



INTERFERENCE

BY

ROLAND PERTWEE



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INTERFERENCE

A Mystery Story

BY
ROLAND PERTWEE



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BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER I

The Powder Closet in Curzon Street in which Barbara Marlay carried out her secretarial duties was little more than an apple-green, panelled cube, ill-assorted to the click-clack of the typewriter upon which Barbara's rather inexperienced fingers dealt with the correspondence of her uncle, Sir John Marlay, M.D., F.R.C.P.

Barbara was eighteen, direct, loyal, and courageous. Her father had been killed in Ploeg Street in 1915, and her mother, through loneliness and a broken heart, swiftly followed him into the unknown. John Marlay had adopted his niece, and, lest the sense of obligation should weigh too heavily upon her shoulders, had given her a job as his secretary. He did not like idle people—with the exception of Faith, who was his wife. Faith was privileged. He treated her as one treats a flower, she being of that human fabric woven of sweetness and devotion, and of spiritual rather than of practical service in this pedestrian world.

Barbara's secretarial duties did not impose upon her a great intellectual strain. The letters she composed were mostly to advise patients that Sir John Marlay could or could not give an appointment at such and such an hour on such and such a day. This fact notwithstanding, she carried out her duties with religious severity, clicking away on the little machine as though the health of nations depended upon it.

She did not look up when Douglas Helder, uninvited and unannounced, came into the room. That Douglas had proposed to her, not once but many times, and that she was fully determined at the right moment to accept him, did not, she felt, justify her in allowing him to interfere with her work. An appreciation of discipline, which is every woman's birthright, instructed Barbara that young men are all the better for being kept in their places, and for being mildly humiliated in the presence of an adored one. Besides, she had a bone to pick with Douglas and knew by experience that he would guess it by the unchanging angle of her head and her air of preoccupation.

'Are you as busy as you look, or trying to look busier than you are?' he asked.

Getting no answer, he drifted to the window, and stared down at the traffic which slowly trickled up and down Curzon Street. Douglas Helder was a good-looking fellow, a hard-bit, service type of man, unlike the

average run of pressmen. As a Lieutenant-Commander of the Royal Navy he had come into the zone and passed out of it without getting his step, and had accordingly turned his back on the sea and attacked the profession of journalism.

His equipment, keen observation plus an agreeable aptitude for turning a phrase, secured him a job with *The Cable*, which for the best part of six months he held down with moderate success. His first big stroke of luck had come with Sir John Marlay's discovery of a serum for the cure of General Paralysis of the Insane—a discovery which had created a tremendous excitement in medical circles and among a large section of the laity. Only a few weeks ago the theory and the facts had been given to the public, backed by undeniable instances of successful cures. Perhaps because the newspapers of the civilised world appreciated the immense value of the discovery, or, perhaps, because the time was sterile of other sensational reading matter, the press had given the serum an unprecedented publicity. The pleasant quiet of the house in Curzon Street in which John Marlay carried on his practice was invaded by legions of reporters, English, American, German, Austrian, French—by batteries of camera men and an ever-increasing number of scientific and pseudo-scientific gentlemen anxious for enlightenment. Himself something of a recluse, John Marlay was swift to realise the impossibility of carrying on his work in the glare of so much limelight. In self-defence, he made it known that he would give no interviews concerning the serum or his own private affairs save under exceptional circumstances, to any reporter but Douglas Helder.

To the gentlemen of Fleet Street who plucked at his sleeve or clicked cameras at his own front door—on the steps of King George's Hospital, or any other institution he was known to attend, his invariable reply was:

'Get after Douglas Helder; he'll tell you all I want known. He's a first-class chap—doesn't know much about his job—just come out of the Navy—and going to marry my niece. Must give one's own folk a leg up.'

'Yes, but Sir John——'

But their protests were cut short by that crisp, characteristic 'No!' which blocked all further argument.

So Douglas Helder found himself exclusively covering the biggest journalistic scoop of the season.

The tiny typewriter bell tinkled cheerfully—the keys clicked BM/JM. Barbara Marlay pulled out the sheet of typescript, scanned it with a professional eye, slapped it down in the 'For Signature' tray—rose, took the cigarette from Douglas's fingers—extinguished it in an ash tray and fixed him with a penetrating eye.

