Caroline choked—"he was in love at least once a week, and always drowned his disappointments in strong liquor. A black sheep. He went utterly to the dogs; but he was an amusing fellow."

The Bishop coughed and looked uncomfortable, and darted a glance at Jack, who looked another way.

"He fell on bad days at last and died miserably, I heard. Did you ever know of such a person, Lady Hester, while you were at—I forget the name of the church?"

"St. Saviour's," murmured the wretched woman. "I never heard of any such person."

"I once met a curate of that name," observed Aunt Caroline coldly, and with wonderful self-possession. "He was a friend of that Dick Gordon of whom we were speaking at dinner."

At the name of Dick Gordon Lady Hester gave a great choke and a gulp that was something between a scream and a sob. She clutched at her full, white throat.

"Hester, my dear Hester! You're really not well. You shouldn't have come down," cried the Bishop, running to her. "Caroline, my dear, take her upstairs."

Everybody crowded round full of sympathy, and

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Bannister glared savagely at Aunt Caroline. But Lady Hester would not give in. She protested that she would be better presently. And Aunt Caroline was satisfied that she had probed a certain distance into the mystery. Hester had known Dick Gordon, and Crick's assertions were not far wrong after all.

Lady Hester's mental suffering was as plain to Mabel as if interpreted by spoken words. She saw that her father was stabbing her friend with invisible darts. While the others imagined that mere physical weakness was the trouble, she knew that the woman was being cruelly broken. She stepped quickly up to her father, and, going close to him, flashed a look into his eyes that he had never seen there before.

"Why did you do it? You're a coward! You—you——"

"Tut-tut, be quiet, child. Don't make a fool of yourself," he whispered between his grinding teeth. He looked as though he could have struck her; but Jack came towards them, and his features were instantly wreathed in smiles.

"Mabel, my darling," he purred, "I'm sure Jack would like to talk to you. He hasn't had five minutes alone with you since we came down. Go over there and amuse him. I have much to say to the Bishop."

Jack was only too glad to get his wife into a corner, and, taking advantage of the interest aroused by Lady Hester, he tackled her seriously.

"You haven't written to me, Mabel."

"I had no time. Everything was so hurried."

"And I want to know what you meant by talking of good-bye."

"I can't explain now—not here," she replied almost absently, watching Lady Hester and her father all the time.

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"Never mind my mother, attend to me, little girl. I want to know why——"

"Ah, she's laughing now. She must be feeling better."

"Oh, yes, your father is taking her in hand. He'll amuse her and bring her round. It was only a little faintness. She'll be all right after a night's rest. You needn't be so alarmed. You look as though you thought your father would eat her."

It was true; the girl's eyes watched the pair as if fascinated. She saw her father seat himself at his hostess's side and talk commonplaces; and Lady Hester forced an artificial laugh, and kept up the farce until the interest which had been concentrated upon her was withdrawn; then with a stealthy glance to left and right to be sure that she was unobserved, she talked swiftly and earnestly.

"Mabel, attend to me. Have you lost all interest in my society? Have you forgotten?" whispered Jack petulantly.

"No, Jack, but don't talk to me just now, not to-night."

"Oh, if you are bored or annoyed with me——"

"I'm neither, Jack, dearest. I've much to say to you that can't be said with all these people near. And I can't say it—just yet. I must have time."

"I'll come to you to-night after they are all gone and the others are in bed; then we can talk in privacy."

"To-night—here? Oh no, no, I've changed my room. It would be madness."

"Nonsense. I can get to your room all right. And who is to know? They'll be asleep by midnight."

"No, not here. You terrify me."

"Well, I seem to have become a regular bogey of a

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husband already," he growled, tugging at his mustache. "What do you think I came down for but to see you?"

Very much the same sort of conversation was in progress on the other side of the room, where Lady Hester was masking her excitement by a pretence of showing Bannister a Japanese mirror and talking *sotto voce*.

