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THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT

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THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT

By

J. S. FLETCHER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

LEE THAYER

BALTIMORE
THE NORMAN, REMINGTON COMPANY
1923

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INTRODUCTION

At this late date, Mr. Fletcher hardly needs an introduction to any English speaking country. Here, in America, we already have many of his entertaining mystery stories, of which, perhaps, this volume is the best.

His stories of English rural life are not so well known to us, but are well worth reading. Their charm of description and character study is not lacking in his mystery stories, which will always be found to have much to recommend them besides their thrills and intricacies.

To those of us who love to read (and write) these tales of plot and counterplot, there is no greater pleasure than to find one which not only "keeps us on our toes" from start to finish, but one which is written in clear, good English, vitalizing both narrative and description.

With this modest tribute of one fellow-craftsman to another, I make my bow, and present for your delectation, ladies and gentlemen—

MR. J. S. FLETCHER

in

THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT.

LEE THAYER.

Chatham, New Jersey,
July 23, 1923.

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CHAPTER I

THE TWO O'CLOCK CALL

FOR once in a way something had gone wrong with Hextall's latch-key—or with the latch into which he was endeavoring to insert it. A young man of infinite and practised patience, he spent five minutes in trying to make things right; it was already two o'clock in the morning and he had no wish to ring the bell and wake his household. And as he stood there on the steps of his house, occasionally glancing right and left along the lights and shadows of Wimpole Street, it struck him as a queer thing that this should happen on the first night out that he had allowed himself for the past six months. Some folk might say that inability to fit a key into a latch was a not unusual result of a night out, but no one who knew Hextall would have connected this difficulty with his amusements. His relaxation, in fact, had taken the form of a visit to the annual dinner of a learned society to which he belonged; that over, he had gone home for a pipe and a chat with an old fellow-student, and had sat up discussing a certain new theory until the small hours. He was now very tired, and very sleepy, and he felt inclined to curse the patentee of that particular latch—an American affair which had only recently been fitted to the door. When a neighbouring church clock struck two he gave

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the attempts up and rang the bell, and at that moment a man came running, panting, round the corner.

Hextall's was a corner house, and at the corner itself stood a gas-lamp. In its yellow light Hextall looked curiously at the man who ran and panted. He was a big man, in evening dress; his face was very large, and very fat, and at that instant it shone white, as if from fear or emotion. The man wore no hat; on his high, bald forehead Hextall saw great beads of perspiration gathering and rolling. Unconsciously, the runner lifted a plump hand and wiped them away, muttering to himself as he did so. Then he suddenly caught sight of Hextall, half hidden in the shadow of his door, and he pulled up with a quick, shaking jerk of his body. He glanced sharply at Hextall's tall figure, gave an equally quick glance at the house, and approached. And Hextall, who had a trick of shrewd observation, set him down as a butler or confidential valet; the signs of it were written all over his big, flabby face.

"Beg your pardon, sir," gasped the man. "Are you a doctor?"

"I am," answered Hextall.

"Can you come with me, sir?—close by. I—I was running for a doctor. At once, if you please, sir!"

"Were you going for any particular doctor?—have you a doctor whom you usually call in?" asked Hextall.

"No, sir—never had occasion before now," replied the man. "Glad if you'd come back with me, sir, at

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once. It's just round the corner—one of the new flats in Queen Anne Street—Mr. Tress's, sir."

"I'm coming—as soon as my servants open the door," said Hextall, quietly. "In the meantime, what's the matter?"

The man glanced nervously up and down the deserted street, as if he feared to even whisper to its lights and shadows. He wiped his forehead again as he drew nearer to the young doctor.

"Accident, sir—shooting—revolver went off," he replied, in low tones. "And—and it's a lady."

"A lady?" replied Hextall.

"Mr. Tress's sister, sir. A young lady."

The door opened just then, and Hextall motioned the man to follow him inside. He went straight along the hall to his surgery, turned on a light, and, picking up a bag which was kept ready in case of emergencies, opened it, and glanced at its contents. The messenger stood watching him and getting his breath.

"Where is this young lady wounded?" asked Hextall, mechanically.

"I—I think it's in the shoulder, sir—I'm not sure. There or in her arm, sir, anyway," answered the man. "I wasn't present, of course."

"Who's with her?" demanded Hextall.

"There's her brother, Mr. Tress, sir," replied the other, a little confusedly. "And—and some other gentleman."

"No woman?"

"No woman, sir."

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Hextall picked up the bag, into which he had placed some extra necessities.

"Oh, well!—we can get a nurse within five minutes," he said. "Come along, then."

The man followed him out of the house with a sigh of obvious relief, and once in the quiet street again wiped his forehead.

"Upset me, sir," he said, apologetically. "A shock, sir!"

"You'd better tell me how it came about," remarked Hextall. "I dare say you're pretty well aware that you can tell a medical man anything."

"I don't know how it came about, sir," answered the man. "All I know is—it did come about. I haven't been long with Mr. Tress—a few months—and I don't know much about them. You see, he's a very rich young gentleman, with a fine place in Survey—Lynne Court—and a couple of months since he took and furnished this flat. He—well, the truth is, he's gone the pace a bit, sir. And to-night, his sister, Miss Paquita——"

"Paquita?" said Hextall, involuntarily.

"They're half foreigners, sir" said the man. "Half Spanish, I think. She came up from Lynne Court last evening, and said she was going to stop. I don't think Mr. Tress half liked it, but he took her out to dinner and to the theatre, and when they came back, two or three of his friends dropped in—as they often do, late at night. Miss Paquita, she went to bed—half-past twelve that was: I had to stop up, of course. And I was dozing, just before two o'clock,

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in my pantry, when I heard a shot. Then Mr. Kesteven—that's Mr. Tress's great friend, sir, came to me, and said there'd been an accident, and Miss Tress had shot herself, and sent me for a doctor."

"Shot herself, eh?" said Hextall.

"So he said, sir—but not dangerously. Here we are, sir."

He had led Hextall round the corner to a block of newly-erected flats, and he now hurried him past a night-porter, with a meaning look at that functionary, and up one flight of stairs to a door at which he paused for a moment. He gave his companion an informing glance.

"They're all a bit—you know, sir," he said. "The gentleman, I mean—they'd all been taking a fair lot. Except Mr. Kesteven. He's never like that. But this may have sobered them."

Hextall nodded silently, and followed his guide into a dimly-lighted, richly-furnished entrance hall, in the oak panelling of which several doors were set. The man threw one of them, at that moment a little ajar, wide open, and the doctor stepped into a blaze of light and upon a scene which at any other time would have impressed him by its semi-theatrical atmosphere. Indeed, if a curtain had been suddenly rolled up before his eyes to reveal what he saw, he would have said that this was a scene set for the stage. Except, that is, for one difference—his keen, professional eye immediately caught sight of red blood trinkling over warm, white flesh.

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He stood for a second staring at what he confronted: behind him, his guide muttered low words of consternation. Between them and the rest of the room, a finely proportioned, handsomely decorated and furnished apartment, half lighted by the glow of tinted lamps, stood a girl, who gripped the side of a tall cabinet with one hand, and in the other held a revolver in an unpleasantly threatening fashion.

She was apparently eighteen or twenty years of age, very beautiful in a dazzling, un-English fashion, and at that moment very striking because of her pallor, which was accentuated by her dark hair, piled in heavy masses about a graceful head. Somewhat above the middle height, slender and lithe of figure, she was in evening dress, and it was from the bare arm which gripped the cabinet that the red blood was trickling. As Hextall entered she flashed a quick glance upon him from a pair of dark eyes just then blazing with anger; it swept him over in a second, and darted back to four men who sat or stood on the other side of the room, behind a green-covered table on which lay certain cards and implements which showed that somebody had suddenly interrupted the playing of a well-known game of chance.

Hextall's quick eyes followed the girl's. Immediately before her, standing by the card-table, watching her every movement, stood a tall, clean-shaven, keen-faced man, alert, ready, whose attention visibly relaxed as Hextall entered. He was a man of good looks, obviously astute and clever, and as he was just as obviously sober, and in very full possession of his

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wits, Hextall took him to be the Mr. Kesteven of whom the valet had spoken. His eye travelled past him to the hearth, where a younger man, whom from the resemblance between them Hextall at once set down as the girl's brother, sat sprawling in an easychair, his legs thrust stiffly out before him, his hands plunged deeply in his trousers pockets. His chin was sunk on his breast; his mouth gaped a little; his eyes, heavy and dull, were fixed on the girl as if the muddled brain behind them was endeavouring to realize and comprehend what was taking place. A half-burned cigar lay on the rug at this young man's feet; on his broad, shining shirt-front there were wine stains. And in the silence which hung all over the room he suddenly closed his eyes and began to snore.

