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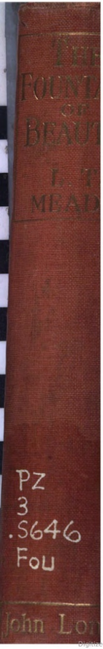
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THE FOUNTAIN OF BEAUTY

BY L. T. MEADE

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The Fountain of Beauty . .

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BURDEN OF HER YOUTH
CONFESSIONS OF A COURT MILLINER
THE WOOING OF MONICA
NURSE CHARLOTTE
HIS MASCOT
LITTLE WIFE HESTER
THE ADVENTURES OF MIRANDA
THE FACE OF JULIET
THE HEART OF HELEN
FROM THE HAND OF THE HUNTER
KINDRED SPIRITS
THE CURSE OF THE FEVERALS
LITTLE JOSEPHINE
THE AIM OF HER LIFE
THE COURTSHIP OF SYBIL

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ELIZABETH THOMASINA (MEADE) SMITH

The Fountain of Beauty

By

L. T. Meade

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The Fountain of Beauty

CHAPTER I

ROBERT HENSHALL crept slowly home after a long day's work in the City. He was a man of about fifty years of age, but had a stoop, and white hair, and a somewhat haggard face. A passer-by who saw him on that special evening towards the end of a very dismal January might have mistaken him for a much older man than he really was.

He reached his own house soon after six o'clock, let himself in with a latch-key, and called in a querulous tone:

"Mary Gray! Where are you?"

His voice penetrated through the small house. There came an answering tone, quite bright and cheerful, and a girl of about five-and-twenty, dressed very neatly, and with hair bound simply round her shapely head, opened the door and came into view.

"Yes, Mr Henshall," she said. "What is it?"

"I am not well," was the reply. "I want a fire to be lit at once in my room and something hot prepared for me to drink. No dinner—no dinner; I couldn't touch it. I expect I've got a bout of that horrid influenza—I want something hot. Have the fire lit, and get Jemima to warm my bed. I am going straight to bed; I have got a chill."

"Very well," answered Mary Gray; "but shall I tell Rebecca?"

Old Robert Henshall straightened himself and looked full at the girl from under his shaggy, penthouse brows.

"Why should you frighten Becky? She is going out as usual, I suppose?"

"Yes; she is dressing now. The Lorrimers are taking her to a dance at the Town Hall, and she will dine with them first."

"Why aren't you going, Mary?"

"I prefer to stay at home and look after your comforts, Mr Henshall."

"Ah, good girl," said the old man. "Well, see about the fire and the hot drink. Let me know when my room is ready. I shall go into my study until you tell me that everything is prepared."

Mary nodded, and went in the direction of the kitchen. Her face, at a first glance, might have been thought pleasant. A second glance would have made the observer of that same face not quite so certain with regard to it, but a third glance would have reassured him. For Mary had the knack of never wearing her heart on her sleeve; in short, under no possible circumstances would she dream of giving herself away.

She went to the kitchen now to give directions, and the old man, well satisfied, dropped into a chair by the fire in his study.

The house was small, but was kept in apple-pie order. The fire had just been made up and burned brightly; the hearth was clean. He turned on the electric light and spread out his limbs to the grateful warmth.

"Ah!" he murmured; "it is a cold night even for the time of year; and I am an old, old man, not in years, perhaps, but in—in mind. I have had a hard fight for it. I have conquered, though, all the same. There is plenty for Becky when I am gone. I am glad Becky is going to enjoy herself. I like to think that she has never wanted for anything all the days of her life. Poor little Beck!—left motherless at two years old and brought up by the old dad, and never, never, through all his wanderings and the many conflicting difficulties of his life wanting for anything. Poor, pretty, dear little Beck!"

There came a swishing sound of a silk-lined dress on the stairs. The door was flung open, and a tall, slim girl, with beautiful bright blue eyes, sparkling with animation and spirit, a pale face, and a mouth cast in pathetic lines, which fact gave a curious interest to her expression, entered the room.

"Why—my daddy!" she said. "Whatever is the matter? Aren't you well, dear old man?"

Old Henshall rose heavily from his seat, and, turning, looked at his daughter.

"I'm as right as rain, Rebecca. I am glad you are going out. 'Pon my word! those diamonds are pretty. How they shine on your white neck, my child!"

"I ought not to wear diamonds; I am too young," said the girl.

"Ought not to wear diamonds!" almost screamed the old man. "And what, may I ask, are the glittering baubles for except to adorn the person of youth and beauty?"

"So they are, of course," said Rebecca; "and I am right glad to have these. You gave them to me; and I love them for your sake. But you look queer and white, and you are back a whole hour earlier than usual; whatever is the matter?"

"And why should not I take an hour's holiday if I choose, miss?" was the reply; murmured, however, in a tone of the deepest affection. "What is to hinder me if I can get through my work? I am a rich man, my little Rebecca, and could live in a big house if I pleased, and keep dozens of servants. But I like the small way, and I am wedded, somehow, to the simple life; and if I give you Mary Gray as a companion, and as many diamonds as you can wear, and as many frocks as you choose to buy, you are content, aren't you?"

"Content?" said the girl. "I am about as happy as any mortal can be; only somehow—somehow I don't like your look, my daddy. Now listen: I don't a bit want to go with the Lorrimers to-night, and I can easily get out of it. Do let me stay with you. Somehow, you are always so frightfully busy, you never have time to give me much of your society. Do let me stay with you this evening."

A longing expression came into Robert Henshall's eyes, but he quickly suppressed it.

"Has Mary Gray been talking to you?"

"Mary? No, I haven't seen her. Lucy fastened my dress. She is such a nice maid, father. Oh, my darling! You surround me with luxuries, and all I want in the wide world is a little bit more of you. As to a big house—I should hate it; and heaps of servants would bother me to death. Now, are you certain you would rather that I went? "

"Of course I would; you are to go and have a right good time, and don't worry about me. Mary Gray is a clever young woman, and she'll see to my comforts. Now—be off with you. That is Mrs Lorrimer's ring at the front door. Go; and enjoy yourself."

The girl bent and kissed her father. She had absolutely regular features. She was a beautiful creature, made in a stately mould and carrying herself well. She wrapped a crimson opera cloak round her shoulders and went into the little hall. A moment later old Henshall heard the sound of carriage wheels as she was driven away. He sank back into his chair, locking and unlocking his thin hands.

"God! How I love her! But how precious ill I feel! These rigors mean fever. I never mistook that symptom yet. I am in for the 'flue'—beastly thing! I am glad my Rebecca has gone out. I can think of her bonny face as I lie wrapped up warm in bed. Wish Mary Gray would be quick, though. She is a good girl, a capable girl, and suits Becky very well. My word! how those diamonds did shine on my Becky's neck. It is worth an old man's toil to have such a creature as Rebecca belonging to him. Not that I am an old man. I'll get over this in a day or two, and be as vigorous as ever. Wonder if Gerard Lonsdale will turn up after all. The seven years will be up in a month. If he fails to appear, or to let me know by the time the month has expired, I shall be one of the richest men in England, and whether she likes it or not my Becky must live in a larger house and have more servants. Perhaps I will send Mary Gray away too. I am never sure whether I like that girl or not. I never did take to sandy hair and freckles and light blue eyes. But she is clever, and keeps the house in order. Ah! there you are, Mary."

"Your room is ready, Mr Henshall; and I will bring you a bowl of gruel in ten minutes, or whenever you like to ring your bell."

"Thank you, Mary; you are a good girl," said Henshall, getting up feebly from his chair. "Yes; I'll be glad to get to bed. Didn't Beck look fine when she went off to her dance?—bless her!"

"Oh, beautiful," said Mary—"beautiful."

The old man passed her without another word and very feebly ascended the stairs. When he had left her, Mary Gray looked round the room. Then she sank meditatively into the chair which Robert Henshall had vacated. There she crossed her slim, long hands on her lap, and gazed into the glowing fire with her light blue eyes. Her eyes were strong, and they did not blink, and no additional colour came into her pale, freckled face.

"Arnold says I am the cleverest little woman in the world," she remarked under her breath, "but I am not as clever as Arnold Deepe himself. I wonder if I really care for Arnold? It's rather fun being engaged, but I doubt if I shall be happy as his wife. He gives me presents, though."

She looked at a small ring which encircled her engagement finger. It held one tiny diamond in the middle. The ring was second-class, and Mary knew it.

"Arnold is poor—very poor," she said to herself; "but he is frightfully clever. If he were only one degree cleverer he'd be a match for Robert Henshall; but as it is he has met his equal in the old man. Well, I don't mean to marry Arnold for many a long day. I may break off the engagement, too; there is no saying. But it is just amusing to have someone to call, and put his arm round you and kiss you and call you his little girl, and take you out on Sundays, and sometimes, too, on Saturdays; and to have Rebecca looking on with those wonderful, bright blue eyes of hers, and that sweet, sad mouth of hers, and to hear her ask in her somewhat languid voice: 'What can it be like, Mary, to love a man as much as you love Arnold Deepe?' Ah! there's old Henshall ringing his bell. I must see to him; he looks uncommonly bad. If Rebecca were not an out-and-out fool she'd never go to that dance with her father looking like that."

Mary went to the old man's room. He was now in bed, propped up with pillows, but his shivers, or the rigors, as he called them, were worse. Mary had fetched the gruel and brought it to his bedside.

"I am very cold," he said, looking up at her.

"You will be hot and comfortable, Mr Henshall, after you have drunk this."

"I don't feel as if I could touch it. I am sick and giddy."

Mary put the gruel down at once. She had been trained for a year as a nurse, and understood something of illness. She laid her white hand on the old man's forehead. Then she felt his pulse, which was very quick and weak and fluttering.