‘Now for you,’ she said. ‘I would like to know exactly what you mean by it?’

With a singular lack of appreciation for the gravity of the moment, the young man put his arms round her shoulders and kissed her soundly.

‘There is one thing to be said in favour of a snub nose,’ he said. ‘It does keep out of the way in moments like these.’

‘Fool,’ said Barbara. ‘Sit down. I am angry with you.’

With an effort to appear contrite, Douglas disposed himself on a Queen Anne stool with his back to the wall.

‘Acknowledging the fact that we are all miserable sinners, in what particular manner have I digressed?’ he asked.

Barbara picked up a copy of *The Cable*, folded it at the illustrated page, and tossed it into his lap.

‘Who told you to publish that?’ she demanded.

‘That’ was a photograph of a man in a white suit and a girl in a white frock standing on a cliff, with the sea and hills behind them. Beneath was printed ‘Sir John and Lady Marlay, from a snapshot taken at Rose Bay, Sydney Harbour, in the year of their marriage.’

‘Well, what of it?’ he enquired.

‘What of it?’ Barbara retorted. ‘You bagged that snap out of the album I showed you last Sunday. You never said a word to me about printing it.’

‘Why shouldn’t it be printed?’ he replied. ‘They both look extraordinarily nice. There is no mystery about the fact that they were married in Australia. What the deuce does it matter anyway?’

‘It doesn’t *matter*,’ said Barbara, ‘except that it was understood everything you published was to be censored beforehand.’

‘Writing matter—yes,’ he admitted, ‘but not photographs, darling. The public love a personal touch. After all the stodgy stuff we hash out about this serum, it is like a breath of fresh air to shove in something jolly like this.’

‘It is no good making excuses,’ said Barbara. ‘You have done wrong and you know you have done wrong.’

‘Have I? But why? Marlay doesn’t care a hoot, does he?’

‘I haven’t asked him,’ said Barbara. ‘Don’t expect he has seen it; he is much too busy to read newspapers these days.’

‘Well, then, let’s forget it.’

‘I am thinking of Faith,’ said Barbara. ‘Faith has seen it and hated it being there. It upset her dreadfully.’

Douglas looked grave.

‘I’m damned sorry if I hurt her,’ he said. ‘She’s been a splendid little pal to me and I’d hate to do anything she didn’t like. But why should it upset her?’

‘I tell you it has,’ said Barbara.

‘Why?’

‘Oh! lots of reasons. In the first place it’s a honeymoon photograph and she says everything that happened on her honeymoon was theirs and no one else’s. And then, it was taken in Sydney.’

‘Yes?’

‘You know how Faith tries to forget Australia and everything to do with it.’

‘That first marriage of hers, you mean?’ said Douglas.

Barbara nodded. ‘If you had married a creature like that, a drunken, cynical beast, you wouldn’t want reminding.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Douglas admitted. ‘But she’s happy enough now. I have never seen two people love each other like the Marlays. If it wasn’t so ripping it would be almost comic. The way she looks at him reminds me of Saint Anne in Da Vinci’s “Virgin of the Rocks.” You know—adoring—dog-like almost. There aren’t many women like Faith Marlay. I could kick myself for having hurt her and I’ll tell her so when she comes in.’

‘Don’t,’ said Barbara. ‘Much better let it alone. But do get it into your head, Douglas, to leave out personal stuff. Uncle John’s frightfully good-natured and understanding. He knows what a difficult job it is for you, but for all our sakes, keep to the facts of the case—stick to the cure.’ She threw up her head with a little angry action. ‘It’s so beastly vulgar to poke and pry into people’s private lives, and he’s just the sort of man, if he thought anyone had gone too far——’

‘No need to tell me that,’ Douglas interrupted. ‘A highly developed property-sense—that?’

‘A tremendous loyalty to what belongs to him,’ Barbara amended. Her expression softened. ‘There, that’s off my chest, so now we can be friends again.’

And they were, side by side on the old Queen Anne stool which could accommodate two as well as one at a pinch.

CHAPTER II

One of the secrets of John Marlay's success lay in the energy with which he attacked every branch of his work. He possessed a rare ability to disassociate his thoughts from all that had gone before and absorb them utterly in some new enterprise.