There were two other occupants of the room—youngish men in evening dress who stood in the background, close together, whispering. Hextall set them down at once as foreigners, though he was uncertain of their nationality. One was evidently expostulating or persuading; the other was as obviously listening with an ill grace. He was a dark-skinned, sinister-eyed fellow this, and he glared over his shoulder at the girl as if he were labouring under some injury. And Hextall realized that it was this man whom the girl was chiefly watching.

All this was seen by the doctor and the valet within a second of their entering the room. Hextall sized up the situation in a glance. Without hesita-

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tion he walked straight to the girl and held out his hand.

"Give me that revolver, and then let me see your wound," he said, peremptorily.

Paquita Tress stared at this sudden cold-voiced command. For an instant she looked Hextall up and down; then a frown of annoyance settled between her eyebrows, and she shifted her position a little.

"Not until those men hand back the money they have got out of my brother!" she answered determinedly. "That man across there, particularly—he's a cheat!"

The tall man leaning against the table turned his head and said something in a murmer to the man who was scowling in the rear. Then he stepped forward, smiling a little.

"There has been a slight—slight contretemps," he said, deprecatingly, as he nodded to Hextall. "Miss Tress got the idea that unfair play was taking place between her brother and his guests, and she interfered, I am sorry to say, with threats of violence. For her own sake, I endeavored to take her revolver from her, and in the struggle it went off, and I'm afraid she has a wound."

"And the revolver, too," said the girl, with a defiant laugh. "And I'll keep my word! Don't pay any attention to him," she went on, turning for the instant to Hextall, and indicating the tall man with a contemptuous sneer; "he's as bad as the others—worse! That man behind there doesn't go out of here until he puts that money back on the table—I watched him.

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If any of you—any!—dare to touch me again, I'll shoot you dead!"

The tall man looked at the doctor, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned away and moved a step or two towards the men in the background, and Hextall once more approached the girl.

"You had much better take my advice," he said, quietly. "You are doing no good, and your wound may be more serious than you think."

"I know all about my wound," she retorted. "I've got a bullet in my shoulder, if you want to know. But what I've said, I've said, and I shall do what I threatened if——Look there!" she suddenly burst out, pointing to the figure in the arm-chair. "Do you think he was fit to play? They've cheated him—all of them!"

The tall man came back, followed by the others—the sinister-eyed one in an evident temper.

"Miss Tress exaggerates," said the tall man, calmly. "There has been no cheating. But for the sake of peace and quietness this gentleman will put down on the table what he won from Mr. Tress. We others won nothing—we lost. Hand it over and let us be done with this," he went on, turning to the angry man. "Be quick!"

The man addressed growled and scowled, but he suddenly dived a hand into his pocket, drew it out full of notes and gold, flung them on the table and turned to the door with a muttered curse. His companion followed him; in silence the valet crossed the

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hall in advance, helped them to their hats and overcoats, and let them out of the flat. A dead silence fell on the room, interrupted by the younger man's snores.

"Now give me that revolver," said Hextall. "Come!"

For answer Paquita Tress suddenly let the revolver drop on the floor, and sank, fainting, after it.

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CHAPTER II

THE DEVIL INCARNATE

NEARLY two hours later, Hextall, followed by a fellow medical man whose services he had requisitioned, emerged from the bedroom in which he had left his patient in charge of two professional nurses, summoned from a neighbouring home, and turned into the apartment to which the valet had conducted him on his arrival. It now looked vastly different. The tinted lamps no longer cast a pink and violet glow over its appointments; the windows were set wide open, and the first gleam of the spring daybreak was mingling with a welcome breath of fresh, morning air. The green card-table and its suggestive furnishings were gone; gone, too, was a certain plentiful array of bottles and decanters which had stood on a sideboard; the whole room appeared to have been cleansed and sweetened of all signs of riotousness, and now looked highly respectable and sober. And at a little table in one of the windows, shaved, bathed, scrupulously groomed, a smart tweed suit on his well-set up figure, a fresh flower in his buttonhole, sat Mr. Kesteven, munching a roll and sipping fragrant coffee. Whatever orgy might have been in process earlier that morning, it was evident to the two doctors that this clear-eyed, steady-handed, alert gentleman had taken no other than a spectator's part in it.

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Kesteven, who was reading a newspaper of the previous evening, jumped up from his easy-chair at sight of the doctors and came forward with the calmness and assurance of a man who was very much at home. He nodded with a mixture of politeness and familiarity which did not particularly recommend itself to Hextall.

"Well, doctor?" he said. "I hope you have left your patient all right? Not a really serious wound, I gather?"

"The injury is not serious," answered Hextall. "But Miss Tress must be kept perfectly quiet until she can be moved home."

"Oh!" said Kesteven, off-handedly. "She'll be quiet enough here. The two nurses, of course, will take entire charge of her."

"She must be kept quiet at night," observed Hextall.

"Of course! You're thinking of—what you saw this morning," said Kesteven, with a smile. "Pity that Miss Tress got so excited about what was really nothing. Her brother was not being cheated—I would have stopped that. Dash of South American blood, you know, doctor!—hot, impulsive, excitable."

"From what I saw of him," remarked Hextall, dryly, "Mr. Tress was not in a condition to——"

"To prevent himself being fleeced, eh?" broke in Kesteven, with a smile that was not far off being a sneer. "All right—all right!—but he'd only just crumpled up when you came—he was quite capable of taking care of himself until then. And I was

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there—and I only drink at meals, and not very much then. Miss Tress laboured under a mistaken impression—and it was her own fault that she got her wound. If I had not tried to take that revolver from her you'd have been fetched to a dead man instead of to a slightly wounded woman."

Hextall made no answer. He was uncertain of Kesteven's status in the place. But Kesteven speedily solved his doubts on that subject.

"I'm sharing this flat with Tress, at present," he went on. "You can rely on me to see that Miss Tress is kept perfectly quiet until she can go down to Lynne Court. Now, how soon will that be?"

"In a few days—if all goes on properly," replied Hextall. "Absolute quiet is the necessary thing."

"This flat shall be kept quiet as a woodland cottage," said Kesteven. "In fact, the patient and her nurses shall have it all to themselves. I'll cart Tress off for a few days. Rely on me. Now, let me offer you some coffee?"

Hextall declined and went away with his colleague. In the hall outside they met the valet, who looked at Hextall with a mute question.

"There is nothing very seriously wrong," said Hextall. "Miss Tress will do very well if she is kept quiet. I have impressed that upon Mr. Kesteven, and he has promised to see to it. I understand that he shares this flat with Mr. Tress."

The valet made a grimance. He glanced at the door of the room in which the doctors had left Kesteven over his coffee.

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"Shares!" he muttered. "Yes—he might put it that way!"

"He guarantees quiet, at any rate," said Hextall. "Can that be depended upon?"

"I've no doubt things will be quiet enough, sir, until Miss Tress goes down to Lynne Court," answered the valet. "Last night would frighten some of them a bit—it'll be talked about amongst them."

"The nurses will stop," continued Hextall. "Is there any one who could come to Miss Tress—any sisters?"

The valet shook his head.

"There's nobody, sir, that I know of but the three of 'em," he answered, in a low voice, again glancing at the closed door behind which sat Kesteven. "Mr. Tress, his sister, and a little brother. I don't think they've any relatives in England—never heard of or seen anybody."

"Well, keep things quiet," said Hextall. "I shall call later in the morning."

"An air of queerness about that," he remarked to his companion when the valet had left them out and they were walking towards Wimpole Street together. "What did you think of the coffee-drinking gentleman?"

"Cool customer," answered the other. "Unusually cool!"

"How would you reckon him up?" asked Hextall.

"I wouldn't reckon him up until I saw young Tress. What's he like? The sister is a beauty."

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"The boy's like the sister—but weak where she's strong. Handsome lad—in his half-Spanish way. From the glimpse I had of him I should say he was in danger of drinking himself to death."

"Where did he get to, then, during this business?" asked Hextall's companion, who had gained an inkling of affairs at intervals, and was excusably inquisitive. "Bed, eh?"

"His man took him in charge," answered Hextall, grimly. "I shall be sure to see him—later."

Darrell Tress was standing by the breakfast-table when Hextall returned to the flat at seven o'clock. He was as scrupulously groomed as Kesteven himself, but his lips were trembling and his hand shaky; there was a plain odour of old brandy in the room, and he looked at the doctor with sheepish and furtive glances.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry about this—this beastly affair," he blurted out, as Hextall entered, and after a slight bow, stood regarding him silently. "Awful mistake my sister—doing what she did, you know. She—of course, if I'd known she had that revolver——"

"I am not concerned about what has happened," said Hextall. "My duty lies in seeing that nothing comes of it. Your sister will have to be kept quiet for several days."

"Oh, that's all right!" answered the lad with evident relief. "We'll see that nothing disturbs her. Kesteven and I are going away for a week—of course, the nurses will stop with her?"