"I will come back in a minute," she said.

She left the room. If was to fetch her clinical thermometer.

"Now," she said, in a cheerful tone as she returned, "we'll put this in your mouth and see if there is anything wrong. If you are normal, why, all you have to do is to lie still and sleep the thing off, but if your temperature is up I had best send for the doctor."

"No, no, I hate doctors, I won't have 'em," said the old man.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Mary. "You must do what is right and sensible for Rebecca's sake."

"Mary," said old Henshall, "I am so glad Becky is enjoying herself at that ball; I am so glad the Lorrimers have taken her. Nice people, the Lorrimers, eh?"

"Oh, pretty well. Now, put this in your mouth, and don't speak. You have to think of yourself for a minute or two, you know."

The old man obeyed. When Mary removed the thermometer she found that it registered 103°.

"Come," she said, speaking as cheerfully as she could, "you have got a rise of temperature."

"How much, Mary; how much?"

"Oh, nothing to be alarmed about; but you had best see the doctor. I will send for Dr Harris. He will give you something to make you comfy."

Mary left the room. The clinical thermometer lay on the table. She had forgotten to take it with her. A cunning and yet anxious look crept over old Henshall's face. He got swiftly out of bed, approached the table, took up the thermometer, and noted its registration for himself. He got back into bed with a groan.

"One hundred and three—good Lord! Then I am in for it. I doubt if I'll recover. I never felt so bad in my life. My head aches; my throat is bad, and these rigors get worse and worse."

In half an hour Dr Harris was standing by his patient's bedside. He was a kind, clever young man, and spoke reassuringly.

"Now, Mr Henshall," he said, "you must just make up your mind to remain in bed for a few days. You have got a touch of influenza and a considerable rise of temperature."

"A hundred and three—ha, ha!" laughed old Henshall. "That's a death-blow to a man of my age."

"Not at all; I have known men of your age have much higher temperatures who got quite well in a few days. But the weather is nasty; the time of year is against you, and you have been overdoing it, like all other City men. I will send you in some medicine—something to soothe you and make you sleep, and by the morning you will probably be much better."

Harris left the room to confer with Mary Gray on the stairs.

"Well?" she said, her eyes gleaming strangely; "he is very bad, isn't he?"

"He is, poor old fellow. His heart is very weak, too; altogether, I don't like his symptoms. He ought to have a nurse."

"I can nurse him," said Mary. "I was trained; I was at Bart.'s for a year."

"Very well; you can manage him to-night, I daresay. In the morning I shall know whether there is any fear of pneumonia. That is what we must dread, but I hope to avert it. I will send in the medicine as quickly as possible."

The doctor ran down stairs. In the hall he was met by a man who had just entered. This man was tall, very thin, with a dark face and sunken black eyes. He was thirty years of age, and had a somewhat insolent manner. Dr Harris just glanced at him, gave him the slightest nod of recognition, and left the house.

Arnold Deepe went into the dining-room. There was no one present, and he noticed with some surprise that neither were there any preparations for dinner. He often dined at the Henshalls, and his intention was to do so that evening. He pottered about the room and suddenly stood still before a pile of letters which had arrived by the last post and were waiting on their accustomed salver for Mr Henshall's inspection. Arnold Deepe did not think it at all beneath his dignity to examine them himself. He looked from one to the other. Some were mere circulars; a few looked so essentially business-like and at the same time so ordinary that they did not rouse Deepe's curiosity in the very least. But there was one which he gazed at again and again. It was written on thin foreign paper, and bore the postmark "Teheran." The writing was in a good, honest, manly hand—the hand of a young person, too. But what possible correspondent could old Robert Henshall have at Teheran? Why, Teheran was in Persia, and—Deepe paused and considered for a few minutes.

There came a light step on the stairs, and, without an instant's hesitation, he slipped the foreign letter marked "Teheran" into his pocket. He had scarcely done so before Mary entered the room.

"Ah," she said. "Here you are! There won't be any dinner to-night; Rebecca is out, and Mr Henshall is ill."

"Ill!" said Deepe, in an anxious tone. "You might give us a kiss, old girl."

Mary raised her colourless, thin lips to her lover's. He kissed her without any special fervour, putting his arm round her waist, however, and drawing her close to him.

"Henshall ill? Did you say ill? Does that mean that he is in bed?"

"Yes; he came back a good hour earlier than usual. He is in bed now, and the doctor has just been. He is rather bad, and I am going to nurse him to-night."

"Then he won't want his letters, Mary, till the morning?"

"Bless you, no! He is not even thinking about them; but I may as well collect them and put them into the study. When he is better to-morrow he may inquire for them."

"All right, Mary; all right. Then I suppose I am not wanted?"

"I am afraid I can't stay with you, Arnold; I have got to look after the old man."

"What is his own daughter doing? Why should you have all the drudgery?"

"Am not I here for the purpose?" answered the girl. But she pressed a little closer to Arnold Deepe as she spoke.

"I wish I could take you out of this, Molly," he answered. "I hate to see you always devoting yourself to others. I want you! I am jealous of all the rest of the world when they make use of you."

"But you can't afford to marry me, Arnold dear, and, in short, there is no help for it. Until you are a rich man and I have put by something we must bear with things as they are. Now, go, like a good fellow, for I am frightfully busy."

"I will call early in the morning," said Deepe, "and if I were you, Mary, I would leave those letters on the salver. I will look in before I start for town. Just leave them there; you can pretend you forgot all about them."

"What do you mean?" she asked, startled at his manner.

"What I say," he replied; and his deep-set black eyes grew very black, and there came an ominous queer twitch to his moustache.

Mary looked full up at him; the cunning in her eyes which people so often noticed when they just slightly knew her, and which seemed to vanish out of sight when they knew her well, was very apparent at that moment.

"You have a reason?" she said in a low tone.

"I have, and I will just whisper it to you, sweetheart. Our marriage, our little home! My Mary—the mistress of her own house—not at the beck and call of a stupid, fine lady like Rebecca Henshall, and a fanciful old man like her father. Leave the letters on the salver. I shall look in first thing in the morning."

Mary raised her eyes to Arnold Deepe's face. Just for a moment a look of distress filled them. She had the appearance of one who was about to struggle against a decree which she felt to be wrong. Then the man's influence over her made itself felt. The colour of which she possessed so little mounted into her cheeks and she said in a low tone:

"Of course, Arnold, I will do what you wish."

"Naturally you will," he replied, "and you will keep the thing a secret. It is for our mutual benefit that I speak."

"Leave me now," said Mary, almost with impatience; "I must go to my patient: I ought not to have neglected him so long."

Arnold Deepe left the house. Mary remained standing in the dining-room. The distress which she had felt when he spoke to her about leaving the letters on the salver returned once more to her face. She said to herself, "When he went he did not even kiss me." Then she sank down in a chair, and gave herself up to thought.

Mary Gray was now in the full pride of her womanhood. She was twenty-five. She knew well that each year as it passed would take something from her charm. She was not the sort of woman who wears well. Already her hair was less bright than it had been, and she even detected a few grey hairs here and there. Her lips were thin. They had a firm expression, but they were not the sort of lips that an ordinary man would love. There was nothing whatever lovable about her, although her face was full of cleverness.

Mary now, as she clasped her hands together, thought of her past. Her past life had not been an easy one. She had been left an orphan at a very early age. Her education had been neglected. Almost from the time she could think she knew well that she would have to earn her own living. At one time she thought of being a nurse, and studied for that purpose for a year at Bart.'s. But the restrictions, joined to the severe work, told on her. She gave up her training long before it was complete, and at last, in what she considered a remarkably lucky hour, she got a situation as companion and housekeeper to Rebecca Henshall.

In Henshall's house she was treated with all consideration and kindness. She might have been a happy, she might have been a good, girl if she had pleased. Rebecca had so warm and true a heart that she could not but be kind to everyone. It is true that Mary was scarcely to her taste, but nothing would have induced her to part from her. She pitied the lonely woman. There were few things she would not do to promote her interests. Henshall, too, had a regard for Mary. She was capable, even if she was not affectionate. She was a good housekeeper, and kept his little home in perfect order. She never showed the envy she really felt. When Rebecca showed her the beautiful presents which her adoring father lavished upon his only child, Mary's ecstasy over them was almost pretty to witness.

It was in her own room afterwards that her envy and jealousy found vent. At moments such as these she hated Rebecca. She did not see the justice of giving one girl so much and another so little. She complained in a little diary which she kept, and which was always carefully locked, so that no one could read the contents. This diary was Mary's safety valve, and greatly astonished would her host and his daughter have been had they read its contents.

It was on a certain day, about a year before the commencement of this story, that Mary met her fate in the person of Arnold Deepe. Deepe was by no means an attractive man, but his cleverness, his shrewdness, his discontent with the life he lived roused the girl's sympathy. She found as she talked to him that he also hated the rich and prosperous, that he also was very much of the opinion that the ways of Providence were unfair. Deepe was a very poor man. He had only a small clerkship. He was unable even to afford a sitting-room, and when he was not in his employer's office, or wandering in the streets or taking his meals at cheap restaurants, he had nothing that bore even the semblance of a home except a dingy bedroom at the top of a dingy house.

Arnold Deepe had no love whatever for Mary Gray. Nevertheless, he made love to her, and finally asked her to join her life to his whenever they were both well enough off to contemplate marriage. His reason for this was that he believed Mary would help him.