"I must see you—I must talk to you alone," she whispered. "You must go away at once."

"Nonsense," he replied, "I am coming down to buy Dingle Hall and live near you."

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"I shall. There are the young people to consider—my daughter."

"Yours?"

There was a world of query in her voice.

"Yes, mine—*and yours*," he whispered, with a cynical smile.

"I knew it—I guessed it—I felt it. Oh, Mabel!"

She rose with an impulsive movement, and walked swiftly across to Mabel, who rose quickly, just in time to catch her sobbing mother in her arms.

"I knew it—I knew it! She ought not to have come down," cried the Bishop helplessly. "Caroline! Caroline!"

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CHAPTER XIV

A YOUNG wife in her night dress praying beside her bed. The prayer a jumble of appeals, questions, lamentations, and sobs.

The room was a severe, old-fashioned one with a four-poster, and red curtains hanging from a massive canopy which reached to the low ceiling. On the dressing table candles burned, one on either side of the large oval mirror. The girl's pretty clothes were strewn about in confusion, showing that she had undressed hastily with her mind on other things. Her hair was tumbling over her eyes, and gathered in two long plaits, one on either shoulder—as Jack loved to see them. She looked more girlish than in her modish satin gown earlier in the evening. Her eyes were dry; but her throat was thick with sobs that seemed to be choking her. Her soft white hands were clenched upon the pink coverlet, twining and working in harmony with the twisting of her troubled brain.

She had locked the door, and the key was on the bed. Jack had refused to listen to her denial, and was coming for the explanation which she could not give. He was coming to his wife to look into happy, bright eyes, and hear her confess that she was once more happy in his love.

To risk detection thus was reckless; it was foolish; but it was an enterprise to Jack's taste. Stolen kisses were ever sweetest, and he was determined that the clouds which had risen between them should be speedily scattered by satisfactory explanations. His curios-

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ity to know the reason for her change of attitude was stronger than his discretion. He would not be guided by his wise little wife.

"I shan't let him in. O God, help me!—guide me—give me courage to go where I can never see him more," she prayed. "Don't let me ruin him and be a drag upon him all his life till he grows to hate me. He knows I love him—he will never doubt that. And he will understand—he must understand—that it was for his good I am doing this. My father is a bad man—a cruel man. He is only using me for his own ends. He is weaving a web about this house. O God, you can understand. Guide me, help me, show me where to go! I am so very much alone."

There was a rustle on the corridor outside. Her heart stood still; her breath strangled in her throat, and she could not extinguish the second candle. She looked round in panic.

A regular knocking at her door, soft and steady, yet dangerously loud. She made a sound in moving towards the door, and knocked over a scent bottle. The person outside evidently heard.

"Mabel, I'm coming in—may I?"

It was Lady Hester. The voice was husky and hardly recognizable. Mabel tried to answer, but the words choked her. She wanted to temporize and make an excuse; but ere she could articulate the door opened, and Lady Hester, in a long cream dressing gown, and with her hair untouched since retiring to rest, entered and closed the door after her. The mother could not keep away from her child.

"Mabel, my dear," she cried, extending her arms with strange tenderness; "Mabel, I wanted to see you before I went to sleep."

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The girl came to her obediently. There was a strange, illuminating, beatific expression in those big, tearless eyes. They seemed to be telling her something.

Lady Hester folded her daughter to her heart and dropped her head upon her shoulder. She kissed the soft, girlish cheek, and passed her hands over the turbulent hair. Then she drew away and stood with her back to the candle, in order that the light might fall on Mabel's face and reveal the eyes that had always seemed to be saying something to her that she could not understand.

"My child—my child!" she murmured, and kissed her again, holding her tight. Then the flood gates opened—tears at last.

Still holding the girl from her at arm's length and looking into her face, she spoke with more calmness.