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Hextall, who was drawing off his gloves, looked attentively at his patient's brother. His professional eye saw sure and certain signs of recent incessant dissipation—but he also saw that Darrell Tress was quite sufficiently himself to hear a little plain truth; he also saw sufficient indications of latent good sense in him to know that he would hear straightforward speaking from a man not very much his senior.

"That means that you leave your sister in the sole care and charge of—strangers," he said dryly.

Darrell flushed under his dark skin.

"I—the fact is, we don't know anybody," he answered. "We've only been in England a few months, and——"

"Has your sister no women friends?" asked Hextall.

"I'm afraid not," replied Darrell.

"Then, said Hextall, "I should suggest that you should give up your own friends for a few days and devote yourself to seeing that your sister is properly attended to. I'll take care of her in a professional way, but neither doctors nor nurses are relatives, you know, and——"

Kesteven broke in upon them, entering from a side door with a Bradshaw in his hand. He nodded calmly to Hextall, and turned to Tress.

"The one-twenty-five's a good train," he said. "Suppose we——"

Darrell Tress looked at Hextall.

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"The doctor thinks I ought to stay and look after Paquita," he said. "I—I suppose I ought. I don't think I'll go, Kesteven. You go."

Hextall caught a momentary flash of Kesteven's eye. He recognized its meaning—it showed as plainly as a look could that Kesteven was not the man to brook interference. But it was gone as swiftly as it came—and Kesteven turned a bland, understanding accommodating countenance on him.

"Oh, of course, if Dr. Hextall thinks that!" he said. "Of course—certainly! But I understood that absolute quiet was necessary, so I thought we should be best out of the way. Of course, if you wish to stay with your sister——"

Hextall went off to his patient. And here was no invalid, dependent and submissive, but a self-assertive, strongwilled young woman, who answered questions about herself with impatience, and insisted on having replies to her own.

"I'm not going to be kept lying here," she said. "All for a mere scratch of a thing like this! It's ridiculous!"

One of the nurses, an elderly woman, smiled shyly at the doctor.

"Miss Tress wants to get up," she remarked.

"Not to-day, at any rate," commanded Hextall, with a glance at the face turned on him in mutinous appeal. "You'll be getting feverish, and then I won't answer for possible complications. This was more than a mere scratch, you know. That bullet was pretty deeply imbedded."

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Paquita Tress slowly moved her head and looked Hextall steadily up and down for a full minute.

"Send these women away," she said with sudden abruptness. "I want to speak to you—alone."

The two nurses left the room, and Hextall sat down by the bedside.

"Yes?" he asked quietly. "Now, what is it?"

"What you can guess, I should think, if you have the observation I credit you with," she answered. "What will make me feverish, what will undo any good you can do, is anxiety. Just that—do you see? What is my brother doing?"

"Your brother is considering how he can look after you and keep you quiet." replied Hextall. "He was thinking of going away so that you and the nurses should have this place to yourselves. But I believe he has changed his mind."

Paquita looked at him hard and long.

"And—Kesteven?" she said at last.

"The last word I heard Mr. Kesteven say was that if your brother wished to stay with you, he must stay, of course," answered Hextall, who had long since seen that it was best to be plain with her.

"Oh," she murmered. Then a sudden flash came into her eyes. "Kesteven," she said incisively, "is another incarnation of the devil!"

"Then he must be fought," laughed Hextall, good-humouredly. "Now what is it that you precisely wish? Far better tell me."

"Can I see my brother for a few minutes?" she asked.

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Hextall went back to the sitting-room. And there he found Kesteven and young Tress, both standing in similar positions on either side of the breakfast-table. The positions were those of deep thought—that is to say, each stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his trousers, and stared, with bent head, at the carpet. It was Kesteven who looked up at the doctor's entrance, and gave him a smile which on the surface at least was engaging and even frank

"Look here, doctor," he said. "Let's be candid. Tress and I have been talking, and—in short, I think it might be well if I cleared out for a bit, eh, and left Tress and his sister together, you know?—after all, when one's got sickness in one's place—eh?"

Hextall answered the apparently frank look with one which was genuinely so.

"I certainly think that it would be well if Miss Tress could be left in absolute quiet for a few days," he answered.

"Just so," agreed Kesteven. "All right—I'm off within the hour."

He vanished briskly into an adjoining room, and Hextall turned to Tress.

"Your sister wishes to see you," he said. "And," he added with a significant look, "I think it will do her good if you tell her that your friend is going away, and that you are remaining at home."

Darrell Tress went off towards his sister's room with something of a hang-dog look on his handsome face, and Hextall let himself out of the flat and departed on a round of visits. But a sense of strange

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mystery had got hold of him, and during the rest of that day he caught himself wondering, more than once, what Paquita Tress had meant when she said that Kesteven was another incarnation of the devil. He was still wondering about it, late that night, over a quiet pipe, when a sudden commotion arose at his door. There was a violent ringing of his bell, hurried voices on the threshold, one heard in entreaty and expostulation, another in high insistence. And the insistent voice was—Paquita's!

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CHAPTER III

HEXTALL jumped from his easy-chair with a growl of sore vexation. He flung open the door of his room and looked out into the hall. There, volubly informing his parlourmaid that she must see Dr. Hextall at once, stood the patient who ought to have been sound asleep in bed; behind her hovered the younger of the two nurses, distressed, tearful, and apparently helpless. She began to address Hextall as soon as she saw him.

"It's not my fault, doctor!" she pleaded, wringing her hands. "I couldn't stop her—she would come!"

Paquita turned a pair of star-like eyes and a glowing face on Hextall's stern and disapproving countenance. She smiled in a fashion that would have disarmed an ascetic, and made for the open door at which he stood.

"May I come in?" she demanded eagerly. "It's all right—there's no need for all this fuss. I want to speak to you—I must speak to you! Can't the nurse sit down somewhere and wait? And don't be angry with her—it isn't her fault. No one can interfere with me if I want to have my own way."

Hextall silently motioned the nurse to a waiting-room close by; then he took Paquita by the arm, led her to the chair he had just left, closed the door on

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them, and turning, looked down on her with a stern disapproval which he made mighty efforts to maintain.

"I tell you what it is!" he said, with the quietness of extreme displeasure; "if you behave like this, you must be good enough to send for another doctor. It is no use being angry with the nurse, for you are evidently unmanageable. But you are treating her very badly, and——"

"I'll make it up to her," said Paquita eagerly. "I'll give her—anything she likes."

"Nothing you can give her will make up," replied Hextall. "And you are treating me badly, too. What's the use of my—but what's the use of talking to you? Are you no more than a child?—to behave in this foolish, wayward fashion!"

Paquita lifted her face to him wonderingly. Her cheeks were bright with colour, and her eyes were dark and liquid and full of light. She was certainly the loveliest woman Hextall had ever seen, and he almost forgot everything but that as he stood staring at her. He had to drag his eyes away and to nerve himself to maintain a proper professional dignity.

"Childish—childish conduct!" he insisted. "The sort of conduct I should have expected from a spoilt child of twelve!"

"I'm not a spoilt child of twelve!" exclaimed Paquita. "I'm a grown woman with a world full of trouble. That's why I came to you. I don't know a soul in all this great town that I can turn to. But if you're so angry with me, I'll go away."

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She rose as she spoke, and Hextall, who, like all young men who have determined to be bachelors, was remarkably soft at heart, saw her beautiful lips quiver and a couple of great pearly tears gather in her eyes. He gently pushed her back into her chair, drew another to her side, and unconsciously threw a vast amount of sympathy and protection into his voice.

"Now!" he said. "What is it? Out with it! You'll be all the better when it is told."

Paquita dabbed her eyes with a tiny film of cob-webby lace and shook her head.

"Darrell has gone!" she said.

"Your brother!" exclaimed Hextall, frowning. "Why—I thought he was going to stay and look after you?"

"So he did—for a few hours," she replied dismally. "I knew it couldn't last. Didn't I tell you Kesteven was an incarnation of the devil? So he is—and I knew Darrell wouldn't rest until—until he was off to him. I saw how he was fidgeting and fidgeting to go. And—and in the end he went! What would you do if you had a brother, whom you loved very much, and whom you saw going straight to hell?"

There was something so absolutely simple and naïve in this question that Hextall could scarcely forbear a smile. But the girl's simplicity made him answer very seriously.

"I should move heaven and earth to stop him," he answered.

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"I've moved heaven and earth—and so far it's no good," asserted Papuita. "I've said more prayers than I ever said for anything else—I've done all I could on earth, which, perhaps, isn't much. No good!—up to now. The devil—that's Kesteven—is too much for heaven and earth and me all rolled into a lump!"

"Who is Mr. Kesteven?" asked Hextall. "And how is it that he exercises this bad influence on your brother?"

"I'd give everything to know who Kesteven is!" she exclaimed. "As to the other question—why he's simply got hold of Darrell, that's all. Just got hold of him—and he does what he likes with him. And his influence is bad—bad—bad!"