Mary told her secret to Rebecca. She was engaged. The tall, thin man with dark eyes and a somewhat cadaverous face would be her husband some day—oh, not for a long time, but some day. Rebecca was deeply interested. She was full of sympathy, not unmixed with a certain curiosity. She wondered what it was like to be engaged, to be loved by one man beyond all other women, to walk with him, to talk with him, to tell him every secret of her heart. Once or twice she asked Mary questions on the subject, and Mary replied with a laugh:

"Oh, it isn't what you think. Arnold and I never make fools of ourselves. He doesn't even make love to me except very, very seldom, but I think I like him all the better for that."

"Like him!" exclaimed Rebecca. "Mary, you must love him."

"Yes, I love him," exclaimed Mary; but she found a certain difficulty in uttering the words.

Now, on this special night, she felt that the thing which bound her to Arnold Deepe was assuming the strength of a giant. She felt that it bound her round. In short, it turned her into a crooked course. Mary Gray knew quite well that in her heart of hearts she was destitute of principle. She knew that if the right and the wrong were presented to her to choose from she would accept the wrong if it helped her to a better position in life. She little guessed that it was because of this trait in her character that Deepe had proposed for her. Mary lived with wealthy people. One day she would be of immense use to him. Up to the present, however, he had kept his thoughts on this subject to himself. He was always pleased when the Henshalls asked him to dine. He felt that he owed Mary a debt of gratitude for introducing him to the rich man and his very handsome daughter. Deepe often found his eyes fixed on Rebecca, who, very much younger than Mary, had all the charm of face and manner which Mary lacked.

"Why did I not think of winning her heart?" was his thought at these moments. "I should have been first in the field. She is only just out. Oh, it is too late now; but what a fool I have been to engage myself to Mary Gray. Well, Mary must help me. I don't mean to be a poor man long. By hook or by crook I will climb up the ladder. Mary shall help me to make my ascent."

After Mary Gray had sat for some time in the dining-room she rose, uttered a quick, tremulous sigh and said to herself, "I begin to fear Arnold Deepe. He has got a power over me. Why do I tremble when my eyes look into his, and why don't I love him as a girl ought to love the man she has promised to marry? I hate—I hate what he asked me to do to-night. Why did he ask me to leave the letters on the salver? He had a purpose. I meant to refuse to comply, but when he looked at me I got that stupid sort of fear over me. I could not help myself, I had to obey him."

After a time Mary went upstairs and softly entered the sick-room. Henshall was asleep. His cheeks were deeply flushed and his breathing hurried. Mary knew at once that his temperature was rising and that he was in reality very ill. She put a candle into a shaded corner, lit it, and then turned off the electric light. By-and-by the sick man moved, turned on his pillow, and opened his drowsy eyes.

"Is that you, my little Beck?" he said.

"No, sir," answered Mary's quiet voice. "Rebecca, as you know, is out enjoying herself, but I am sitting with you."

"You are a good girl, Mary Gray," said Henshall, "only I do wish you would break yourself of one habit."

"What is that?" she asked in some surprise.

"I wish you would not talk as you do of my daughter. Rebecca went to her dance to-night at my express request. She wanted to stay with me."

"I am sure she did, Mr Henshall."

"Your tone was not nice when you spoke of her just now," said the old man.

"Oh, I am sorry," replied Mary. "I did not mean anything. I love Rebecca very much."

"So you ought. She is very good to you."

"She is, sir; and so are you good to me."

"You are a clever girl, you are well-meaning, and you suit me," said Henshall. "You take the worry of housekeeping from my dear child. You manage the servants; you manage the house. My little Rebecca is, of course, the real mistress, but you do the work."

"Yes," said Mary, under her breath, "I do the work."

The sick man did not hear the whispered words. After a minute he said:

"The doctor thinks me very bad, does he not?"

"He hopes you will be better in the morning, Mr Henshall."

Henshall raised himself a little on his pillow. He flung his hot hand restlessly outside the coverlet. His eyes were fixed on Mary.

"Bend forward a little," he said; "I want to look at you."

Mary pulled her chair a little forward.

"That won't do," said Henshall, in the irritated voice of the sick. "Switch on one of the lights."

"So much light is bad for you, sir."

"No, it isn't. Anyhow, I wish to see your face. Switch it on."

Mary did so. The room was now full of light. The fire in the grate burned merrily.

"This is a very comfortable room," said old Henshall.

"Yes, sir."

"So warm," he continued; "so well furnished. It isn't a very large bedroom, still, it isn't a small one. I have slept on this bed for many years. I have dreamt dreams here, and I have gained strength and refreshing sleep here. To-night I shall not sleep well."

"Oh, yes, you will," replied Mary, "after you have taken your medicine."

"I shall not sleep well," was the answer: "I shall dream to-night."

"I hope not, sir."

"Mary," said the old man, "I can see your face distinctly now. Tell me exactly what the doctor said."

"He said you had a sharp attack, but he hoped to pull you through."

"My God! Then that means that I am in danger."

"I hope not, sir—indeed, I hope not."

"Mary, I want to tell you something. It is a secret. You never reveal secrets, do you?"

"Never," said Mary.

She told the lie with firmness. What thing ever happened in that house that she had not spoken of to Arnold Deepe?

"You can't do much mischief even if you do repeat my words," said the old man. "What is the day of the month, Mary?"

"The twenty-ninth of January," was the reply.

"I am particularly anxious to live for another month. I have a special reason."

"Have you, sir? Oh, I hope you will live for many years."

"That is as God wills, Mary; but, somehow, I don't think He will prolong my life. All the same, I do ask Him for a month—just one month more. I will speak to the doctor about this in the morning. It is most essential—most essential to me that I should see the greater part of February out."

"Why so, sir?" asked Mary.

"My good girl, I cannot possibly give you my reasons. To tell you why I want another month of life would be to tell you more than your clever little head is capable of holding. But I shall speak to the doctor in the morning. No stone must be left unturned to give me that extra month. I can afford to see every great specialist in London. A doctor is worth very little if he cannot give a man one month of life."

"Don't dwell on it, Mr Henshall; you only weaken yourself by doing so. I am sure and certain that you will have that month."

Henshall gave a laugh of pleasure.

"You think so?" he said. "It comforts me to hear you say it."

Mary's eyes sparkled. Then she said, "Live, sir; live for many years; that is my wish for you."

"You speak beautifully, Mary; and really your words and your belief comfort me a great deal. Mary, I am not inclined to sleep. If my own girl were here I should have a great deal to say to her to-night; but as she is not I will talk to you."

"What you say, sir, excites me."

Henshall was silent for a minute. Then he said, "Have I said anything special?"

"Only about your desire to see February out."

"Ah, yes—ah, yes," he said, moving his hands restlessly as he spoke. "You don't forget that that is a secret. You won't repeat it—even to my girl?"

"To no one, sir; to no one, of course."

"You won't even talk it over with the doctor? I shall have to tell the doctor, but you must not speak of it."

"If you wish it, sir, I will not."

"I do wish it. This is a secret between you and me and the doctor; but you and the doctor are not to talk it over."

"I quite understand, sir."

"Mary, if it is the will of Providence to spare me there may be great, very great changes ahead."

"What sort of changes, sir?"

"You will like them," said old Henshall. "They will mean a big house instead of a little one; a large staff of servants instead of two. They will mean fine clothes for you as well as Rebecca, a carriage for you to drive in, and horses for you to ride, and a motor-car—oh, yes, we must have a motor-car. I shall launch out—yes, I shall launch out. I must do it for the sake of my girl. You will like these changes, eh, Mary?"

"Yes, Mr Henshall, for they will mean that you are a rich man. Oh, sir, I do love riches. I wish I had them myself I hate to be poor."

"You won't feel your poverty if you are in my house—my new grand house. Your salary will be doubled, and you will have presents; oh, yes, you will be well off."

"Sir, are you not exciting yourself very much? The colour in your cheeks is too high. You ought to try to be quiet, and to sleep."

"I am too restless to sleep, and this is as good an opportunity as any other for telling you what is in my mind. You are engaged to be married to Arnold Deepe."

"You have been very kind to me about that, sir."

"Against my will I have been kind," said old Henshall.

"Oh, sir!"

"Because Rebecca wished it," continued the old man. "I gave Rebecca a reason, a strong reason, for my dislike to your marriage. She begged of me never to mention it to you. I did not promise her, but her wish influenced me, and up to the present I have said nothing. My dear Mary, it would give me great happiness if you broke off this engagement."

Mary felt herself trembling. Her light blue eyes were very bright indeed as she fixed them on the old City merchant's flushed and anxious face. In her heart of hearts she echoed the wish he had just expressed.

"Sir," she said, "if you know anything which I do not know against the man I have promised to marry you will be good enough to tell me. It is not fair to leave an orphan girl in the dark."

"An orphan girl!" repeated Henshall with a start.

"Oh, sir, of course you know that. My mother died at my birth, and my father when I was a little kiddy. I don't remember either of them."

"Poor child, poor child!"

"I had a very lonely and sad life, sir, until you and Rebecca took me up. Since then I have been happy. I have looked on you almost as though you were my father, and on dear Rebecca as though she were my sister."

"Very proper indeed," said old Henshall; "very correct and proper. How long have you been living with us now, Mary?"

"Five happy years," she answered. "I was twenty when I came to you: I am now twenty-five. When I first came to this house Rebecca was a child of fourteen. She is now nineteen."

"Is my pretty one as old as that? Somehow I forgot it. How time does fly."

"Yes, sir. It flies very fast. But what about poor Arnold? Why should I not marry him?"

"Once," said Henshall, looking at the girl as steadily as he could, "once I had a clerk in my office. It was some time ago. He was one of the under clerks. He served me for a year. His name was Arnold Deepe. Has Deepe ever spoken to you of the year he spent with me?"

"No," said Mary. "Sir, why did he leave you?"

"I will only tell you that circumstances compelled me to part with him."