During working hours he never slacked off nor allowed his mentality to idle. If he found himself with a few moments to spare between a departing and an arriving patient he extracted from them the final second's worth of value. His work over, he would plunge into recreation with equal enthusiasm. It was this gift of detachment that made him so loved by his wife, his niece Barbara, and his friends.

When alone with Faith, no other consideration but her happiness entered his mind. Because in her muddling, uncomprehending way she liked to be conversant with his activities, he sprinkled his talk with scraps of professional matter, gravely asking her advice, and gravely approving the manner in which she gave it. Her credulity was unbounded, and from time to time, he could not resist the temptation to invent absurd little leg-pulls, or cast gaudy and ridiculous flies at which she never failed to rise.

His love of Faith took precedence over every other consideration in his life. Work, Success, Ambition, all took a second place to the smooth, soft, violet-eyed girl chance had let him rescue from the wreckage of a disastrous early marriage.

At the end of the war, as a result of five years' gruelling work in a variety of field-dressing and casualty clearing stations and base hospitals, John had gone, on his own advice, for a cruise to Australia, where, with the first sign of returning activity he had started to write a book on nervous ailments. He advertised, in a Sydney paper, for a stenographer, but the high-spirited, bobbed-haired, short-skirted non-stop talkers who responded to his enquiry did not belong to the type that was likely to prove a sympathetic recorder of the technical matter he proposed to dictate. He had determined to carry on as best he could by himself, when a page-boy entered his private sitting-room with a card bearing the name Faith Voaze. Marlay shook his head.

'I have seen enough for one day, she had better come back in the morning.' But the words were scarcely spoken when in the doorway he saw Faith for the first time.

The effect she produced on him was as remarkable as it was instantaneous.

She was slender, but exquisitely rounded. Her small face looked to him like a lily on a stalk. Under a shabby felt hat bunches of crisp brown curls clustered over and concealed her ears. Her eyes, like wet violets, had been smudged into their hollows by a finger dipped mummy brown. Her skin was the colour of ivory and John observed how her trembling lower lip was caught between her teeth. One hand rested on the lintel of the door—the other hung limp at her side.

There was about her something faun-like and defenceless. Her expression seemed to mirror the tale of a bruised soul. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. The limp hand rose, touched her throat, then, with an apologetic gesture, dropped to her side again. It was as a Doctor that John Marlay spoke his first words to her.

‘Come in and sit down, you have been frightened.’

The page-boy departed with a smile.

Faith moved to the small elbow chair by the window, and the rays of the evening sun slanting across the harbour waters reflected a pink glow upon her cheeks.

John Marlay knew human nature too well to risk startling her by a direct question. Returning to his writing table he made some pretence of addressing an envelope, looked up and smiled his crinkly smile at her.

Something in that smile gave her confidence. Rather pathetically, she tried to smile back and said, in a barely audible voice which had about it the soft suggestion of an Irish brogue—

‘It is silly to be nervous, but I have not been very lucky when I have tried to find work. My fault I expect.’

‘You needn’t be scared of me. Meeting strangers is always embarrassing,’ said John. ‘Is it the secretary’s job you came about?’

She nodded.

‘Not that I suppose I should be any good, really, only, you see, since my—for the last two years—I have been serving in the little restaurants by the Circular Quay—it was awfully hard work, and rather hateful. Sailors, and all sorts of people back from the sea—I suppose one can’t blame them——’ She closed her eyes and shuddered. ‘But it frightened me. You will think I am an awful fool, only when one has been frightened that way——’

Once more she broke off and stared through the open window, her smooth brow creased in an effort of concentration.

‘I ought to tell you that I can’t do shorthand, but I think, with practice, I could learn to use the typewriter.’ And then in a most ridiculous way, like a hurt child, she sniffed, bit her lip, pressed a hand over her mouth, and said, ‘I am wasting your time, I know I am wasting your time.’

Something in the tone and gesture convinced John Marlay that the girl was hungry. Crossing the room he took her hands and looked critically into her face.

‘When did you have a meal last; a square, honest-to-God meal?’

She tried to avoid his eyes, but they were too compelling to escape from.

‘Mid-day,’ she said.

John shook his head.

‘I am a doctor,’ he told her, ‘and if a doctor is any good at all, as I believe I am, he knows the truth when he hears it and knows an untruth when he hears it. Come on now. Cut this pride stuff—when?’

‘I don’t remember, honestly I don’t.’