"Perhaps you'd better tell me how he got hold of him," suggested Hextall. He saw that the girl wanted to talk, must talk, and he judged it best to let her talk to her heart's content. It was no business of his, all this, but he knew that unless she unburdened her conscience she would fret herself into a fever. "Did he know Mr. Kesteven before you came to England?" he asked. "Or is he a recent acquaintance?"

"I'll tell you everything," she said with sudden impetuousness. "That's what I came for—I'd have burst or something, lying there in that beastly flat, with Darrell gone, and only that nurse to stare at. Besides, I knew I could trust you—I had a good look at you when you came in last night. I think—I think

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you're the first man—man!—I've seen since I came to England."

"I sincerely trust not!" said Hextall with a grim smile. "Let's hope you're mistaken. But now tell me—whatever it is you wish to tell. Because all this is very irregular, and I don't want you to talk too much—you ought to be in bed, and fast asleep."

"Being in bed with me of late has meant lying awake all night," she said. "Thinking and thinking, you know. Well—but you see, you don't know anything about us. There are three of us—Darrell, and myself, and our little brother, Ronald—he's only seven. We were never in England until about eight months ago—we came last September. You see, our father was a ranch owner out in South America—in the Argentine. He married a Spaniard—that's why I am called Paquita; it was my mother's name. She died when Ronald was about two years old. Then my father died, three years afterwards, and then Darrell ran the ranche, though he was only a boy. And I don't think things went very well, because we began to get rather poor—only it isn't so dreadful to be poor out there as it seems to be here in England. And then—last year—we became, oh, tremendously rich! Because Uncle James, whom we had never seen, died, and left us all his money and the place we now live in—Lynne Court, in Surrey. So we came home—and now I wish we'd stopped at our estancia, however poor we might have been! because then Darrell wouldn't have met Kesteven."

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"Where did he meet him—and when?" asked Hextall, forced to put leading questions.

"I don't know where—but it was very soon after we came. You see, Uncle James, who was a great merchant in London, left one half of his money and Lynne Court to Darrell, and the other half in equal shares between me and Ronald. Darrell used to come up to London a good deal after we arrived at Lynne Court, and I suppose he met Kesteven somewhere. Anyway, Kesteven began coming down to Lynne Court long before last Christmas, and then he and Darrell were always together, going to race-meetings, and up to town, and they brought men to the house whom I loathed—like those you saw last night—men who drank and gambled, and oh—I can't tell you! And then Kesteven persuaded Darrell to take this flat, so that he would have a place in town—and you have a good idea, from what you saw, of what goes on there. And though Kesteven doesn't drink himself—I think that shows what a calculating devil he is!—I'm sure he's encouraged Darrell in that way, and I know he gets money from him and stands by while other men get it—confederates, I expect. You understand, don't you? Oh, I'm heartbroken! I came up last night because I would know what went on at this wretched flat, and after they thought I'd gone to bed, I watched them, and I am sure Darrell was cheated. Cheated!—of course, he's being cheated every day—he'll be cheated out of every cent he has!"

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"Look here," said Hextall. "I think you mustn't mind if I ask you a few questions. How much money did your uncle leave your brother?"

"He left Darrell about half a million, and he left the same amount divided between me and Ronald," answered Paquita, calmly and unconcernedly. "But Darrell also has Lynne Court, which is a fine place—house, grounds, park, and a big farm."

"Is your brother absolute master of all this?" asked Hextall. "I mean—it's not left in trust for him?"

"Oh, it's all Darrell's, every penny and every acre," she answered. "The lawyers told me that—they said he could make ducks and drakes of it if he liked. You see, I went and complained to them about Kesteven."

"Ah! And what did they say?" asked Hextall.

"I don't think they were nice. They laughed; they were hard-faced men. They said that as Darrell was of full age, and as his property was his own, no one could interfere with him. One of them also said that there was no need for alarm—Darrell would settle down. But—he won't."

Hextall found himself faced by the difficulty which the men of law had seen. As Darrell Tress was of man's estate, and absolute master of his money and his land, nobody could meddle.

"Did you give them your ideas about Kesteven?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. They laughed again, and said something about hawks and pigeons which I didn't under-

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stand—how should I have understood, knowing nothing? One of them, who was a bit kinder, said to me that young men were always a little wild when they came into money, and advised me to try what he called moral suasion on my brother. As if I know what moral suasion is!"

"He meant—you must talk to your brother for his good," said Hextall.

"I have talked to him for his good! I have been sister, mother, grandmother, aunt and cousin to him. I talked to him to-day—I have begged and prayed of him to be a good boy, and to give up drinking so much, and to leave off gambling, and to kick Kesteven out of the door—and so far, it's no good whatever. He listens and sometimes he promises, and now and then he cries, and then Kesteven gets hold of him with some new devilry, and he goes to the bad again. You see to-day!—there he is, off again. I knew he wouldn't stand being mewed up there with a sick sister and two nurses. He's gone to Kesteven, of course. Ah!—I wish I'd shot Kesteven six months ago! I had the chance once—and nobody would ever have known."

Hextall, who had been staring at the fire, thinking, turned on his visitor with a start of surprise.

"Nonsense!" he said, sharply. "You don't mean anything of the sort!"

But Paquita's face was calm and unperturbed, and she smiled a little.

"Don't I?" she answered. "Then—I do! Think what trouble it would have saved me and all of us!

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That man will ruin Darrell, body and soul; therefore he's neither more or less than a dangerous wild beast who ought to be destroyed. Out there where I was brought up, we don't think as much of human life as people seem to do here. If I'd shot Kesteven out there—for the same reasons—I'd have been praised and congratulated. Here, I suppose," she continued, meditatively, "I'd get hanged."

"You'll certainly get into trouble if you're so ready with a revolver as you seemed to be last night," said Hextall. "That won't do here, you know. We're civilized in England."

Paquita gave him a look from under her long, dark eyelashes.

"I'm not a fool," she said. "I know how much your boasted civilization amounts to! Why are most English folk such hypocrites?"

Hextall got up hastily.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Can't you help me?" she said. "I—I thought—somehow—you could—and would."

"I will, indeed—if I can!" he answered with warmth. "But—just how?"

"Can't you do something to get Darrell away from this man?" she replied. "Or—get him away from Darrell? I've no friends—and I think you'll be one. Do help somehow, and I'll—I'll do anything you ask."

Hextall stared at her—stared until he felt himself sinking into seas of danger. He recovered his senses with a jerk.

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"Then obey me at once by going home, and to bed, and by strict obedience to your nurses," he said smiling. "I'll help you—all I can. We'll do something."

Unconsciously, he held out his hand, to cement the promise. To his infinite surprise and overwhelming confusion, Paquita lifted it to her bewitching lips.

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CHAPTER IV

WHO IS KESTEVEN?

WHEN Paquita, smiling and obedient, had gone away with the nurse, to whom she was suddenly as affectionate as if they had been sisters, Hextall retreated into his dining-room and looked at the back of his hand. It seemed to him that he still felt Paquita's warm lips there. He was afraid to meet his own eyes in the mirror over his mantelpiece. And his hands trembled as he picked up his favourite pipe and essayed to light it.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Am I going to have softening of the brain? And—I've promised to help her! Her!"

He had struck several matches and thrown them away before he got the pipe thoroughly going, and when at last the tobacco was burning he became so abstracted that it was quickly out again. At that he threw the pipe aside with a muttered imprecation and went off to bed.

"Paquita," he mused, as he laid his head on the pillow. "Paquita is very beautiful—and very dangerous. It will be well when Paquita returns to Lynne Court."

But in the meantime, Paquita was close at hand, and he had to see her at least twice a day. On his next visit he found her much more amenable to disci-

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pline and cheerful in spirit; it was very evident that the midnight conversation with him had wrought a change in her outlook on life. Evidently of an ingenuous and impulsive nature, she lost no time in letting him see that she hailed him as a friend, and Hextall realized that he was being expected to make good his promise in true and knightly fashion.

"But we must move warily," he said, not wishing her to anticipate too much. "You don't know where these two are, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I do!" she answered. "Fowler—that's Darrell's man—told me this morning. It turns out that Kesteven telephoned to Darrell last evening from Brighton, and Darrell made an excuse to Fowler and set off there at once, leaving Fowler in charge. Of course he said it was business, and he'd be back as quickly as possible, but I know what it means. They'll stay there as long as they're amused, and then they'll go to Lynne Court, and when I return I shall find the house full of the usual set. Never mind! I'm sure you'll help me."