"Was not Arnold a good clerk, sir?"

"As far as his duties went he was the best clerk I ever had."

"You did not dismiss him, sir, because of an aversion to him, did you?"

"That was not the reason. I am sorry that he never spoke to you himself about it."

"He never did, sir."

"Mary, when next you see him, tell him that I have told you, and ask him why he left. He will, of course, keep the matter no longer a secret from you."

Mary bowed her head. Her hands were trembling. She felt a queer shiver running down her spine.

"I remember," she said at last, "the day Arnold came here—the first day, I mean, after I had promised to marry him. It was dear Rebecca who insisted on his being asked. After dinner you and he stayed for a considerable time over wine."

"Ah!—you noticed that?" said Henshall.

"Yes, sir; I noticed that. Perhaps, sir, you were talking to him about that time."

"I was."

"You forgave him then?"

"I have not mentioned to you, Mary, that there was anything to forgive."

Just then there came a tap at the room door. Mary went to open it. The parlour-maid, Lucy, stood without. She had a bottle of medicine on a small salver in her hand.

"This has just come from the chemist's, miss," she said.

"Give it to me," replied Mary. "The chemist should not have been so long making up the medicine."

"It has only just come, miss."

Mary was re-entering the room, holding the bottle in her hand, when Lucy said:

"You would perhaps like me to sit up later than usual to-night, miss?"

"It would be very kind of you, Lucy."

"Is the master very bad, miss?"

"I hope not."

Mary dropped her voice to a whisper. "But all the same," she added, "I am anxious. I should be glad if you sat up."

"I will, miss, with the greatest pleasure."

Lucy tripped downstairs, and Mary returned to the sick-room with the medicine. She opened the bottle and poured out a dose. She brought the glass containing the medicine to Henshall's side.

"Now, sir," she said, "you must not talk any more. I am very much obliged to you for what you have told me."

"You will be sure to ask Arnold?" said the old man.

"Oh, certainly, sir."

"And—and if what he tells you leads you to break off this engagement you may be quite certain of my friendliness, and of the friendliness of my Rebecca, in this matter. You shall have the thousand pounds and your home will be assured; and, Mary Gray, there are other men in the world. If I could tell girls like yourself what I know they would none of them marry bad men."

Mary trembled so much at these last words that the medicine glass nearly fell from her fingers.

"Please, Mr Henshall," she said, "you must not talk any more. Drink this, and then I will turn off the electric light."

Henshall drank the medicine. Mary put the room into semi-darkness and sat on a chair at a little distance. The medicine was soothing. It contained a slight opiate, and was of a nature to reduce fever.

Henshall by-and-by fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER II

Arnold Deepe went straight from the Henshalls' house in Paddock Row into a bustling thoroughfare. He paused before a restaurant. The restaurant was full of light, and also full of the sort of people who dine night after night at such places. Deepe knew this eating-house well. He entered with the sort of swagger he always possessed. He marched up to the far end of the long room, called a waitress who had often served him before, and asked her to get him a small table which he could have alone.

She did so after a very little difficulty. He sank into his seat, ordered a simple dinner with a pint of stout, and sat back waiting for it. One or two people, who knew him slightly, nodded to him. He nodded in reply, his insolence growing more marked each time he saw a chance acquaintance.

Presently he took up a paper and pretended to bury himself in its contents. While he did so, however, he kept one hand in his pocket, and that hand clasped the letter marked "Teheran," and addressed to old Mr Henshall.

The girl brought him his dinner. He ate in an abstracted manner, paid his bill and went out. He now took an omnibus, mounted on the roof, and was borne in the direction of Islington.

He was put down after half-an-hour's ride in a somewhat obscure part of that vast suburb. He walked down a side street, crossed a square, entered another street, and stopped before a shabby house. He took a latch-key from his pocket and let himself in.

If the house was shabby in its exterior it was still more so inside. The hall was long and narrow, ill furnished, with torn linoleum on the floor, and a very dull gas jet throwing but a feeble glimmer of light up the dark staircase. Deepe, however, was accustomed to these squalid surroundings. He ran upstairs, three steps at a time, and presently found himself in a sort of bed-sitting-room of the poorest description at the top of the house.

There was a feeble fire burning in the grate. He turned on some incandescent light, which made his room at once comparatively cheerful, pulled down the blinds with a jerk, and, taking a small saucepan from a cupboard in the wall, filled it with water. He put the saucepan on the fire in order that the water might get hot. When it smoked and steamed he held the foreign letter marked "Teheran" over it, raised the flap gingerly, and took the contents from the envelope. He had locked the door and was sure of being uninterrupted.

The letter was in the same manly writing which characterised the address on the envelope. The paper was thin and foreign.

"Dear Mr Henshall"—it ran,—"I shall be in England, and will call upon you the end of February. I expect to get to England about the 20th of the month, and will go straight to your business address—the address you gave me in Teheran seven years ago. I am bringing you back the five hundred pounds you were so generous as to lend me, and the full interest on the money. In return I am anxious to secure the diamond. When we have made our exchange we shall be quits—that is, in one sense; but I shall never, as long as I live, forget your kindness and how you helped a man through a tight corner and set him on his legs. You must have thought that I was lost during all these years of silence, but when we meet I shall have a strange tale to tell you—one which I dare not whisper on this paper. I can, however, say that I have been in prison and in peril of my life, and that even now I am a hunted man. I shall not be safe or able to breathe freely, or to enjoy the fact that I am only twenty-nine years of age, until I hold that diamond in my clasp and give it to the one who demands it back.

"Independently of all these things, however, you may be glad to hear that the money which saved me, and which you so nobly lent me, has borne excellent fruit, and I come to England with a considerable fortune. All I need now, therefore, is to make things straight with you and to put things straight for myself. —Yours, with everlasting gratitude,

"GERARD LONSDALE."

Deepe read this letter over once—twice. Then he got up and, going to his mantelpiece, looked at the clock. It was still comparatively early; not quite ten. He felt excited. The contents of the letter stimulated him. He said to himself that he always suspected a mystery.

He had served for a year of his life as a clerk in the office of Robert Henshall, and although he was forced to resign this employment owing to circumstances which Henshall never spoke of, he had made good use of his opportunities. He was the sort of man whose observation is so keen that nothing escapes him, and whose memory is so good that he remembers the most minute details.

"Ah," he said to himself on this occasion, "I begin to get a glimmer of Henshall's strange interest in Teheran, in Persia, in the Shah."

Again he looked at the clock.

"The diamond!" he murmured. "That fellow comes back with a fortune. He wants the diamond; he is afraid; why? He says he is hunted. He confesses to having spent some of his time in prison. The diamond will put him right. Suppose he never gets it? Suppose I see Mary to-night—yes, to-night!"

Deepe snatched up his hat, thrust it on his head, turned off the gas and ran downstairs. He was a poor man who counted his money by shillings, but so excited was he now that he gave himself the luxury of a hansom all the way from Islington to Paddock Row.

He reached the house where Mary Gray lived about half-past ten. There were lights burning in the hall, so he was not afraid to ring. His ring was low, and sounded timorously through the house.

Presently a neatly-dressed maid-servant answered his summons.

"Can I see Miss Gray, and at once?"

'I don't know, sir," replied the girl. "Miss Gray is in master's room, and master is very ill."

"Take her place for a few minutes, please," said Deepe. "I want to see her, and it is urgent. Stay in the room with the old gentleman while Miss Gray is with me. Now, go up; and be quick."

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"Very well, sir."

Mary came down rubbing her eyes as though she had been half asleep.

"What do you want with me at this hour, Arnold?" she said.

Her voice had an annoyed ring in it. She did not like her lover to come to the house at so late an hour.

"Is there a room where I can see you alone?" he said.

"Why, I suppose so, any number; but I can't stay with you. The old man is highly feverish and restless."

"You need not enlighten him, need you, dear?" was the answer. "I have something of the utmost importance to communicate to you. That dreadful, stand-off, uppish Miss Rebecca isn't back yet, is she?"

"Becky?" said Mary. "She won't be back until to-morrow morning. She is spending the night at the Lorrimers."

"Ah, good—good. Then you have an opportunity, Mary, of serving me as man was never served before."

"What do you mean? You always talk in riddles."

"Perhaps I do," was the answer; "but there is a meaning at the back of them. Ah, I see you have let the fire out in the dining-room."

"Of course," said Mary. "My place is upstairs."

"I am very cold," said Deepe, shivering a little as Mary switched on the electric light. "Can't you get me some whisky-and-water?"

"Oh, yes," was the reply; "but you must not take too much. Now, please, your business—quick."

"Mary, I did something underhand this afternoon."

"Did you, Arnold?" replied the girl. "It would not be for the first time, would it?"

"How well you know me!" he answered, with a laugh. "You say such things, and yet you love me."

"Sometimes I am not quite sure whether I do love you," was the reply—a little unexpected, for Arnold Deepe started when the girl uttered the words. "But please understand that always—always, from the very first, I knew that you were crooked." Then she gave a queer laugh. "You look your name—deep."

Arnold smiled.

"Never mind," he said. "Perhaps we are both built in that mould. Perhaps that is why I really attract you."

"Please don't become psychological now," she answered. "My place is by old Mr Henshall's bedside. I have undertaken to nurse him until the morning. There, you have taken as much whisky-and-water as is good for you. Go, please, Arnold, go at once."

"I have not an idea of going. I have got to tell you something, and you have to listen. There is a grand, very grand opportunity before you. Miss Henshall is away; the old man is very ill in bed; that maid-servant who opened the door—Lucy, I think you called her—can manage him just as well as you can. You have your work cut out for you."

"Oh—what do you mean?" said Mary.