‘You’re broke?’

‘No, that is, I am broke, but I need not be. I could get money if I cared to—to ask for it.’

‘How do you mean? From whom?’

‘A firm of solicitors, my—’ she hesitated—‘my husband’s solicitors.’

A wave of something only to be defined as jealousy went through John.

‘Your husband,’ he repeated.

‘Yes, he’s dead.’

The wave of jealousy ran up the sands of displeasure—ebbed and was gone.

‘He was killed just before the armistice.’

‘I am sorry,’ said John.

It was impossible to believe that soft small voice could become so hard.

‘Are you?’ she answered. ‘If it were not wicked and unforgivable, I could almost say, “thank God!”’

‘Would it ease your mind to tell me about it?’ he asked. ‘Confidence is good for everyone. Besides, a doctor’s a privileged listener.’

While she hesitated, uncertain how to reply, he moved to the house telephone and called through.

‘Send up some tea, will you? Boiled eggs and buttered toast, jam, honey, you know, a nice tea.’ Then in answer to the gratitude in her eyes, ‘Don’t know what you think, but, in my opinion, a high tea is the best meal in the world.’ She said nothing and he went on. ‘So your husband left you some money, but you prefer to go hungry?’

‘He didn’t leave it to me,’ said Faith, ‘not after he died, I mean. It was when he went away—deserted me three years ago. A thousand pounds with a firm of solicitors, for me to draw upon when I liked.’

‘You haven’t liked?’

She shook her head.

‘When you are trying to forget someone you don’t willingly do things to remind you.’

He nodded. There was pluck and character in the reason she had given.

‘What sort of a ruffian was this?’ he asked.

‘Philip?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. It has all gone misty.’ She broke off, ‘Why am I telling you, I wonder?’

‘Because we are going to be friends, perhaps,’ he answered, ‘and there should be no secrets between friends.’

She raised her eyes and in them was a queer look of admiration.

‘How old are you?’ he asked.

‘Twenty.’

‘Your husband left you three years ago, you say. You can’t have been very old when you married him.’

‘Seventeen.’

He made a rapid calculation.

‘It didn’t last long?’

‘Three months, that’s all, as his wife.’ She stopped and added, ‘But before that——’

John Marlay could not help wishing that she would deny him the confidence that started ‘before that.’

‘Well?’ he said.

‘I was at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, in the Blue Mountains. My mother and father were dead. Philip came there to paint.’

‘An artist?’

‘Philip was everything,’ she replied. ‘He could do everything and he knew everything. We met and talked. I had hardly spoken to a man before that, and his voice—there was something about him. He knew everything,’ she repeated.

‘I never told the Sisters when I came back from my walk, and then day after day we met. At night he used to come just near enough to the wing of the convent, in which I slept, for me to be able to hear him whistle. It sounds silly, whistling, doesn’t it? But he whistled like a bird, not tunes—but bird songs in the night. I lay awake listening and dreaming and thrilling. No one knew, not even my special friends among the girls. It was my secret to lie there and hear him. Then one day when we met in the woods, he whistled a few different notes to me and laughed. “Do you know what they mean?” he asked. I shook my head. I didn’t know and he said, “Those are the notes with which a blackbird in the English lanes calls to his mate when spring has come.” He dropped his voice and his lips brushed my hair. “One of these

nights," he said, "I shall whistle that call to you. Of your charity, Faith, what would you do, if you heard it? Would you come?"'

'I told him I didn't know, but it was a lie. I did know, I knew I should. After that, night after night. I listened for that call alone. I told you he was clever, he knew everything and how long waiting breaks one down. When at last I heard the call I did not stay to think but crept out of bed and into my clothes, and climbed down by the creeper to where he was waiting in the convent garden. There was a buggy in a lane near by and we drove miles and miles along a dusty white road in the moonlight.'

'He said there would be a priest to marry us at the rest house where we were to stay that night, but when we arrived, nobody was there, not even the old woman who kept house. There was not a soul but our two selves and we waited for the priest who never came. I was afraid then, afraid to go on, afraid to go back and loving him and believing that nothing mattered but my love for him.' She paused and rubbed her forehead helplessly.

'I shall never forget that night, we two, one at each end of a long wooden table with a guttering candle which flickered out as the dawn came. Once he asked if he should take me back to the convent, and I could not answer, for there was a look in his eyes which made me feel that life would end for him if I said "Yes."'