Hextall left her, feeling that he had promised more than he could easily perform. To attempt the reformation and reclamation of a young man of the Darrell Tress type was a stiff thing, and at present he saw no way in which to set about it. He was inclined, being a good deal of a utilitarian, to take the view of the lawyers to whom Paquita had appealed, and from whom she had got such scant sympathy. There was nothing novel nor striking about the case—it was merely the familiar instance of the

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rich young man falling amongst thieves, with no power of detecting their intentions, and no great desire to protect himself. In all these cases there were two possible developments—Darrell Tress might suddenly sicken of his surfeit of questionable pleasures, pull himself up, and reform, or he might go under before anybody could work a reformation in him. But Hextall knew enough of life to feel assured that, in any case, Kesteven, if he was the hawk that circumstances seemed to suggest, would do a good deal towards plucking his pigeon before it escaped him.

As he was leaving the flat that morning Fowler, the valet, met him in the hall, and looked meaningly at him.

"You want to speak to me?" asked Hextall, interpreting the look into a desire for conversation.

"A word or two, if you please, sir," said Fowler. He led the way into a small sitting-room, evidently sacred to himself, and closed the door. "It's about what we saw that night, sir," he continued. "I thought I'd better mention it, because as you're attending Miss Tress, you won't want her disturbed."

"Well?" said Hextall.

"You saw that man who put the money back on the table, sir?" asked Fowler. "The dark-faced fellow with the bit of pointed moustache?"

"I saw him."

"He was here last night. I had a nice job to get him away. He wanted Mr. Kesteven. It was just

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after Mr. Tress went off. I—I'm afraid there may be trouble with that man, sir."

"How?" asked Hextall.

"He said that Mr. Kesteven persuaded him to hand over that money—which he swears he won fairly—so that Miss Paquita would calm down, and that Mr. Kesteven promised he'd meet him at noon yesterday, and give it back to him. It's true that Mr. Kesteven pocketed it after you and the nurses had got Miss Paquita into her room—I saw him pocket it when he and I began putting the place straight. But this man said that Kesteven never turned up at the place they were to meet at. And so he came here for him—and a nice temper he was in, too! As I say, I'd a job to get him off. And—he went off with a threat, sir."

"What threat?"

"Well, sir, he threatened that if Mr. Kesteven didn't hand back that money at once, he'd go to the police about the revolver business, and charge Miss Paquita with threatening to shoot him. And—I don't know where Mr. Kesteven is, sir. Nor where Mr. Tress is."

"I thought they were at Brighton," said Hextall.

"No, sir! I told Miss Paquita that—I had to tell her something to keep her quiet. Mr. Kesteven went away at noon yesterday, and he telephoned to Mr. Tress about seven last night, and Mr. Tress had a couple of suit-cases packed, and went off in a car somewhere or other to meet him, I expect. But I don't know where they are. What am I to do if this man comes again, sir?"

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"Do you know him?" asked Hextall.

"No, sir, I don't. There's a certain set of 'em that's come here to play, but he's not one of them—he'd never been here before that night. I neither knew him nor the other man—he'd never been before, either. Mr. Kesteven brought both of them—the three came in just after Mr. and Miss Tress had come back from the theatre."

"You don't even know their names?"

"Don't even know that, sir. I know a lot—a big lot!—of gentlemen about town, but I'd never set eyes on either of those two before—never."

"Was it any considerable amount of money that was in question?" asked Hextall.

Fowler smiled.

"I saw several hundred pound bank-notes among it before Mr. Kesteven picked it up, sir," he answered. "They've been playing high, sir—very high indeed—I never saw anything like it, sometimes. Of course, it's not my place to make remarks, but I've drawn my own conclusions, and it's high time Mr. Tress was protected."

"From—whom!" asked Hextall. He was hating and loathing all this sordid revelation, and he felt a certain nausea in asking the question—but not far off was Paquita, and the remembrance of his promise to her was strong in his mind.

The valet made a grimace and shook his head.

"Kesteven!" he said. "Kesteven! He's got hold of my young master, and he's plucking him—like you'd pluck a chicken!"

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Hextall looked at the valet in silence for a moment. He knew that servants of this class were adepts in knowledge of what went on amongst the masters they served; Fowler looked old enough to be the depository of many secrets. There was a knowing gleam in the eye which he turned on the young doctor as he spoke of Kesteven, and Hextall, much as he disliked doing it, could not forbear from taking the hint.

"Since you've said so much," he observed, "I may as well tell you that Miss Tress has been complaining to me about the influence which Mr. Kesteven exerts on her brother. She seems to think it——"

Fowler laughed a little.

"Oh, I know, sir! I've been down at Lynne Court —several times. I've pitied Miss Paquita from the bottom of my heart. Oh—yes!"

"Do you know anything of Mr. Kesteven?" asked Hextall. "You say you know a lot of men about town. Did you know him when he came here first?"

"Oddly enough, sir—no! I have known a lot of his sort, in my time—you know, sir, the sort of men who fasten on to rich young fellows, and stick to them like leeches till they've bled 'em dry—hawks, as they used to call 'em when I was younger. But I didn't know him—and what's still queerer, none of my friends know him. We've talked—as gentlemen's servants do talk, sir, whether anybody knows it or not—and none of us know him. We can't recall him or place him. I've friends who know every man of

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that sort in the West End, and I've pointed Kesteven out to them; nobody recognizes him."

Hextall felt that he was in for far-reaching matters by this time, and he began to ask further questions without scruple.

"Do you know how and when Mr. Tress met him?" he inquired.

"Not for certain, sir," replied Fowler. "That is—as to how they met. I know when it was. Mr. Tress had just engaged me; he had a suite of rooms at the Carlton Hotel at that time, last winter. He went to the steeplechases at Newbury for a couple of days and stayed at Reading—I did'nt go with him, as I'd a violent cold. He brought Kesteven back—and Kesteven's never left him since. That was when they met, sir; but as to how they met, or who made them known to each other, I don't know. I expect they just picked each other up—on the race-course."

"I dare say you can answer a question that is possibly very pertinent," remarked Hextall. "In what condition was Kesteven when he came? I mean—how did he present himself to you? Was he well dressed—did he seem to be in good circumstances?"

The valet laughed sneeringly.

"He was well dressed enough, sir," he answered, "but it was all the suit he had: a first-class tweed. That, and a smart overcoat, and a small suit-case, filled with good linen and dressing appointments, was all he ever brought to us. But," he added, with a wink, "he'd plenty within a fortnight—more than a dozen suit-cases like his would have held!"

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"You mean—at Mr. Tress's expense?" suggested Hextall.

"Just so, sir—at Mr. Tress's expense. I know, of course, because tradesmen talk. Mr. Tress took him around to all his tradesmen—tailors, hosiers, shoe-makers, hatters—they all sent their bills to Mr. Tress. Lord, bless you, sir!" concluded Fowler, "Why, there isn't a man goes down Piccadilly who's better dressed than Kesteven! Oh, he's feathering his nest—there's no doubt about that! A cool hand, sir, and a clever one. Likes a good glass of wine, and knows what is good, but never touches a drink between meals, and never takes more than a very modest amount with his meals. He's not the sort that wants brandy-and-soda or a half-bottle of champagne first thing in a morning—China tea's his mark, or good coffee. When a man's only capital is his brain, sir—eh?"

"You mean, that Kesteven knows how to take care of his?" said Hextall, smiling.

"No man better, sir. He's always got his wits about him. I've noticed that when they're going to play, here at nights, or down at Lynne Court, Kesteven never even drinks at dinner. Not he!—a mouthful of mineral water, with a squeeze of lemon in it, is all he wants."

"There is one thing I can't quite make out," observed Hextall. "I don't understand his encouraging Mr. Tress to drink."

Fowler shook his head.

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"He doesn't, sir—I'll say that for him," he answered frankly. "Miss Paquita blames him for that, but she's wrong. The truth is, sir, Mr. Tress had got on to that game before Kesteven came on the scene. When I first came to him, he'd been alone for some time in that suite of rooms he had at the Carlton, and I found that he'd got into the habit of having a pint of champagne as soon as he got up. He's got past that, sir—it's brandy-and-soda—strong, now. No!—that's not Kesteven's fault. My own opinion is—but perhaps I've no right to give it."

"Say what you think," said Hextall. "It will go no further."

"Well, I think that Kesteven sees how things are, and he's making a purse for himself as fast as ever he can," replied the valet. "And that's why I don't understand his bringing those other two men here the other night—and not settling up with the dark fellow who came back last evening. I know all the men who've come here except those two—them I don't know, and I'm certain there's some mystery about them, and about that night. Now, what am I to do, sir, if that man returns? Shall I warn——"

Just then a ring sounded from the outer door of the flat. Fowler excused himself and went to answer it. A moment later he returned, shaking his head.

"He's here again, doctor!" he whispered. He's at the door now, and the other man is with him."

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CHAPTER V

THE GREEK GENTLEMEN

HEXTALL'S soul rose in revolt on hearing this news. He realized that he was suddenly thrown into an unpleasant predicament. These men were evidently bent on mischief: the master of the flat was away, and his mentor with him; Fowler, after all, was only a serving man. And there, behind a door or two, was an invalid.