"You are going to marry Jack, Mabel. That's what I came to see you about. The Bishop seems to have thought out and arranged everything—in his own mind—in rather a hurried way. I don't want you to think me unkind, or mysterious, but—but I want you to put it off for a little while. A nice, long engagement, so that all things may be straightened out."

"I don't think I am going to marry Jack at all," said Mabel quietly.

"No? You have quarrelled, then?" asked Lady Hester, with very little show of surprise, and striving in vain to repress the excitement in her voice.

"You see, when we were engaged I didn't know—whom I was."

"Then you know now. He has told you?"

"Ah, then I *am* right," sobbed Mabel. "You, too, know the kind of man my father is. He is not fit to be

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in this house. I am not fit to be here. Jack must never be ruined by me."

"So the cross is bearing you down too," said Lady Hester impressively. "What has he told you?" This anxiously, and with her eyes averted.

"He has told me nothing. I've guessed how he lives, how he must always live. Who I am, and whether I have any right to the name I bear, I don't know. Sometimes I hope that I may not be his child at all."

"Would to God you were not, Mabel! Oh, my darling, you are——"

The confession would not come. The agonized mother flung her arms about the girl and held her to her breast again, twining her arms tightly and impulsively about her, but she could not speak the amazing words.

Mabel broke away at last, sobbing as badly as Lady Hester.

"You knew him. You must have known him before to-night," faltered the girl. "Tell me, what do you know about him? You told me about a man once, a villain who took you into strange company and showed you another side of life to that you were used to. Did you ever meet my father in those days? Birds of a feather flock together, they say. Oh, it is horrible! Yet he seems to have always known decent people and to have visited nice houses. Oh, tell me he isn't what I think he is. I know that men are often gamblers and unscrupulous—I've heard about it often—and some women always cheat at bridge—but he isn't—he isn't——"

"Yes he is, Mabel; he is a thief!" cried the other bitterly. "I see you have found him out. At least, that is what he was when—when I met him."

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"Oh—oh! I shall kill myself," sobbed the wretched girl. "I won't know him. I won't live with him. I won't ever touch him. He is vile, although he is my father. If I haven't courage enough to kill myself I—I shall kill him. I am quite alone—I've got nobody. It doesn't matter what I do or what becomes of me."

"Yes, you have some one, Mabel. You have me."

"Oh, you can't know me," cried the girl hysterically, drawing away. "I'm not fit to sit at your table. The Bishop, if he knew, would be horrified. Oh, how shabbily I am treating him by letting him imagine my father is a gentleman, and an equal! Oh, Lady Hester, Lady Hester, he has only come down here to steal. I know it. I overheard it."

"To steal—here!"

"Yes, and he's brought that man Voss with him."

"Voss? Who is Voss? The name seems familiar."

"He's his servant, or pretends to be. But he's quite familiar with him when they're alone, although father insults him all the time. They're planning something dreadful, I know they are. They want your emeralds."

"Oh, the emeralds are in a safe, dear," laughed Lady Hester mirthlessly. Again she drew the unhappy girl to her, and looked wonderingly into her eyes, ready to unburden her heart and make the great confession which must come sooner or later. The words would not shape themselves. Her emotions were too overpowering—she grew dizzy again. The cords of her brain seemed to be snapping. She opened her arms dumbly, and Mabel, seeing the pain in her face, came to her embrace tenderly and comforted her.

They stood thus for a few moments, the elder woman weeping quietly on the younger's shoulder, making but

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one shadow against the candle light. They forgot all else but their troubles.

They did not hear the door softly open behind them, but they heard it close. The next moment Jack's voice cried exultantly—

"Ah, I've got here, you see, little girl." He took a bound forward, and the women jumped apart.

"Jack!" gasped Mabel.

Her cry was echoed by Lady Hester.

"Jack?—here?"

"Good Lord—mother!" gasped Jack, falling back breathlessly and shamefaced. Then he cursed beneath his breath, while Lady Hester stood gazing at him in astonishment. Mabel hurried into a dressing gown, timid and ashamed.