She shuddered. 'He knew—he knew everything.'

John Marlay had moved back into the shadows of the room listening to that soft trembling voice, telling the world-old tale of seduction. Here he stood with knit brows and hands shut and a smouldering anger and indignation against the dead man who had deflowered this child.

'After that,' he said, 'he married you?'

She nodded.

'Two months after. I think, in a way, he was happy with me until then. Marriage ended everything. He said I had chained him, cheated him of his freedom. Freedom was Philip's God. Then for a frightful three months he destroyed every illusion I had. He drank—he boasted of the ugly life he had led and the ugly companions he had shared it with. Then one day a woman came, a woman who had been his—his friend before me. Somehow she found out about our marriage and where we lived. That was the most terrible day of my life. The shame of it haunts me always. I can still see Philip standing with his back against the wall drinking brandy and laughing at us. Then quite suddenly, as was his way, he became angry, bitterly, terribly angry. "You fool, Deborah," he cried—that was her name, Deborah Kane—"You fool, do you think I am the kind of man to go back to you? Haven't you learned that life is a pageant made up of things left behind?" I have

never forgotten those words, they were so terribly true of Philip; he was a man with whom nothing lasted.

‘A little while after I was taken ill and went to a Sydney nursing home for a month. When I got back the house was empty and there was a note from Philip telling me where to get money if I needed it. “My dear Faith, you were too good to be true,” he wrote. I next heard of him with some girl from a travelling theatrical company in Melbourne, and after that, he went to France as a soldier. He was killed in the British retreat in 1918 and his body was never found.’

Three weeks later, Faith, widow of Philip Voaze, was married to John Marlay at a Registrar’s office in Sydney. As they drove away he said:

‘Our life begins from to-day. Everything that has gone before is forgotten.’

And the admiration in her eyes told him that the future held so much in store, that there was no room even for a flicker of memory of the past.

CHAPTER III

For seven years, Faith and John lived as man and wife, the while he built up one of the most successful practices in London.

To Faith, her husband's success was tantamount to the possession of a season ticket to Heaven. Her convent-bred soul, unaccustomed to the wide horizon of public life, was enchanted by the limelight which was being thrown upon John Marlay. The cries of newsboys announcing tidings of his discovery, the posters bearing his name in sensational characters, and all the rest of the block capital ebullitions from Fleet Street given as a pabulum to the reading public, afforded her a delight no words could describe. She knew that she had married the greatest man of the century, the dearest man of any century and the finest man of all time. Not unreasonably she was happy. Not unreasonably she gloried in the possession of a being beyond the reach or imagination of other women. But the natural shyness of her nature, or as moderns would put it, an inferiority complex, caused her to shrink from her own share in his greatness. Although intensely proud of the splendid, if rather inadequate title which had been bestowed upon him she felt that it was silly that she should have become Lady Marlay.

When giving her name to the parlourmaids or butlers at the houses at which she called, she whispered the word 'Lady' with such studied inaudibility that very often she had the good fortune to pass in as a mere Missis.

'I want to be useful and necessary to him,' she told Barbara, 'but it seems dreadfully silly to be made sort of grand because of him. I am not a bit grand, and never could be; I'm only very, very happy.'

After that Barbara called her 'Your Happyship' when they were alone together; a cumbersome little joke which pleased Faith beyond expression.

'You know,' said Faith, 'I don't like those capable and competitive women one meets. I think I am old-fashioned.'

'No, you aren't,' said Barbara; 'But you are in love, and lovers are always slaves.'

'I adore being a slave,' said Faith and snuggled into a soft cushion, the gold tassel of which she waved joyously.

'One doesn't have to think—only feel, and feelings are ever so much nicer for women than thoughts.'

Barbara said nothing. She just wondered.

'Have you promised Douglas to marry him yet?'

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

‘It’s good for young men to be kept waiting,’ said Barbara. ‘Good discipline.’

‘It isn’t,’ said Faith, warmly. ‘That’s a wicked thing to say. Douglas is a darling; he’s terribly fond of you, and, thanks to John, he is getting on awfully well now.’

‘Thanks to Uncle John we are all doing awfully well now,’ said Barbara, steering the talk into the channel where it was most likely to prove welcome. ‘By the way, Douglas is so sorry he stuck that photograph in the paper,’ she added.