"Well?" he said, looking at the valet.

Fowler returned the look with a shake of the head which suggested perplexity and entreaty; it was clear that he was the sort of man who instinctively depends upon a stronger will than his own.

"They won't go away for me, sir," he said. "They declare they're going to stop here until they see somebody. I thought, perhaps, that you would speak to them?—being the doctor."

"Where are they?" asked Hextall, unwilling. "In the hall?"

"No, sir—I didn't let them in. They're on the landing. I told them that neither Mr. Tress nor Mr. Kesteven were here, but they wouldn't believe me. Perhaps if you told them—ah!"—he broke off as the electric bell rang again. "There they are, you see, sir! If they start that game——"

Hextall suddenly left the room and marched to the front door. He opened it quietly, slipped out, and

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closed it behind him. The two men without, both medium-heighted, slightly-built individuals stepped mechanically back as he emerged, and looked up in some surprise at his tall figure. And one muttered a couple of words to his companion.

"The doctor!"

"Look here!" said Hextall, with characteristic bluntness. "You must be good enough to go away. I can't have my patient disturbed by your ringing or knocking. The manservant has told you that Mr. Tress and Mr. Kesteven are not here—they are away from home. You are aware that Miss Tress met with a serious accident, the other night—in your presence. As her medical adviser——"

The man of the sinister eyes interrupted him with a smile that was half incredulous, half sneering.

"That is all very well," he said, in a voice marked by a strong foreign accent. "But we do not know anything about Miss Tress, or Miss Anybody—we do not know any names of anybody that lives here—Miss, Mrs. or Mr. We want those two men that we met here the other night—the man that brought us here, and the other we found here—with the young woman."

Hextall started at the contemptuous tone in which the last two words were spoken. His face flushed, and he drew himself up, and looked the speaker over in warning fashion.

"I think you had better adopt a civil tone," he said.

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The man addressed laughed, showing his white teeth under his black moustache, and a resentful gleam came into his eyes.

"All right—just so!" he said, with a glance at his companion. "If I speak plain to you, it is not so plain as I can speak to the police—eh? We go there if we don't get satisfaction here, you understand? No offence to you—you are the doctor—eh, yes! But—you don't know all."

"I can't have my patient disturbed," repeated Hextall, who could think of nothing else to say. "I must ask you to go away. Come back—if you must—when Mr. Tress returns."

"Mr. Tress? Oh, yes, but we don't know any Mr. Tress," retorted the leader, while his companion laughed incredulously. "All we know is—this flat. And what happened to us—here. Some of it you saw—the end of it. Look you!" he continued, his volubility increasing. "We show you how it is, eh? Then you will understand. We are Greek gentlemen—in business in Manchester—well-known gentlemen. We come to London for a little pleasure, eh? The other night we dine at the Café Imperial—all right. We get talking—you known—to the man you saw here—the elder man, fine-looking fellow. We have a drink or two with him—very pleasant man, very agreeable. He suggests we have a quiet little game of cards at a friend's. Well—no objection—little what you call spree, eh? We come here with him—we find the young fellow, the—young lady. Everything goes all right at first—we have another drink—

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we talk—quite agreeable, oh quite! Then the young lady retires, and we play. We play some time, and I win—quite fairly I win. I do not cheat—no! Why should I cheat?—I am a gentleman; I have plenty money—but!—I give you my card to show you who I am—my friend he give you his card, too. Ask anybody in Manchester if they know our names—oh, yes!"

Before Hextall could do anything to prevent them, each man had pulled out a beautiful card-case and had forced upon him highly-finished, perfectly-engraved cards. He glanced at them and read: Mr. Victor Demetriadi—Mr. George Chimbouloglos. In the corners of each were addresses in one of the best residential quarters of Manchester.

"These!—all correct—eh?" continued Mr. Victor Demetriadi. "Quite respectable, eh? Well, I tell you. We continue to play—I win more—I win twelve hundred pounds—yes!"

"Twelve hundred pounds!" exclaimed Hextall.

"Yes, but half an hour before that I am losing fifteen hundred!" exclaimed Demetriadi. "Eh—eh? There was no talk of cheating then—no! But, you see, we had settled to stop at two o'clock, precise. Well, at five minutes to two, I am winning twelve hundred—I have it in my pocket, because we pay up as we go on—plenty of money in there behind you! Then out comes the girl—the young lady—with a revolver, and says we are cheating her brother—me, most!—and threatens to shoot—especially me—holds the revolver at my head, eh? Oh!—it was all what

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you call a plant! A plant—of course! If I had been losing—if my friend Chimbouloglos had been losing at two o'clock—what?"

"It was at any rate no plant that my patient got shot,"observed Hextall quietly.

The two young men turned and looked at each other. A glance of intelligence passed between them which was not lost on Hextall. But neither spoke, and Hextall was suddenly minded to ask a question.

"As you witnessed the affair, how did she get shot?" he said.

Once more the two exchanged glances. Then one glance seemed to answer the other, and the man who had kept silence up to then spoke.

"The elder man tried to take the revolver from her," he replied quietly, and with less accent than his companion. "She struggled, and in the struggle the revolver went off. But she retained her hold on it, and she kept us covered until you came."

Demetriadi laughed.

"Bah!" he sneered "All a plant! I tell you, if I had lost—if my friend had lost much—then, ah, then, it would have been all right. This is a swindling affair —all confederates—of course!"

"I understand," said Hextall, who was now determined to get at the bottom of things, "that you were induced to put the money back on a promise that it should be handed to you yesterday. Is that so?"

"So! The elder man, he says: 'Put it back and quieten the girl, and I bring it to you at the Café Imperial, at noon—all right.' And Chimbouloglos

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here, he say the same thing. So—I pay it back. But—we go to the Café Imperial at noon, yesterday, and we wait—and no man, and no money! No, I am cheated—done in—what they call had-for-the-mug! But——"

He wagged a finger at the closed door behind Hextall, and his teeth gleamed under the dark moustache.

"I will have my money what I fairly win, or I will have my revenge!" he said. "I will go to the police. Chimbouloglos, he say, 'Leave it alone—do not trouble yourself—the money is nothing!' Just so—the money is nothing—I have plenty of money—I am a very rich man. But—my honour! I am brought here—gambling den, eh?—I win my money fair and square, as you call it—then I am threatened with revolver, made to pay back on a promise—and the men hook it! But—the woman is here—trapped! Bah! —Chimbouloglos is what the vulgar boys call fat-head!"

"Mr. Chimbouloglos is a very wise man," said Hextall. "I give you the same advice. And I assure you that you are under a wrong impression about the young lady inside—quite wrong!"

"Wrong!" exclaimed the injured one. "What!—when she stick a revolver at my head, and threaten to blow out my brains if I don't put back the money I have fairly won? Oh, no, no, no!—I am not a fool, Mr. Doctor—come, now!"

For a moment of silence Hextall looked the two over more carefully. Mr. George Chimbouloglos seemed to him to be a good-tempered, easy-going sort

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of young man; Mr. Victor Demetriadi, in spite of his sinister eyes, looked to have some good points. Paquita's newly-enrolled knight resolved, in her service, to use a little diplomacy, and to see what an appeal to whatever sense of honour the two young men possessed would do.

"I am sure you are not a fool, Mr. Demetriadi," he said, "and I am also sure you are both men of honour. Now, supposing I give you my word of honour that you are mistaken?"

Chimbouloglos nodded readily enough, but Demetriadi stared.

"But I see it with my own sight!" he exclaimed. "What!—you think I don't know what is a revolver—me?"

"We mustn't stand talking here all day," said Hextall. "Step round to my house with me for a moment, and I think I can explain matters to you—all except one, at any rate."

The two Greeks followed him without demur. And as he led them round to Wimpole Street, Hextall reflected, with a sense of grim amazement, on the extreme smallness of this world. He himself was a Lancastrian, and he had learnt his medicine, and walked his hospitals at the Victoria University in Manchester; consequently he knew Manchester well, and he had at once recognized the names of the two Greeks as those of two leading houses in the Greek trading community of the great Lancashire city. These were evidently scions of those houses, up for a lark in London—and the pride and spirit of Mr.

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Victor Demetriadi had been touched. For Paquita's sake, he must give them an explanation—at Kesteven's cost.

Being a little of a diplomatist Hextall first spoke of Manchester and his own connexion with it—this transferred matters to a friendly footing. Then, pledging the two young men to secrecy, and putting them on their honour, he told them as much as he thought it necessary they should know. And to his great relief Demetriadi immediately accepted the situation.

"Oh, in that case!" he said, spreading out his hands; "of course, I have no more to say, eh? Nothing! I am sorry for the young lady. But that fellow—what you call Kesteven, eh? Ah! And——"

He broke off sharply and glanced at his companion, and once more the two exchanged the look of significance which Hextall had twice previously noticed. Presently Demetriadi went on:

"Perhaps we better tell you something we see, or think we see," he said. "Something that make us——"

Chimbouloglos quietly interrupted him.