Jack saw that he was caught. He ground his teeth and set his jaws obstinately; then rammed his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown, and stood awaiting the inevitable.

"Jack, you here at this time of night? What do you mean? Why have you come?"

Lady Hester looked from one to the other; but Mabel was only crying miserably, and playing with the lace of her dressing gown.

"We're caught, that's all," growled Jack defiantly. "Mabel, you might have told me you expected visitors, or have you arranged this as a surprise for me? Does mother know?"

"She knows no more than she has seen, Jack. I've told her nothing, and what she thinks I don't care. As I am never going to marry you, Jack, it doesn't matter what I do, or what Lady Hester knows."

Jack stared uncomprehendingly.

"She has discovered our secret," he muttered awkwardly.

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"Secret—secret?" cried Lady Hester despairingly, flinging up her hands.

"We're married," he added.

"Oh, fools, fools! why couldn't you wait? You deceived me—both of you."

"Yes, we're married, that's the long and short of it," growled Jack, diving his hands deeper into his pockets, and striding up and down as though he were bored at this intrusion of Lady Hester into his domestic affairs.

"Married!" echoed Lady Hester. "Secretly?"

'Yes, married," he snapped. "Married. And what of it?" He jerked out his reply in a temper, and glared at his stepmother. "We've been married ever so long."

"Oh, Jack, Jack, you needn't have told her!" moaned Mabel, sinking into a chair.

"Needn't have told! I'm not going to have people thinking idiotic things about you and me. It's got to be kept quiet. But what does it matter now? Father has agreed to everything; so it hurts nobody."

"Fools! fools!" cried Lady Hester, flinging up her hands again, and making for the door. "Your secret is safe with me—but God help you!"

With a sob she escaped, leaving Jack more nettled than ever, and utterly mystified.

Still dumb, he stared at his wife with as much dignity as he could command in a dressing gown and slippers, angry and irritated; angry at being caught out by Lady Hester, irritated because he was vaguely conscious that there was mystery in progress, something outside his ken. He was temperamentally very like his father, and hated anything that was not plain sailing.

Mabel had dropped into a chair, where she sat huddled up with her hands clenched on her knees, the very picture of weary despair. He waited for her to speak

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"YES, MARRIED," HE SNAPPED. "MARRIED."

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now that Lady Hester had left them. It was only natural and proper that his wife should give him an explanation of the extraordinary interview which he had interrupted. But she remained silent, troubled, and self-engrossed. She was still overpowered and swayed by the emotions that stirred her when she talked to Lady Hester about her father; and her brain was benumbed; the present, with its hideous complications, filled her horizon. What mattered the future? All her bold resolves were rendered useless now Lady Hester knew of her marriage. Renunciation was of no avail. Jack naturally would demand an explanation, and she could give none—without telling all the hideous truth about her father and her own mysterious origin.

One fact alone stood out from the bewildering tangle. It was still impossible for them to face the world together as husband and wife.

It was awful to be the veriest plaything of circumstances. How could Jack hold up his head if he knew he had a thief for a father-in-law, and that his own father's cherished heirlooms were at that moment in jeopardy? What would he think of her as the decoy and cat's-paw of a rascal who had used her to get into the Palace solely for the purpose of robbery?

Scalding tears forced themselves from under her burning eyelids, and as they fell upon her clenched hands she looked down at them, half expecting to see them blister the white flesh. Surely no girl had ever endured such torture as hers.

"Well, Mabel, perhaps you will explain why I find Lady Hester here, and why you allow me to get caught like this." Jack's voice was hard and cold.

"You should never have come—you should never have come!" she moaned, wringing her hands.

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"And while we are on the explanation tack, perhaps you'll also give the reason for your extraordinary behavior in town, where you talked about good-bye forever, and all that sort of thing. Aunt Caroline caught us then, and now it's Lady Hester. What's the meaning of it?"

"Lady Hester took me by surprise. I couldn't send her away. I—I forgot you were coming for the moment.