A tiny island formed on Faith’s brow and her mouth straightened.

‘That’s all right, it doesn’t matter,’ said she. ‘I was foolish. After all, it was in Australia I met John. Did I ever tell you how I met John?’

‘Eight million times,’ Barbara replied, ‘but do it again if you care to.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Faith. ‘You won’t forget Friday week is his birthday.’

‘I shan’t have a chance to forget, darling, with you about. Have you bought him anything?’

Faith shook her head.

‘I have been looking at things.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘All sorts. I started looking at things round about ten pounds, then I thought that wasn’t expensive enough, so I made it twenty, and then all the nice things seemed to be thirty; but next to them were much nicer things which cost more and now I am afraid it will be a very expensive present.’

‘Yes, but what is it?’

‘I haven’t decided, I tell you, I am still deciding. I go up and down Bond Street every day. Perhaps to-morrow I will decide. I would like to give him a cigarette case, because you can get such beauties, but he doesn’t smoke cigarettes.’

‘Who doesn’t?’ said John entering, for the conversation was taking place in his consulting room after professional hours.

‘I said to Barbara that you didn’t smoke cigarettes.’

John cocked an eyebrow.

‘But the poor child isn’t mentally deficient. She has lived here for seven years. She must know that. What’s the game? Pursuit of the obvious?’

‘I shan’t tell you,’ said Faith. ‘It was a private talk.’

‘Was it indeed, beloved?’ said John. ‘Couldn’t you have found something more interesting to tell her? That I have never climbed Mount Everest and that I don’t keep a wombat.’

‘You could climb Mount Everest if you wanted to,’ said Faith, ‘and I don’t know what a wombat is.’

‘You don’t know what a wombat is?’ he replied severely. ‘Then how do you imagine Hobbs hits up his centuries?’

‘Is that what it is?’ said Faith, shot a quick glance at him and marked the tiny crinkle on the side of his nose, which was always there when he was making fun of her. Faith pouted and said, ‘You are always making fun and taking me in. It is most horrid of you.’

‘My precious.’ He stooped and kissed the nape of her neck. ‘I took you in seven years ago, and you don’t suppose I am going to give up doing so now. By the way, a society tuft-hunter was here this afternoon and wants me to go as a lion to one of her dinner parties.’

‘As a lion?’ Faith remarked. ‘Dressed up as a lion?’

‘No, mutt, as a star turn, a very important man—but cheer up, I am not going.’

Faith cheered up.

‘Do you think you ought to refuse these invitations?’ she asked. ‘Who was it asked you?’

‘Lady Edina Paris.’

‘But she is a very grand person, awfully grand. She is the daughter of the Marquis of Cleland. Whatever did you say? Whatever excuse did you make for not accepting?’

‘I told her,’ said John, carefully, ‘that I was dining alone with a woman.’

‘What woman?’

‘You, my sweet one.’

‘Oh, you didn’t, did you?’ said Faith, pink and glowing. ‘How awfully brave and lovely of you.’

‘I am both brave and lovely,’ said John. ‘If you doubt it, *vide* the illustrated page of yesterday’s *Daily Mail* where the ink had run and I was presented to the public looking like an explosion in a pickle factory.’

‘Do you mean to say it was beastly?’ said Faith with heat. ‘I shall write to the Editor and tell him if he can’t make you look as nice as you do look that we shall tell our friends to give up buying that paper.’

‘Um,’ said John. ‘There’ll be a nasty slump in the shares if you carry out that threat. Care to do a theatre to-night?’

‘I’d love it.’

‘You, Babs?’

‘I am going to dance with Douglas.’

‘Right, we two then. A spot of dinner at the New Devonshire, and then whatever you care to see.’

It did not take them long to dress. The night was fine and dry.

‘Let’s walk,’ said John, taking Faith’s arm in his. ‘It’s only a step away.’

They paused on the doorstep, lit by the light of a street lamp. The photographers and pressmen had gone with the darkness.

A few pedestrians moved this way and that and a few long cars like patent leather shoes with rubber soles drifted noiselessly east and west.

By the railings of the house opposite a woman was standing; a tall, arresting figure whose features were hidden behind a veil.

As John and Faith came from the house she moved into the road towards them, craning her head forward; then with a nod of affirmation retreated to the pavement.