"I don't simply think I saw," he said. "I did see!"

"You tell him, then," said Demetriadi. "You know," he added, turning to Hextall, "I—maybe I didn't see as clearly as Chimbouloglos that night—I'd had a good deal of wine, eh? Not too much—but plenty. But Chimbouloglos he hadn't—he see all right, you know."

"What did you see?" asked Hextall.

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Chimbouloglos flicked the ash from his cigarette and looked thoughtfully after it as it fell. When he looked up at Hextall his youthful face was very grave and he shook his head.

"It's a serious thing to have to say," he answered, "and I shouldn't say it if I weren't certain of it. But since you've told us what you have about that man Kesteven, I'll tell you of this. That revolver didn't go off by accident."

"What!" exclaimed Hextall. "You mean——"

"I mean that I'm absolutely certain that Kesteven discharged it as he was trying to take it from the girl," said Chimbouloglos. "It was my impression that he meant to shoot her. I was just behind them—I saw his hand. She started violently just then—or she'd have been shot through the heart. I'm sure!"

"You can trust Chimbouloglos," remarked Demetriadi. "If he says he saw—he saw."

Hextall received this news in silence. And when his two visitors had gone, he sat for a long time staring at nothing—thinking. The atmosphere of mystery had suddenly been deepened by something that looked very like the foreshadowing of murder. He saw, by one of those sudden mental illuminations which come as if they were directly inspired, how Kesteven, if he really wished to get rid of Paquita Tress, had had an admirable opportunity during that struggle for the revolver of achieving his object without incriminating himself. No one would have suspected that he meant to shoot her: he had the best of all possible reasons for interfering with her before

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she could have hurt others or herself. It could easily have been done—Kesteven would have no idea that the young Greek had particularly watchful eyes. Easily done! The more Hextall considered it, the more he was inclined to believe in the story he had just heard. But—why should Kesteven wish to kill Paquita? A big question—and one that gave rise to many other questions and doubts and problems. Out of the cloud of these rose a clear fact—Paquita was in danger. He turned to his day's work realizing that his promise to help her was going to involve him in complications the result of which it was at that time impossible to foresee.

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CHAPTER VI

MR. SMITH OF PUMP COURT

At five o'clock that afternoon, Hextall jumped out of a taxi-cab at the top of Middle Temple Lane, and hastily descending that ancient throughfare turned off into Pump Court, where he proceeded to climb a flight of well-worn stairs until he came to an oaken door on the lintel of which was painted in faded white letters the name "Mr. John Smith." Those learned in the peculiar mysteries of the various Inns of Court would have deduced two facts from those faded letters and from that lintel—namely, that, first, Mr. John Smith had occupied the set of chambers behind the double door for some time, and that, second, he did not share them with anybody else. They might further have argued from these two facts that Mr. John Smith was a successful barrister who had no need to share chambers and clerks, and kept up a fine show of both. In that, however, they would have been wrong—the plain truth was that Smith, an old schoolfellow of Hextall's, was a man of considerable means, who trifled a little at the Bar, and worked hard at what other men would have treated as a hobby. It pleased him to have a large set of chambers all to himself, and he never felt lonely in them in spite of the fact that he kept but one clerk, who was duly on show between the hours of ten and five-thirty.

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This clerk opened the outer oak in answer to Hextall's knock. He was a queer-faced, slightly squint-eyed, foxy-haired individual, and John Smith boasted that it took him from half-past four to half-past five every afternoon to wash away the ink-stains which he had accumulated since his arrival in the morning, the spilling and smearing of ink over his hands and face being apparently one of his chief objects in life. Hextall caught him in this ablutionary stage, and looked thoughtfully at as much as he could see of him over a mass of soapsuds and towel.

"Good afternoon, Styler," said Hextall. "Mr. Smith in?"

"No, he ain't, Doctor Hextall, and that's a fact, unusal as it is," answered Styler, cheerful and unabashed. "The truth is, sir, there's a very interesting case on, down at the C. C. C., sir—Central Criminal Court, you know—and Mr. Smith's been there all day. I looked in myself this afternoon, sir, and it was expected to be over before or about five, so I don't think he'll be long now. Won't you come in doctor?—I don't think from what I heard of it that it could last much longer—plain murder case, but with a few very nice, interesting incidents: that's what attracted the guv'nor, of course."

"I suppose murder cases and those sort of things appeal to you, don't they, Styler?" observed Hextall, as he walked into Smith's inner rooms and dropped into a chair. "You like that atmosphere?"

"Love it!" answered Styler, polishing himself vigorously with a towel. "It's meat, drink, victuals,

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fire, tobacco, and a sweetheart to me, Doctor Hextall! Ah, I'm getting on, I am! Since I came here—three years now—I've improved my knowledege of criminal law something wonderful! Mr. Smith, he's been tremendously good to me; I've the run of all these books, sir, and the inestimable privilege of sitting at Mr. Smith's feet, as it were, and I've formed a nice little collection of criminal books and documents at home, myself—and, by the by, Doctor Hextall, if you don't mind my mentioning it, sir, you haven't an old copy of a good work on forensic medicine that you could give away, have you? A Guy and Ferrier, now, sir, or a Taylor?—I've been looking for one on the second-hand stalls for months, but——"

"I'll see," replied Hextall, good-humouredly. "What use are you going to make of all this knowledge, Styler?"

The clerk, who was putting a final polish on the tips of a pair of large prominent ears, began to smile. The smile awoke in the middle of his lips and gradually extended, slowly revealing large, shark-like teeth: Hextall was unconsciously reminded of seeing an alligator slowly opening its mouth in a tank at the Zoological Gardens.

"Ah, well, sir!" answered Styler, coyly. "We'll see, we'll see! Rome was not built in a day, I believe, Doctor Hextall. I'm not without ambition, sir, and—here's the guv'nor!"

A little, fat, round-faced, rosy-cheeked gentleman mild-eyed, gold-spectacled, almost venerable in spite of the fact he was obviously no more than thirty years

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of age, came softly into the room, beaming on its occupant. He was in wig and gown, the wig a little awry, the gown bunched up in a plump, white hand, and he looked as mild a mannered man as ever exchanged gentle witticisms with a judicial joker. No one, judging by appearances, would have suspected Mr. John Smith of sharing the tastes of his clerk in the matter of criminology.

"Hello, Hextall?" he said, in a voice as mild and gentle as his looks. "Didn't expect to find you here. What brings you?"

"Something that will interest you," answered Hextall. "A—case."

"Well, I expected that from merely seeing you," observed Smith. He threw off his gown, handed his wig to Styler, dropped into an easy chair, and produced a cigarette-case. "Something that's occurred in your practice?" he asked, when the clerk had gone away. "And that is, of course, of pressing importance. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here; I think you'd have waited until we met. Take a cigarette and tell me what it is."

He settled himself in his chair, leaned his head comfortably against the padded back, closed his eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, and listened in unbroken silence while Hextall told his story. When it came to an end he threw away his cigarette, took off his spectacles, and sat up. The mild, blue eyes suddenly flashed into wakefulness.

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"That's deeply interesting, Hextall," he said. "It interests—me. That's admitting a good deal. There's a lot behind the superficial facts of the story."

"You think so?" said Hextall, uneasily. He had half hoped that Smith would pooh-pooh the whole thing and laugh at him. "You think it's an affair that ought to be looked into?"

"Oh, certainly! I'm afraid you'll have to look into it, as you've pledged yourself to the young lady," answered Smith, with a quiet smile. "As I happen to know your slightly quixotic temperament, I'm sure you will. Now, I'll make one or two remarks. First of all, as to the story of the two young Greeks. It's not at all strange, as I chance to be a Manchester man, that I know those chaps—just know them: I met both when I was last in Manchester. Young Victor is the nephew of old Antonio Demetriadi, the big merchant—he's only recently come to their business house from Athens, and he's inclined to be a bit of a rake. The other lad is of a quiter sort. If George Chimbouloglos says he's certain that he saw this man Kesteven attempt to shoot Miss Paquita, you may be sure that he did see—something of that sort."

Hextall frowned and drew a long breath.

"Then—she's in danger?" he muttered.

"I should say she, and her brother, and the little brother, are all in danger—and from Kesteven," answered Smith quietly. "The next word is—Why? That's to be found out."

"I told you what the valet, Fowler, says," remarked Dr. Hextall. "Nobody knows Kesteven."

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"Nobody that Fowler knows," corrected Smith. "But Fowler's world is confined to Fowler's sort—Fowler's fellow-gentlemen's gentlemen. Somebody will know Kesteven. You want me to help?"

"If you will!" exclaimed Hextall. "I know if you take a hand you'll do it thoroughly. But—what can we do?"