"I mean something so important that I took a hansom all the way from Islington to talk to you. I told you earlier this evening to leave those letters on the salver. There they are quite right. You asked for a reason, and I said the reason was our marriage, our little home, our happy life together. Mary, the reason has grown stronger, the marriage day has come much nearer. . . . Mary, the home won't be a little home; it will be large and spacious and well-furnished; and perhaps it will be my Mary's turn to wear jewels round her neck and to look as she can look when she is dressed to advantage."

"Oh!" said Mary Gray.

There was no doubt that she was intensely excited now. There was no doubt also that she forgot old Henshall, who was struggling with fever, weakness and weariness upstairs.

"What is it, Arnold?" she said in a whisper. "Do—do be quick."

"I did a mean thing to-day, little girl."

"Did you?" she replied. "That is very likely."

"I stole a letter from that tray."

"Arnold!"

"Yes; here it is; I have brought it back again. You may read it if you like."

"I!" she said, backing a step or two. "No, no—I won't. It is a foreign letter. What possible interest can you take in it? Oh, please put it back; why did you open it? He would turn me from the house; he would never speak to either of us again if he knew that you had done this thing."

"He won't know, Mary, you needn't be frightened; but you may as well read the letter."

"No—no," she said. "No—no."

"Well, just as you please. Have you got any gum in the house? I must refasten it."

"There is gum in the study," she answered.

"Go and fetch it, will you?"

She obeyed. She brought it back with her. Deepe cleverly put enough on the thin flap of the envelope to make it adhere. He then laid the letter back on the tray.

"I always knew," he said, "that Henshall had a peculiar interest in Teheran, and in Persia. When I saw a letter addressed to him from that place my curiosity was aroused, and I thought I would acquaint myself with its contents. The contents give away part of a secret. It is sufficient for you to know, Mary, that seven years ago Robert Henshall was in Teheran, and there he helped a young man, whose nationality, I expect, is English, out of a tight corner. In short, he lent him five hundred pounds. Being a man of business, he required some security, and the young man, by name Gerard Lonsdale, gave him a diamond which evidently is of very great value. Lonsdale is returning on the twentieth of February, in order to pay back his money with interest and reclaim the diamond. Now, my dear Mary, don't stare at me with those lack-lustre eyes; I am putting two and two together. There are many rich people in Teheran, but no one so rich as the Shah. His diamonds are proverbial all over the world for their magnificence How did this young man get the diamond? Why is it of great value? He describes vaguely that he has suffered much since he parted with the gem; in short, he has been imprisoned, and hunted, and his life is worth very little to him until he restores to someone, Mary—to someone—what now is in Robert Henshall's possession. This young man comes back, however, rich. Notwithstanding the fact that he was in prison he has also had time to secure wealth to himself, and returns to England with a considerable fortune. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand that you have read a letter which you had no right to read, and are meddling in matters which don't concern you," was Mary Gray's reply.

"Don't concern me, girl! But they do concern me —they concern us both. Can't you see for yourself that if I—I get possession of that diamond I hold that young man, Gerard Lonsdale, in the hollow of my hand, to do what I like with him? Don't you perceive that his fortune is not his own, but mine; that I can make any terms with him I like? Are you not clever enough to read my motive aright?"

"I am—I am," she said. "It is horrible! You want to—to steal the diamond from Mr Henshall!"

"No, dear," he answered, laying his hand on her shoulder, "by no means; but I want you to steal it. You have your opportunity. I want you to get it to-night."

Mary gave a harsh laugh.

"I cannot possibly do so," was the reply. "I have not the most remote idea where he keeps his treasures. If he has the valuable diamond you have just spoken of in his possession he has most likely put it into the bank."

"He has done nothing of the kind, my good girl. Men of the Henshall type never, never give up what they value most to put that possession into a really safe place. The diamond—in all probability stolen from the Shah's palace—is in this house, and you have got to find it—and to-night. Do you hear?"

"Nonsense, Arnold."

"It is not nonsense. I have told you what I wish. You may struggle for a little, but you won't struggle long. My dear Mary Gray, do you know why I am fond of you?" As Deepe spoke he stretched out his thin, bony hand and drew the girl towards him. "Because," he said, raising her chin and looking into her eyes, "you are bad like myself; you have no principle, you have no honour. We fit—we two—our chance has come. Don't throw it away."

As Deepe said the last words he released Mary, pushing her from him with a little violence, and, going into the hall on tiptoe, opened the door softly and let himself out.

After he had left her Mary stood for a few minutes, her hands locked together, her head bowed. Then she went upstairs. She entered the sick-room very softly. Lucy, who was at once parlour-maid and Rebecca's special servant, came gently to meet her.

"The master seems very restless," Miss Gray.

"That is to be expected, Lucy. Now go to bed; I shall not want you before morning."

"You are sure you would not like me to stay with you, miss?"

"By no means. Go at once, don't whisper; that is very disturbing to an invalid."

Lucy left the room on tiptoe, and Mary, after putting a few lumps of coal on the fire, which she did softly and noiselessly, with gloved hands, took a seat not far from the bedside. She was trembling a great deal, and was glad to find herself in the darkened room. By-and-by the warmth and stillness soothed her, and her heart beat less violently.

"I must break with Arnold," she said to herself. "He is mistaken about me. He is a terrible man—I did not know how terrible until Mr Henshall spoke of him. And now that talk has been followed by his visit, and by the fearful things he has said—oh, I must break with him!"

But in her heart of hearts Mary knew that she would not break with Deepe. She was brave enough when absent from him, but in his presence she knew that he had a strange attraction for her. Now, as she sat by the sick-bed, the knowledge of what the man really was, and of the way he bound her to him and kept her, so to speak, under the sole of his foot, gave her such a sense of terror that she could scarcely keep calm. By-and-by Henshall's voice was heard.

"Are you there, Mary?"

"Yes, Mr Henshall. You have had a very nice sleep, sir. Can I do anything for you?"

"You can do a great deal. Take one of the blankets off; I am too hot. Ah, that's better; and turn my pillow. I am thirsty; I must have something to drink. Get me some lemonade."

Mary brought the lemonade. The sick man drank off a glass and then motioned her to take it away.

"I heard a bell ring some time ago," he said. "It may have been a dream, of course; but I don't think it was."

"No, Mr Henshall, it was not a dream."

"Who called, Mary—who called at so late an hour?"

"Arnold Deepe, sir."

"What right had he to come disturbing you at midnight?"

"He had something he wanted to say to me—something of a private nature."

"Ah, private, was it? If I were you I shouldn't like to have many secrets with a man like Arnold Deepe."

"When I marry him, sir, I must know all his secrets."

"You are not married yet, Mary, and I have already told you what I think of this match."

"Yes, Mr Henshall, you have. But your words are useless, sir, for I cannot give Arnold up."

"Then you love him?"

"Not exactly; but I cannot break with him."

"You have promised me, have you not, Mary, to ask Deepe himself why he left my office two or three years ago?"

"Yes," replied Mary, "I have promised you, Mr Henshall."

"You will keep your word?"

"I—if I can," was the reply.

"I beg of you to keep it," said old Henshall. "Your fear of the man—for I know that you are afraid of him—ought to warn you against the danger of becoming his wife. Once you are his wife I can assure you that you will be unhappy. Be wise while there is time. Ask him boldly why he kept a certain event in his life, a most important event, from you."

"If it was anything that he would not like me to know is it not natural that he would keep it a secret?" was Mary's answer.

"In this case his silence is more than dishonourable," said Henshall. "You have reminded me of the day when Deepe dined with us after your engagement was made known. The man would never have set foot inside my house but for my darling Rebecca. She pleaded for him. She begged of me to ask him for your sake. I could scarcely describe to you, Mary, the agony of mind I endured when I sat at the head of my own table and saw that man seated opposite to you, and knew that you were engaged to him."

"Nevertheless," said Mary, "you—you forgave him, sir."

"On a condition, I did forgive him. I discovered to-night that he has never kept that condition."

"Oh!" said Mary with a start, "what was the condition, Mr Henshall?"

"He faithfully promised that he would tell you everything that had occurred. He took a vow in my presence that he would do so. He showed considerable emotion. I saw the tears rise to his eyes. I was touched; I knew that it was possible even for a bad man to repent. I thought that he had repented and that you, little Mary, had saved him. Who was I to be cruel and unforgiving? I told him that if he kept his word and spoke the simple truth to you, if he told you exactly what occurred on that momentous occasion, I would withdraw my objection to the engagement and would allow him to visit you here. He gave me his faithful promise. A month afterwards I met him, and I asked him if he had kept his word. He assured me that he had. I was fool enough to believe him. I believed him to the extent of putting myself out of my way to give him a recommendation. He owes his present small berth to me. I find now that the man could vow, and break his vow. He never told you?"

"He never did," said Mary. "It—it was dreadful of him."

"Get him to tell you, my dear. Don't delay. Have the knowledge from him while I am still alive. Will you do this, Mary?"

"I will," she answered. She suddenly flung herself on her knees by the bedside. She was powerfully affected by Henshall's words, and she felt just then that she hated Deepe; she could not marry such a man; she would not marry him unless he told her everything.

Henshall himself was weary with headache, fever and pain in every limb. He lay silent. Mary watched him. He was not asleep, for whenever she stirred he opened his eyes. Once, towards morning, he opened them wide and looked at her.

"I have had a dream," he said. "I told you, did I not, that I should dream to-night? I have had my dream, and I know what is before me. I am lying on my deathbed."

Mary shook her head.

"You needn't contradict me," said Henshall, "for I know. A man generally has a premonition when the end has really come. I have my premonition."

"But, sir, you spoke with intense earnestness about living for a month longer."