"Forgot, eh?" exclaimed Jack loftily. "One would thing we had been married six months."

"Jack, we ought not to have married at all. We ought not to have deceived Lady Hester."

"Look here, Mabel, is all this emotion and agitation due to what you overheard of Aunt Caroline's conversation in the Temple about Beatrice Carew? Why have you changed so utterly?"

"There is no change in me, Jack. The change is in other people. Oh—don't ask me—don't drive me crazy!" she exclaimed, starting up and clasping her throbbing temples.

The piteous trouble in her eyes moved him in spite of his anger. "Mabel, my darling, you're not yourself at all. You're not my sweet little wife who fished with me at Weybury, and planned out a rosy future, and——"

"No, I'm not, Jack—I'm not."

Further explanations were cut short by a step outside, and a knocking at the door. Lady Hester had returned. Jack opened the door, and she beckoned to him to come outside.

"Your father, Jack. He has heard that you're going up to town the first thing in the morning, and as he won't see you then, he wants to talk to you to-night and is going to your room. He may be there before

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you. Quick! You must not let him suspect anything."

With one troubled look at Mabel, Jack fled. Lady Hester, after watching him go, went in to comfort her daughter.

Her daughter!

She put her arms about her, lovingly and tenderly. There was no anger now, only a great pity; and she folded her to her heart, murmuring, "My poor child—my poor child! This comes of listening to a man in love."

She wept with her, alternately whispering words of comfort and words of gentle condemnation until she was compelled to hurry away in order to avoid inquiry from the Bishop.

Mabel locked herself in, and paced the room till the candles burned low in their sockets, groping blindly in the maze of doubt and difficulty, vainly seeking an outlet that promised some possibility of sane, rational conduct. She was hemmed in on every side. The cords of love were tugging at her heart. Matrimony chained her to Jack, and filial ties hedged her round. She was tethered hand and foot! There seemed to be only one way out—to die.

That was too wild and irrational to appeal to her level-headed instincts. Youth was hot within her; life was still precious; and she had always been accustomed to put her head on her pillow at night with a pleasant consciousness that the morning would dawn fair and bright with another day full of possibilities of joy and health. To contemplate self-extinction by violence was repugnant and horrible.

Jack, on his way to his room, hurried blindly along the dark corridor to the west wing, and, after going a few yards, bumped into some one coming in the opposite direction—a man.

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It was Voss. But to Jack he was a stranger, or nearly so.

"Who the—dickens are you?"

"I'm Mr. Bannister's man, sir."

"What are you doing down here at this hour of the night?"

"Just getting some water for Mr. Bannister, sir. I couldn't find the bath room for the hot water, sir. Would you be so kind as to direct me?"

"There's a bath room in the other wing, three yards away from your master's room. Don't be an idiot. Look about you when the lights are up, and don't come prowling about the house like this."

"I'm very sorry, sir. I'd no idea I had wandered so far. I'm much obliged to you, sir. I'll find the other bath room."

Jack hurried on, for he heard the Bishop's door opening, and his father's voice telling Lady Hester not to wait up for him, as he might be a long time.

What the Bishop had to say to his son was not interesting. It bored Jack unutterably. It was a well-meant, paternal homily on marriage, and the duties of marriage, its responsibilities and ideals. It was almost a sermon. The old gentleman was careful to refrain from revealing anything he had learned through Aunt Caroline of the lady hidden in the Temple; but much of the Bishop's talk about chivalry and discretion and the fair name of her who was to be his wife was prompted by Aunt Caroline's revelations.

Jack, being a married man, and a worried one at that, naturally took little interest in a private sermon from his parent concerning the proper frame of mind in which to approach the altar. The Bishop sat on the end of his son's bed in a manner that was meant to be

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genial, fatherly, and confidential; and if Jack had opened his heart to his natural mentor, he might have sprung upon the old gentleman the great secret which was worrying him exceedingly. He had no idea that keeping up the sham of bachelorhood after the honeymoon was over would be such a strain.