The movement attracted Faith's attention.

'Did you notice that woman,' she asked John when they were twenty paces away, 'the woman opposite?'

'No, I don't think I did,' he replied. 'Why?'

'No reason,' she replied, 'except that she was wearing a veil, and one never sees a veil nowadays.'

'Sometimes a veil is a kindness,' he said. 'What a night it is, little Faith. Look at the twinklers up there in the sky. One seldom sees the stars in London.'

The pavement funnelled into the narrows of Lansdowne Passage.

Faith turned her head for another glance at the tall figure now fifty yards away.

Her hair as she turned brushed John's cheek, and stooping he pressed his lips for an instant on the top of her head.

'Nobody loves anybody better than I love you,' he said, and there was a boyish huskiness in his voice.

Her arm tightened convulsively against his.

'I just adore you,' she said.

John laughed.

'If we go on like this we will get run in,' said he.

CHAPTER IV

Everything was right that evening—wonderful—the choice little dinner at the restaurant made mysterious by the sacrificial fires upon which dish after dish was prepared by the attentive hands of the master waiter; and the play, a simple affair, neither memorable for wit, beauty, nor any unusual display of acting, but right with the time, the spirit and the motive of the evening.

They walked back, and their appetites whetted by the frost sent them on a raiding expedition to the kitchen, where, like children, they sat on the plain deal table, swinging their legs, eating thick slices of bread and dripping and drinking cocoa out of kitchen cups.

Faith awoke next morning feeling she had touched the pinnacles of love and companionship. Because this was so, she decided that forty pounds was not nearly enough to spend on John's birthday present. He must have something much better than that, and, determined to settle this weighty problem once for all, she hopped out of bed, put on her prettiest frock and carrying a sort of moleskin coat with a collar of silver fox over her arm, went down the apple green staircase to breakfast.

John had finished his breakfast and was sitting in an armchair before a fire, racing through a copy of *The Times*. On Faith's plate was a postcard, yellowy buff in colour, with a thin border of bright scarlet. It was addressed to 'Sir John Marley.' On the back nothing was written.

The writing was individual, hard, angular and slanting considerably from left to right. There was a Westminster postmark.

'What's this for?' she asked.

'I do not know,' said John from behind the newspaper. 'I thought, perhaps, you could tell me.'

Faith shook her head.

'I have never seen the writing before, and there is nothing on the back to tell. I expect two postcards must have stuck together and they came apart in the letter box.'

'Something of the kind, I daresay,' he answered, and coming towards her, looked over her shoulder. 'Queer, unfriendly handwriting, don't you think?'

From the hall outside came the murmur of voices. His first patient had arrived.

'Till lunch, my sweet,' said he and went from the room.

It is impossible to explain why the presence of this blank postcard, addressed in the queer unfriendly hand, should have given Faith a sudden

sense of nervousness. Yet so it was. Perhaps the feeling sprang from sight or touch, for many people believe in the power of inanimate objects to emanate feelings of good or evil.

Were this not so, certain ladies and gentlemen who practice the art of psychometry, and who sense by this or that strange happenings and associations would be driven to seek employment in some more commonplace sphere of uselessness.

Faith tossed the card aside with an angry resentful shiver.

Her appetite had vanished, and swallowing a cup of coffee, she marched off to the kitchen to give her orders.

From an economical point of view, Faith was not an ideal housekeeper, but she knew what John liked and saw that he had it. It was Mrs. Wain, the cook, who really controlled the details and finance of the Marlays' domestic department.

Mrs. Wain adored Faith and would not, for the world, have let her know that her daily visits to the kitchen and illegible scrawls upon the slate were of little service. Mrs. Wain would say, after indicating what might be done and pretending that the idea had come from Faith,

'There never was anyone like your ladyship for thinking of things.'

And then Faith would retire into her own part of the house with a happy consciousness of something well done.

Faith's mind was too occupied with the important transaction of getting John's birthday present to allow her to notice that the woman who had been standing on the opposite pavement when she and John had gone out the evening before was again in the same place.

A press photographer attracted her attention by clicking a camera as she closed the front door. Faith smiled a friendly 'Good-morning' to him and started off down the street.

Through Lansdowne Passage she went, along the south side of Berkeley Square under its tall, naked trees, towards Hay Hill and thence by Grafton Street to Asprey's corner.