Henshall's eyes grew bright.

"Yes—yes," he said; "and I want my month—I do want my month. But it may not be given to me."

"Then, sir, you will be sorry to die?"

"Not really, Mary Gray. Death has no real fears for me. I am not what is called a religious man; nevertheless, I believe in religion. I believe in the future life, and I believe in the goodness of God. It is natural to be a bit afraid of the old traditions of childhood: the memory of them comes over a man as he lies here. There is the Great White Throne, and the Books that are opened, and there is the final Judgment, and the anger of the God who made us, if we have not lived humbly with Him and tried to do our duty; and there are the sorrows of the Redeemer, who gave His life for us. I mention these things because it never was my habit to tell lies; still less, therefore, could I tell them now. I am dying, and I am afraid of none of these things. I trust in the mercy of my God. I can even bear to leave my precious child alone in the world. I should like very much to stay on earth for another month, but if it cannot be, it cannot; the Lord will provide."

"Oh, sir," said Mary, "you do excite yourself. You must sleep."

"Sleep?" said old Henshall. "I shall not sleep any more to-night. And why should I sleep?" he added. "Sleep is close at hand—days, weeks, months, years of sleep. Why should I not stay awake while I can? I shall sleep myself into dust all too soon—all—too—soon. Mary, my dear, I like you for some things, but I do not like you for everything. I have always noticed a certain want in you, and I am not afraid to speak of it now. You are not as straight as you might be."

"Sir!" said Mary. Her voice shook.

"I repeat my words, child; you are not as straight as you might be. You do little things that are not strictly honourable. I have watched you, and I know. The things you do, Mary, Becky could never do."

CHAPTER III

TOWARDS morning the sick man fell into an uneasy doze. He lay on his back, breathing heavily. His hands were stretched outside the bedclothes; his face was deeply flushed from the fever which was consuming him. He moved, and groaned, and spoke once or twice in his restless sleep. Mary felt her heart beating very fast as his unconscious words fell on her ears. Once he said aloud:

"Gerard Lonsdale, I have it safe. You ask me if it is valuable. Yes, it's price is beyond rubies; but I have it safe."

Then he turned abruptly on his side away from Mary, who had sunk, trembling now exceedingly, on a chair by the bedside. She had made a discovery. She had found out where Robert Henshall kept the diamond. It must, indeed, be of untold value when he wore it round his neck all night long, Mary had been thinking. Two thousand pounds was worth a great deal. It was—to use a well-known proverb—a bird in the hand, a plump, fat, substantial sort of bird; and the possession of the diamond and her possible marriage with Arnold were—to follow the same metaphor—closely resembling the two birds in the bush. One was safe and certain and comfortable, the other was vague, dangerous, uncertain, and probably, when all was said and done, the reverse of comfortable. Of course the two birds in the bush might mean untold wealth; while two thousand pounds, Mary knew well, would at the best only mean a shelter from the storm, starvation, or little better, cleared away from her path.

Nevertheless, all night long she thought a great deal of the two thousand pounds and the promise she must make were she to secure that sum of money. She knew Robert Henshall too well to doubt for a moment that he would not present her with the money without hedging her in with conditions which would make it impossible for her to marry Arnold Deepe. In short, she could not promise the dying man to give her lover up and afterwards marry him. Arnold was a dangerous man to offend, and it was more than likely that Mary would offend him mortally if she did not help him now in his quest. He knew some things about her, too, which might make matters very unpleasant for her, though these were nothing, of course, to the things which she knew about him. But she was not the sort of woman to injure the man she loved.

By degrees Henshall's sleep became calm. This was the opportunity which Mary had been waiting for. Once, some time ago, she had noticed, sticking up above his collar, a narrow piece of black ribbon. She had observed it aloud, and the old man had started, coloured, and pushed it hastily out of sight. In reply to her curious gaze, for she happened to be alone with him at that time, he had said to her, " Do you believe in talismans? " Mary had laughed. " No," she said; " I am not so silly." " Well, I do," he answered; " I wear a talisman always next my heart—a thing of not the slightest consequence to you or to anyone but myself. Hence this bit of black ribbon. Don't notice it again, please."

Now Mary, ever since Deepe's visit, had been thinking about the black ribbon, and the idea had darted quickly through her active brain that a talisman might mean a diamond, and that if the old man really meant to guard it he would wear it day and night about his person.

Mary felt for the ribbon. It was there. Beyond doubt she had discovered the hiding-place of the diamond.

The first person to arrive on the following morning was Arnold. Mary knew he would come on his way to the business house which now employed him on the noble salary of a pound a week. She went downstairs, therefore, early. She did not want Henshall to know that he had called. She had made up her mind to say nothing whatever about her discovery.

When Deepe appeared he looked eager; he had the appearance of a man who had passed a restless night.

"Well?" he said, when he saw Mary.

"There is no 'well,'" she answered. "I have nothing to tell you."

"Then you did nothing?"

He had gone with her into the study, where the fire was now lighted, and the room was warm and comfortable.

"I told you I could do nothing," she replied, shutting the door. "My place is by Mr Henshall's sick-bed. He is very, very ill. I am most anxious for the doctor to see him. His temperature is higher than ever this morning."

"Then he will die," said the man. "My God! We must get that diamond first."

"I have something to ask you, Arnold," said Mary, "and I had better ask it now than put off my question until to-night."

"I have no time to spare," was Arnold's response. "I am due at the Beverley office by nine o'clock."

"It isn't eight yet," replied the girl. "You have plenty of time. Arnold, you have asked me to marry you."

"I have," he answered, drawing himself up and looking at her fixedly.

"You have professed to love me?"

"I have told you the truth," he replied.

"You have not told me the truth. You do not love me."

A very ugly expression crossed his face.

"What has come over you, Mary?" he said. "What strange things have been happening to you? You have never, never spoken to me in that tone before."

"I have not, because I have never been so hurt, so offended as I am now."

Deepe stretched out one of his large hands and drew the girl towards him.

"Don't go on like this," he said. "It is you who hurt a man: your words sting. They go down into my heart and wound me dreadfully. You talk not like the wise girl I have always supposed you to be, but as one would speak who is silly, hysterical, sentimental. I could not endure such a wife. I want a girl with a practical turn of mind, not too squeamish, not too high-principled. I have found this treasure in you."

She shrank away from him. His words were meant to be consolatory, but she knew that the fire of intense anger burned beneath. She had to call her courage to her aid. She would know everything, and at once. If she broke with this man she would have two thousand pounds of her own. What could she not do with so magnificent a sum? Why should she give herself to him and become wicked? Ah, yes; she knew she must be wicked if she became his wife. Why should she do this thing? Two thousand pounds, and a straight and honourable life: Arnold Deepe, who could offer her no provision, and—the paths of the wicked.

"I will speak," she thought. "God in heaven keep me from being frightened!"

"Time is passing," said Arnold. He took out his silver watch. "I must leave here in a few minutes. I will come back again to-night. You can tell me then what you want to say."

"You shan't go until I have asked my question," was her reply. "Arnold, why did you never tell me that once you were Mr Henshall's clerk?"

The man started. He dropped the hand which he had laid on the girl's shoulder and stepped back.

"Has he been telling tales out of school?" was his response.

"He did not say much; but he hinted at something which will alter both our lives."

Deepe took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

"Go on," he said. "Tell me at once what Henshall did say."

"He told me that you were his clerk for a year—that you left him, or rather, that he dismissed you at the end of that time. He gave me to understand that there was a very strong reason why it was necesssary for him to take this course. He went on to tell me something else."

"First, please," said Deepe, "answer my question. Did he tell you, Mary, why he dismissed me?"

"No; he said that I had better get that information straight from you."

Deepe again wiped his brow. He gave a sigh of relief.

"I am not going to let you off, Arnold," said Mary; "and I have more to say. Last night, after you had gone, Mr Henshall spoke to me again. He told me what occurred after dinner on that night when you first dined in this house. He allowed you to dine very much against his will, because Rebecca wished it. After dinner he had a serious talk with you. He forgave you, and said he would help you—on a condition. It was this: that you should tell me everything; that we should not begin our lives together with secrets between us. You promised him. You swore that you would tell me all. A month afterwards he asked you if you had done so, and you replied that you had. He found out from me last night that you had told a lie, and that your oath was nothing in your eyes. He begged me most earnestly to get the truth from you now. I promised him that I would. Tell me the truth, please, Arnold. You can say it in a few words."

Arnold Deepe was silent. He crossed his arms on his breast. In this position he looked down at the girl.

"Suppose I don't tell you?" he said.

"Ah," she replied, "then I break off my engagement."

"What—you give me up because of a trivial secret which I would rather you did not know?"

"I will not marry you, Arnold, unless I know."

"You funk the thing, Mary? I did not imagine that you would have so little spirit."

"I won't marry you until you tell me, Arnold; and, what is more, if you refuse now to enlighten me I have nothing further to do with you. You must tell me, and you must tell me now, or our engagement comes to an end."

"Do you mean this?"

"Emphatically I do."

"I never saw you with such determination in your eyes. But listen. Suppose I do tell you, and suppose you are not inclined to appreciate my story. Suppose it makes a vast difference in your life—how then, how then?"

"I cannot reply to you until I know what your story is."

"There are a few little matters connected with yourself which you might not like your employer to know about. Do you remember that day when you were clever enough to secure a parcel of handkerchiefs and gloves that belonged to Miss Henshall? You were never found out, but you told me; and when we went out together—those jolly Sundays when we went by train to the country—you wore the gloves and used the handkerchiefs. Your deed was not exactly straight. Henshall may not like it when he knows; but he shall know if you break with me."

"That is speaking nonsense, Arnold. You cannot get to Robert Henshall's room to tell him anything at present."