Smith smiled and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I shouldn't think much of my powers if I couldn't do something," he answered. "What we'll do is to find out about Kesteven—who he is. Now, can you trust this valet, Fowler?"

"I think so," replied Hextall. "He's certainly no love for Kesteven."

"Can you get Fowler to come to your house for an hour this evening?"asked Smith. "You can? Very good—make it nine o'clock. I shall send Styler to meet him. You'll leave them together. And you'll tell Fowler to bring with him, if possible, a photograph of Kesteven, and one of Mr. Darrell Tress."

"Styler!" exclaimed Hextall. "You mean to set him to work?"

"I mean to set the smartest sleuth-hound that I know of to work," answered Smith. "Leave it to me! When you're gone, I shall tell Styler what you've told me, in my own way, and I shall send him up to have a chat with Fowler, to-night. After that, Styler will take his own line in finding out all about Mr. Kesteven. But—he will find out."

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"You think so?" said Hextall, half incredulously.

"Bet you a new topper!" answered Smith. "And with small delay, too."

"Supposing there is nothing to be found out?" suggested Hextall.

Smith's expression became judicial.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "Come—come! There is something to be found out about every man. Where's your knowledge of human nature? Leave Styler to that job. That point's settled, then. Now, we come to point number two—which is Miss Paquita. Now, she seems to be in careful hands at present—there's one or other of the nurses always with her?"

"Always," replied Hextall.

"Very good," said Smith. "How soon can she be moved to Lynne Court?"

"Oh—in three days."

"Also very good. Now, you must be guided by me. You will take Miss Paquita down there yourself—you'll run down in a car in less than two hours—and you'll just have a look at the place. But—more important than that—you'll impress upon her that for a short time, at any rate, she must retain those two nurses. They must go with her. You must give them strict orders that until you give further instructions, she is to be under the surveillance of one or other of them always—always. You understand, by night and day. You can see to that?—you can throughly depend upon these nurses?"

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Hextall remembered Paquita's recent midnight escapade. She had then paid scant attention to the nurse who was left in charge of her. But upon reflection he decided that Paquita was now much more amenable—he believed that she would do what he told her to do.

"All right," he answered. "I'll see to that. She shall be watched night and day."

"Very good—that's all right," said Smith. "I'm giving you all these instructions with a purpose. And it's for a purpose that I want you to go down to Lynne Court with your patient. I want you to see the little brother she spoke of."

"Yes?" said Hextall, wonderingly. "Why?"

"You've seen Miss Paquita; you've seen the elder brother; now I want you to see the younger one. I want you to observe if he's a healthy youngster; in whose charge he is; anything you notice about him, and about the arrangements made for him. Never mind why, now—but give me your report when you come back."

"I don't know what you're after," said Hextall, "but I'll obey you."

"I know what I'm after. While you're doing these things, I shall be doing something else—making myself thoroughly acquainted with the history of the Tress family and the circumstances under which these young people came into this wealth. It's a good job, Hextall, in cases of this sort, that guardian angels like you and me can find things out—and in this particular case, egad! I think the young folks do want

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guardianizing. Now, you haven't any idea where this young ass Darrell has got to?"

"Not the least! But he's with Kesteven, of course."

"Oh, of course! Well, they'll either turn up, or news of them will turn up. Now we've done all we can at present, so off you go and arrange for Fowler to meet Styler at your house to-night, at nine o'clock. And after you've taken Miss Paquita and her nurses down to Lynne Court come back and report to me."

Hextall always took John Smith at his word, and he rose obediently and made for the door. But before he opened it he ventured one further question.

"I'm to leave Styler and the valet alone?"

"Absolutely—and don't ask Styler any questions afterwards," replied Smith, with a bland smile. "Styler's peculiar methods are mole-like, and like all moles he doesn't care about being seen when's he's digging a way underground. However, he's unlike the mole in one important respect—he doesn't cast up evidences of his labours. Off you go, and leave matters to me."

Hextall went back to the West, and saw Fowler, and made his arrangements, and impressed particular secrecy on him. As he had expected, he found the valet ready and eager enough to enter into any plot against Kesteven; it appeared that he had several crows to pull with that individual, and was only too glad to begin the process. What passed between him and Styler at their interview that night, Hextall did not know, but he chanced to see them in his hall as

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they went away, and he fancied from a certain gleam in the valet's eye, and from an assured smug satisfaction in the clerk's queer face, that their secret conference had yielded pleasure to both of them.

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CHAPTER VII

THE EARLY MORNING TELEGRAMS

As Hextall was putting the finishing touches to his toilet next morning, he heard a taxi-cab pull up at his door, and looking out of the window, he saw John Smith dismount from it, followed by a tall, quietly-attired, middle-aged woman. He hastily finished his dressing and ran down, to find his visitors in the hall.

"A word or two with you," said Smith. "This is Nurse Palliser. Let her sit down in one of your waiting-rooms for a few minutes while we talk. Look here," he went on, when he and Hextall were alone in the consulting-room. "That woman outside there is a fully trained, properly certificated nurse. She's also one of my most valued assistants."

"Yes?" responded Hextall, who was already seeing what Smith was after. "And you want——"

"I want you to take her down to Lynne Court as one of your patient's two nurses. You can easily get rid of one of the two you now have, and instal Nurse Palliser in her place. Do it without exciting any suspicion on the part of the other nurse. As for Nurse Palliser, she'll take good care to arouse no suspicion in anybody—she's as clever as they make 'em. I've employed her before—several times. All you've got to do is to arrange with her—now—when she's to come to her patient."

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"You want her to be in a position to report to you, I suppose?" said Hextall.

"Just so—especially after what Styler told me last night. He got a good deal out of Fowler which you wouldn't have got. Never mind that, now. Make these arrangements, and take Miss Paquita with the two women down to Surrey—when?"

"The day after to-morrow," answered Hextall promptly. "In the afternoon."

He had no difficulty in carrying out Smith's wishes.

Paquita, rapidly recovering from the first shock of her accident, was evidently only too pleased to let her doctor and new-found friend make any arrangements he considered necessary, and she left the flat in high spirits. She and Hextall travelled in one car; the nurses in a second; all the way through the Surrey lanes she laughed and chattered with gay vivacity. But as they approached the hill country of the Sussex border she became thoughtful and almost gloomy.

"There's Lynne Court!" she said suddenly, pointing to a house which showed against the sky-line on a distant hill. "There—up amongst the woods. I thought I should be glad to see it—and now I'm not."

"Why?" asked Hextall.

"Because I don't know what I shall find when I get there!" she answered. "They may be there—Darrell and Kesteven. If they are, there'll be more of the Kesteven sort with them. In that case——"

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"I don't think you'll find them there," said Hextall. "And if they are—why, then, I shall have to speak to them pretty plainly."

Paquita sighed.

"What a blessing Fowler happened to light on you!" she said artlessly. "And what a relief to have a man about that one can depend upon! Will you really have to go back to London—at once?"

"Must!" replied Hextall with forced determination. "But I'm always within call, you know."

There was no Darrell and no Kesteven at Lynne Court. And Lynne Court itself, an old, grey-walled, half-timbered manor-house, set amidst pine woods, on a slope of the hills which overlook the Sussex Weald, seemed to Hextall to be suggestive of nothing but peace.

The house itself was ancient and picturesque: its gardens and pleasure grounds were ideal; from a south terrace there was a glimpse of the English Channel; the whole place was one in which to dream away one's days. And Paquita evidently saw what her companion was thinking and turned to him with quick intuition as they reached the house.

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "It is beautiful, and it would be all right—if it weren't for—you know what. Here's my little brother, Ronnie."

Mindful of his promise to John Smith, Hextall looked with interest at the boy who came running out to greet his sister. He was a fine, healthy-looking lad of seven, alert, quick-spirited; Hextall fancied that the evidences of the Spanish strain in him were

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more marked than in his brother and sister. There was evidently nothing wrong with him, physically or mentally, and Hextall turned his attention to a young woman who followed him, a slight, rather pretty, decidedly prim and proper person, whom Paquita presently introduced as Miss Brock, the governess. Behind these two, at the door, were gathered some upper servants, a staid housekeeper, a grave-faced butler, a footman or two, all evidently delighted to see their young mistress. Within a few minutes Hextall gained the impression of an atmosphere of great comfort and luxury—a big house, troops of servants, every modern convience that heart could desire, well-oiled domestic machinery, and, outwardly, lacking nothing. And its young master was away from it, rioting, debauching—where?

Paquita, vigorous in spite of her accident, insisted on personally taking her nurses to their rooms; Hextall was left alone for a while in a library which looked out on the southward view. He was wondering what was going to come of all this, when Paquita came back to him looking a good deal concerned. She closed the door behind her and led him into one of the deeply embrasured windows.

"Ronnie has just told me something queer," she said. "He says that the other night he saw Kesteven!"

"Kesteven! Where?" exclaimed Hextall.

Paquita looked round at the door and sank her voice to a whisper.

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