The most interesting part of the discourse came at the end, when the Bishop announced that, in view of Mr. Bannister's generous settlement upon his daughter, he (the Bishop) could do no less than double Jack's present allowance, to prevent him being too much dependent on his wife.

The small hours were well advanced when the Bishop returned to his room. All the up-stairs lights were extinguished, and he groped his way as best he could, going softly for fear of disturbing his wife. He stopped outside her door for an instant and listened, because he fancied he heard a movement within. She was evidently not yet asleep, for the light showed through the keyhole of the door; or she might have fallen asleep and have left the candle burning. He was about to knock and turn the handle when a stifled sound, like a sob, disturbed the stillness—and the next instant the candle went out.

"I'd better not disturb her. Poor Hester! One of her nervous attacks; her fall must have shaken her badly."

He passed on, and, like Jack, tumbled on some one in the darkness. "Who is it?" he murmured.

"It is only me, sir, Mr. Bannister's man. I was going to get him some hot water. There's none in the other bath-room."

"Well, my man, go quietly. Another time light the gas at the end of the corridor before you try to find your way in a strange house."

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"Yes, my lord—certainly, my lord. But I didn't care to take the liberty for fear I should disturb anybody."

A few minutes after the Bishop had begun to undress, he heard Voss turning on the tap in the bathroom, making a deal of unnecessary noise. He almost went out to rate him soundly for daring to run the risk of disturbing her ladyship by such carelessness; and he voted Mr. Bannister's man a stupid idiot.

Voss carried an empty can to his master's room, and let himself in. Banninster was not yet in bed. He was lounging at his ease on a couch reading—he was always late to bed. He looked up when Voss entered, showing irritation.

"Sorry," murmured Voss, "but I was obliged to come. I ran into the Bishop, and told him a yarn about hot water. Everybody seems to be prowling about the corridors to-night; first her ladyship, then Mr. Jack, and then the Bishop."

"Where have you been?" asked Bannister, as he closed his book and stretched his arms languidly with a yawn.

"Been prospecting."

"There's no need, you fool. I told you so."

"But we must know the ground."

"You'll do as I tell you. I say it is unnecessary."

"I've counted the windows from outside. It's the third from the end. The safe must be in the wall, and the wall quite a yard thick."

"You needn't concern yourself with useless calculations. It won't be done that way. There are other means of opening safes than those you would employ, my good Voss."

The fellow tidied up the bedroom in the mechanical

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way of a servant. He was a strange combination of servility, usefulness, and villainy.

"Emeralds ain't easy," he murmured thoughtfully as he folded a towel. "They ain't like diamonds, where one's just like another. Emeralds——"

"Silence!" hissed Bannister, blazing out at him with unusual energy. "Don't let me hear you mention the word within four walls. You're growing more and more careless. I'm here to arrange the marriage of my daughter to the Bishop's son; that is enough for the present. Have you talked to the other servants?"

"Yes, I've gassed about the way we live in town, and money no object, and all that sort of thing; and what a lucky boy Master Jack Lawyer is to marry an heiress."

"And what do they say?"

"That Aunt Caroline—that is, Miss Cardew—ain't taking to it at all kind; and nothing goes right in this house if she don't cotton to it. She means to make trouble, and talks as though the girl was only down here on appro', so to speak."

"I think I've put a check upon Aunt Caroline." Bannister smiled and stroked his beard, and dropped his eye-glass, and surveyed himself pleasantly in the mirror.

"Do I look old, Voss?"

"Old—what do you mean?"

"Do you think I've changed much in twenty years?"

"No, not since I've known you."

"Ah, I wear very well. Do you think I've improved?" He ran his fingers lovingly through his hair.

"Matter of taste," observed Voss, who rather wondered at the strange question. He knew from old association that it was always necessary to wait till his master arrived at the point, and not to forestall him.

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