"I can tell Miss Henshall."

"Do: it would be better to tell her than for me to marry you if you refuse to tell me your secret."

Deepe frowned, stamped his foot, and paced up and down the large room. He looked at the clock.

"I must be going," he said.

"Very well," said Mary; "you can go. You need not return."

"Folly! My Mary, how could I live without you? How could you live without me?"

"There are times when I feel like that," answered the girl; "but not now. It would not pain me to part from you now, Arnold. I felt quite sick last night after I had seen you, and after you told me what you had done. Yes, I felt sick."

"Squeamish!" said the man. "A poor thing—weak as water. You'll be a good riddance."

"Perhaps," she replied. "I cannot stay with you any longer unless you tell me. You don't mean to tell me, so—good-bye."

She held out her hand. He caught it in a grip of iron, drew her towards him, and raising her face with his other hand, he pressed kiss after kiss on her brow, her lips, her neck.

"You cannot part with your own Arnold," he said. "You know you can't."

She trembled when he kissed her. He could always break down any resistance on her part by a kiss.

"My darling," he said, "how can I express to you the love I bear you? I did not tell you because I was afraid, my little Mary—afraid that you might turn from me. I could not bear to lose you. Oh, Mary, if you give me up I shall indeed go to the bad. I am not squeamish, nor over particular, but with you I could lead a fairly straight life. Without you the devil would have me for his own."

"Tell me," said Mary.

"You must know?"

"Yes, I will know."

"Promise that you won't give me up whatever I tell you."

"I will make that promise, if I can, afterwards, Arnold."

He looked at her intently.

"You won't give me up," he said then. "I see it in your eyes. Well, this is my confession. I wanted fifty pounds. I forged Robert Henshall's signature. I got at his bank-book one day when he happened to be absent. I filled in a cheque for fifty pounds and attached the forged signature to it. It was an excellent imitation; so like that it would have required the cleverest detective to find out the difference between my forged signature and his. I cashed the cheque and gambled with the proceeds. I had a sort of hope that I might be the lucky dog who isn't found out. There are many wicked dogs in the world, my Mary, who are never found out. I trusted that I might be in their category. I am considered clever, but undoubtedly I lost my head then.

"On the following pay day I was called into my employer's presence. He showed me the cheque with the forged signature and said that if I would not confess at once he would put the matter into the hands of the police. He said also, 'You had best be quick in telling me the truth. If you go to prison your sentence will be five years.' Of course, when I knew the game was up, I made a full and humble confession. He told me to leave his business premises there and then, and never to let him see me again. My God! I had a hard fight, but I just managed to keep my head above water, and now and then I had a windfall. Just before I met you an old aunt died. She left me five hundred pounds. The money seemed to me an inexhaustible fortune. I once more considered myself a gentleman. I got my tailor to fit me out with many suits of clothes. I took good and respectable lodgings, and I looked up some old friends. It was at one of these houses that I met you. The moment I looked in your face I saw that you and I were kindred spirits. I also perceived that in many ways you were cleverer than me. I felt sure that we could lead a life of splendid crime between us. When I discovered that you were Miss Henshall's companion, my hatred of Henshall made me more determined than ever to secure you. I loved you, and I thought that you loved me. We became engaged. Henshall was good to me afterwards and got me the post I now hold; but he insisted on my telling you about the forgery. I promised, to satisfy him. I meant to keep my word—I did, really; but when I was with you I found I could not tell the ugly tale. It was easier to lie to him than to shock you. What is the matter, my dear?"

"If you thought me so bad, Arnold, why did you suppose that the story would shock me?"

"Then it hasn't—it hasn't!" he cried in a tone of rapture. "Oh, my little Mary, you are the last person on earth to forsake a man when he is down. My dear little Mary, how I love you!"

He kissed her again and again, and she submitted to his kisses.

"We will never give each other up," he said, whispering the words in her ear.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," she replied. "I cannot answer you now. Yes, come back this evening; I must leave you, and you must get to your office. I have no more time to attend to you now."

At that moment the front-door bell rang, and Rebecca's gay, happy young voice was heard in the hall.

"There's Rebecca!" said Mary. "I must go to her; I must tell her—please leave me, Arnold."

"I will stay in this room for a bit and then let myself out. You disappoint me very much," said the man, who felt in a very bad humour.

Mary looked at him with growing dissatisfaction. Should she close with Robert Henshall's offer—get rid of Arnold Deepe for ever and face the world with two thousand pounds? All her inclinations at that moment pointed to the path of righteousness. The old man was right. She was not quite straight; but if she gave Arnold up, and received that welcome legacy, she could be straight in the future; she could be good; she could lead an honourable life. She knew she had plenty of talent. She might make money with a little fortune left to her. Oh! anything was better than Arnold! His manner, his ways were unendurable!

"Mary, Mary!" called Rebecca's voice.

Mary ran into the hall. The tall, pale girl who had looked so beautiful in her ball dress on the previous evening looked even more striking now in the neat costume which she was wearing. It was tailor made, and showed off her fine figure to perfection.

"Mary, where's dad? Do you know, I have had a most uncomfortable night; I could not get him out of my head. I fancied somehow that he was ill—of course it was only my imagination. But what is the matter with you? You look ghastly white. Am I in time to see father before he goes to the City?"

"In plenty of time, dear. I am sorry to tell you, Rebecca, that your father is ill. He has got influenza, and is very feverish. He came in rather bad last night, but would not allow you to be told. I have been nursing him all night, and I grieve to say I don't think he is at all better this morning; but the doctor will be here presently. Why—what is it, Rebecca? What is it?"

Rebecca came quickly forward. She took the pins from her hat and flung it on the table in the hall. She unfastened her jacket. Then she took Mary's two hands and stared her in the face.

"You let me go out—me—and spend the night, the whole night, amusing myself when my father was ill!"

"It was his wish," said Mary. "I only did what he desired."

"Bah!" said Rebecca. "I hate women like you, Mary Gray."

She dropped Mary's hands and ran upstairs.

A moment later she had softly entered her father's bedroom. The room was hot—too hot for comfort. It was untidy, too; for Mary had been thinking more of herself than of her patient during the night.

The moment Rebecca entered the room it was exactly as though the spirit of order, of youth, of courage had come in. Every scrap of emotion which she had exhibited when she had given Mary Gray a spice of her mind had left her fine face. She stepped softly and went up to her father's side.

"I am back, dad," she said.

He looked up at her, all the love of his heart shining in his eyes.

"My own darling little girl!" he said.

"What a bad, naughty dad you are!" she continued. "You let me go away when you were ill. But I am back now. I mean to nurse you day and night."

"You must not, my pretty," was the answer; "you would fag yourself to death."

"I fag myself?" was the girl's answer. "I tell you what it is, daddy; I've got the strength of ten where you are concerned. Now, you are going to be made really comfy, and"—she paused—"we won't have Mary Gray in the room."

"Eh, eh, what?" said the old man. "But she meant well; she sat up with me all night."

"She kept me from you," said Rebecca; "but we needn't talk of her any more. Please understand that I am your nurse. I am just going away for a minute to put on another dress, then I shall be with you. I have lots of pleasant things to tell you, and when you are too tired I will just sit by your side and keep silent. Now then—no more of Mary Gray, and a great deal of Rebecca Henshall."

As Rebecca spoke she left the room, went to her own room, changed her dress quickly, and entered her father's just as Dr Harris appeared.

The doctor examined the patient and found decided complications of a somewhat serious nature. Rebecca followed him on to the landing.

"You have a bad account to give me," she said.

"I am very sorry, my dear young lady, but I regret that such is the case."

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Don't be afraid to tell me the truth. I can stand"—then she paused—"anything in the cause of those I love."

"I believe you, Miss Henshall. Well, as you wish to know, I must inform you that your father is very ill; the principal danger arises from the heart, which is in a very shaky condition, but there is also lung trouble. We ought to get a good nurse immediately."

"Certainly we will."

"Two nurses would be best," said the doctor.

"No, sir," replied Becky; "I shall be one of the nurses."

"Very well. As you please."

"I want you to do something for me, Dr Harris."

"What is that?"

"Go downstairs and see Miss Gray. Tell her that you forbid her to enter my father's sick-room."

"Oh! Why do you want me to say that? She seems quite a capable young woman."

"I can give you no reason, doctor, except that I want you to take this matter on yourself. It is of the highest importance to me."

"Very well."

"You must be very firm. Mary can attend to the household concerns; I will look after my father with the aid of the nurse whom you will send in."

When Dr Harris went downstairs he asked Lucy, the parlourmaid, to beg of Miss Gray to give him a short interview. He was waiting in the dining-room. Mary wondered what was the matter.

"How is the patient, doctor?" she said at once.

"He is very ill," was the answer. "Miss Gray, I have a message to give you. I can quite understand that it will hurt your feelings, but I have promised to do what I am asked. It is the wish of my patient, and also of Miss Henshall, that for the present you should confine yourself to your house duties. A trained nurse will be here in the course of an hour, and she and Miss Henshall will nurse the sick man."

"You mean to tell me," said Mary, turning very white and with a feeling of sickness creeping over her, "that I am not to go to Mr Henshall?"

"That is what Miss Henshall wishes."

Mary folded her hands so tightly that the nails almost penetrated into the flesh.

"Miss Henshall—Rebecca—wishes it?"

"Yes, she wishes it, and so does her father."

"But why—why, doctor?"

"I cannot tell you why."

"I was with him last night," continued the girl; "all night long I stayed up with him. I was tired. I could have enjoyed rest like any other woman. Why am I turned away now, just as though I had done something wrong?"

"I can only give you the message," said Dr Harris. "I am sorry if it hurts you. I have known Miss Henshall almost from her birth, and I do not think she would do anything unkind or unreasonable. It is possible that you may have unduly excited my poor patient. Anyhow, I tell you what I am told to tell you, and I further enforce the message which I had to deliver to you. I forbid you under any circumstances to enter the sick-room."

"And you think I will obey?" said Mary, her light eyes flashing and her face whiter than ever.

"You must obey. In a case like this it would be the height of madness to cause a scene. You are not to go to the sick-room. You must have recognised before now that Miss Rebecca is a girl who will be obeyed."

"Yes, I have noticed that," was the reply. "She turns me out—she turns me out, and I—I loved him!"

"You will prove your love in the best possible way by obeying orders," said the doctor. "I shall be back again presently. Remember, if you disobey you leave the house. Good-morning."

How often had Mary Gray during the last few hours found herself alone in the dining-room or study! She went slowly, very slowly back to the room where she and Arnold had had their exciting interview. The man was still there. He had not been idle during this time; he had employed himself prowling round the room, examining locked drawers, pacing up and down, thinking with all his might and main. Mary had forced him to tell a truth which he hoped might never be known. He had never respected her more than he did at this moment; he had never wanted her more badly. He would not lose such a woman for anything else that could be offered to him.

Mary had opened the door very softly. At first he did not see her. She came forward a few steps, her feet making no sound on the thick pile of the carpet. Then he turned and looked at her.

" What—what is wrong? " he said.

She gave a short laugh.

" Arnold "—she went up to him and laid her hand on his arm—" Arnold, I forgive you about the forgery. I will not break off our engagement; and, Arnold, I will help you to get the diamond, for I know where it is."

CHAPTER IV

Some of the most active, some of the busiest of men make up their minds very quickly when death stares them in the face. Resolute, uncomplaining, steadfast, courageous all their days, they do not lose their courage in face of the grim foe. On the contrary, they fold their arms calmly and, without a particle of fear, or even regret, meet the inevitable.

On the very first night after Robert Henshall's illness he had made up his mind that he must die. There came a few days of swift and terrible pain; there came clouded hours when he could only speak the random words of delirium, and then there followed a great peace and the assurance that the River of Death was full in sight, and that all worldly affairs, as far as he, Robert Henshall, was concerned, were at an end. He must leave his prosperous, commercial life; he must say good-bye to that fortune which he had piled up honestly —most honestly—but with such pains, such years of toil. Even the diamond which lay in its little case over his heart, and which was, he felt, very nearly his own possession (for he knew nothing of the letter waiting for him downstairs) must never realise for him the enormous sum which he felt he could get for it.

But none of these things really mattered. Death is a strange leveller, and somehow the man who is dying sees but little difference between riches and poverty, between the life of the very prosperous and the life of those who fail; between rank and low descent. All these things are measured at their true worth, and the dying man is content that such should be the case. He is gradually loosening his moorings—to revert to an old metaphor—and the process is scarcely painful.

There was only one thing that troubled Robert Henshall when he lay a-dying, and that was the thought of leaving Rebecca; for somehow Rebecca—this brilliant, beautiful, gifted child of his—belonged to a part of him very far removed from the worldly part. Was she not his treasure, the light of his eyes? Was she not the very soul of him? It was true that he would leave her well off, but somehow, he could not think much of money then. He would leave his darling without himself. He must go away, and she must stay behind. Nothing greatly mattered except this. He wished that he could take her with him.

As to Rebecca, her calmness during her father's illness astonished even Mary, who knew how devoted the pair were to each other. She shared the nurse's duties, and insisted on sleeping on a small bed in her father's sick-room. That room was now kept in exquisite order, and all that could be done to lengthen Robert Henshall's life was accomplished.

But death is a sure foe, and advances steadily when he has made up his mind to claim his victim.

One of the first things Rebecca had done was to take her father's correspondence and lock it up until such time as he either recovered or died. She knew that all important business letters would go to his City address, but his private letters were there for him to read when he was well, or for her to do what she willed with.

There came a day after the old man had been ill nearly a fortnight which denoted a serious change. Mr Henshall himself spoke to the doctor. All the delirium had left him; the fever had gone. He was suffering from weakness, however, of so extreme a type that his heart might stop at any moment.

"How long do you give me?" said Henshall, speaking to the medical man.

"Perhaps until morning," was the reply.

"Thank you," said Henshall.

Rebecca was in the room. Her father turned his dying eyes and fixed them with a wistful longing on her face. She replied with a steady glance, full of love and courage.

The doctor went upstairs. Mary, who had to all appearance got over her disappointment, met him as usual in the hall.

"What news of the dear patient, doctor?"

"I grieve to tell you, Miss Gray, that my poor friend is dying. If he sees the morning it is about as much as he will do. I shall look in again before midnight. No, Miss Gray, nothing will save him. His heart is past recovery, and there are serious symptoms of blood poisoning, caused by the sharp attack of pneumonia which he has just lived through."

"Then there is no hope?" said Mary.

"None; but he is a good, brave man, not afraid to meet his Maker; and what a splendid girl Miss Henshall is."

Mary was not in the mood to hear Rebecca praised. When the doctor had gone she moved, cat-like, about the house. Her feelings during the last fortnight had been indescribable. They were perhaps all the more bitter because she was forced to keep them to herself.

After a few minutes, however, she put on her hat and jacket and went softly out. She sent a telegram to Arnold Deepe. The words of the telegram were these:

"Henshall not expected to live until morning. Have you anything you want me to do?"

Deepe received this telegram on his return to his comfortless lodgings. By this time he had Mary completely in his power. She had given up all idea of securing the two thousand pounds and giving her lover up. By so doing she would work with Rebecca, not against her. She hated Rebecca now so fervently that her sole desire was to injure her.

Deepe arrived at the house in Paddock Row between eight and nine o'clock. Mary herself opened the door to him.

"I was waiting in the hall," she said. "I heard your step. Come in softly; there is a fire in the dining-room." Deepe obeyed. "Here is something hot for you to drink," said the girl, "and I have saved you a plate of meat and vegetables."

"That's right," he said, beginning to eat and drink eagerly.

Mary did not speak at all until he had finished. When Deepe had drained his glass to the last drop he sank into a chair by the fire, spread out his long limbs to the warmth and looked up at the girl.

"So he's about to shuffle?"

" Yes."

" You know where the diamond is? "

" Yes."

" Why won't you tell me, Mary mine? "

" There is no use; it is better for one to hold a secret than two."

Deepe looked round the room.

" What about the old man's letters during his illness? What about that letter from Teheran? "

" Rebecca gave directions about the post the day after her return," said Mary; " and the letters, by her directions, are taken straight to her; she locks them up."

" She is a tigress," said Deepe. " But we'll be even with her yet."

Mary laughed.

" I want to be," she said.

" She will read that letter from Teheran," continued Deepe, " after the old man has gone."

" What else do you expect? " said Mary. " Of course she will read it."

" She will be prepared," said Deepe.

" Yes," answered Mary.

" Look here, Mary. You say you know where the diamond is? "

" Yes."

" Can you secure it to-night? "

" Impossible."

" But it is safe? "

" It is safe."

" Mary, do you think by any chance that old Henshall will tell his daughter about the diamond and this man, Gerard Lonsdale, before he dies? "

"I can't say," answered Mary. Then she added, dropping on her knees and laying her hand on her lover's arm, "To tell you the truth, that is why I sent for you. I think it more than probable that the old man will tell Rebecca all about the diamond and its history; in fact I am almost certain he will."

"Oh, that we could hear!" said Arnold Deepe.

"I have an idea," said Mary. "It is highly dangerous, but there is a possibility of its succeeding."

"You are a clever little thing, my Mary," said Deepe. "Now, out with your thought; what is it?"

"I want to be present," said Mary, "when Rebecca is informed by her father of the true history of the diamond."

Deepe clapped Mary on the shoulder.

"You are plucky!" he said. "You are the woman of all women for me. But how can you manage this?"

"The nurse is nearly dead with fatigue. I could put on her cap and apron and slip into the room in the dark."

"No, that won't do," said Deepe; "it is too dangerous. Besides, I have seen the nurse, and she is taller than you; I know it won't do."

"There is a cupboard in the room in which I could hide, but the difficulty is how to get to it. Rebecca and Nurse Prescott never leave Mr Henshall alone for an instant."

Deepe covered his face with his hand. He was thinking hard.

"If I could hide in that cupboard," said Mary, "I should know everything."

"The knowledge would be invaluable," said Deepe.

"But how am I to get into the cupboard?" continued the girl.

"That's the puzzle," said Deepe. "Now, do let me think. I've gone through so many tight places that I cannot see why I should not get you into that cupboard without anybody knowing. Once there, however, you must stay the whole night long."

"As if I minded that. But how am I to get there?"

"That's the question," said Arnold. "It would be very awkward, too, if you were discovered."

"I shan't be. Why should they go to the cupboard to-night? The old man keeps most of his wardrobe there, but there is only one garment he will need in the future—his winding-sheet."

"Come, come," said Deepe, "don't be too morbid. Now, give me a few minutes to think."

Mary sat down quietly by the fire. She had a woman's quick intuition and was not in the least scrupulous. Nevertheless, how to get into that cupboard, how to act as eavesdropper on the momentous occasion which was so likely to occur, baffled even her wits. Deepe suddenly raised his head.

"Who sleeps in the room at the other side of the old man?"

"No one," said Mary at once. "There is just a landing and a window."

"The back of the cupboard," said Deepe, "must be flush with the wall of the landing."

"I suppose so; I have never thought about it."

"Can we not get to the cupboard from the landing?" was the next remark.

"How would that be possible? Every sound would