To Faith, Asprey's stood for all that was best in presents.

It was a difficult choice to make, for John was a man to whom one must give something useful, and useful things have a habit of being ugly or cheap. What she wanted had to be lovely and very dear. She had been searching two or three minutes, when, all of a sudden, like the coming of a thought, she saw the ideal gift.

It was a small platinum and onyx card-case, a miracle of craftsmanship, a perfect little thing, so perfect, that the window dresser had given it a white velvet tray to lie upon all by itself.

If the platinum and onyx card-case could have looked up from the white velvet tray through the plate glass window and seen the admiration in Faith Marlay's eyes, it could not fail to have been proud.

'You are perfect, absolutely perfect,' said Faith half aloud. As she spoke, she felt a touch on her shoulder.

'Lady Marlay,' said a voice, 'can we go and talk somewhere?'

Faith started, looked round, and found, standing beside her, the tall woman who had watched from the pavement in Curzon Street the night before.

'You know me?' she said. 'I do not know you.' But a fear came over her that the words were untrue.

The woman laughed, a hard uncomfortable laugh.

'I hoped my postcard this morning would remind you,' she said. 'It is a long time since we met, Faith Marlay, and a good deal's happened since then. Let's go into one of these little teashops. They are empty enough at this time of the day.'

Faith drew back a step, her hand pressed against the plate glass window.

'You are Deborah Kane,' she said.

The woman nodded.

'I thought you would hardly have forgotten.' Then, slipping an arm through Faith's, 'Come along, let's get away from the crowds.'

'No,' said Faith, holding back. 'I have nothing to say to you—nothing.'

'It's what I have to say to you,' Deborah insisted. 'Don't be afraid, you little idiot. There's nothing to fear in drinking a cup of coffee with a friend in a Bond Street teashop.'

'No,' Faith repeated. 'I tell you "No."'

The arm through hers tightened compellingly.

'It would be a mistake for the wife of the famous Sir John Marlay, M.D., who is filling the papers these days, to be concerned in a scene in the West End. You ought to know me well enough to remember that I am not frightened of scenes when there is no other way of getting what I want. Are you coming?'

Without waiting for consent, she moved off with Faith at her side, and turned into an open doorway. Together they climbed a narrow staircase to a back room, which boasted one or two tables with check cloths and coloured cups.

A waitress with a mop of yellowy hair rose from a chair by the window and asked for their order.

'Some black coffee,' said Deborah, 'and if it could be arranged, we should like to be undisturbed for a quarter of an hour.'

‘Bless us! I don’t want to know what you have to say,’ the girl retorted. ‘Two black coffees, you said.’

‘Now I have made sure of your identity there is no more need to hide my own,’ said Deborah removing the motor veil which concealed her features.

A tall, rather bony woman was Deborah Kane, suggesting the scaffolding of what was once a splendid physique. A shock of coal black hair framed a face chalk-white save for the scarlet thread of her mouth and the black caverns of a pair of glittering eyes. Time had erased all trace of feminine softness from face and figure alike, but there was something gallant and arresting in her appearance as if beauty, long dead, had left behind a ghost of its former self. If her eyes had lost the innocence of youth, they had gained some new quality from experience. Her mouth, though thin-lipped, was unusually large, and it is doubtful if there was anywhere to be found a mouth which responded so efficiently to the business of a smile or snarl. Her whole face, in fact, was a mirror of the emotions and, as it were, a chart of the track she had followed through the rough seas of life. By the hard light of day evil currents, whirlpools and hidden rocks could be discerned upon that chart, but it was easy to imagine that, to her men friends at least, a more thrilling message might have been read when the lighting was a little more favourable. In the world of men Deborah Kane had taken and given hard knocks and caresses with equal impartiality. Failure was scrawled over every line and feature of her face, and yet there was something about her to suggest a gallant failure, a fighter to the last, a pirate who might sink, but with her colours nailed to the mast.

Until the coffee was placed on the table she made no attempt to speak, and Faith, shocked into silence by the apparition of this woman out of a past upon which she had prayed the last door had been closed for ever, sat staring, wide-eyed and afraid.

The waitress set down the tray with a clatter, shot a glance at these two ill-assorted women, and with a toss of her head, vanished into the little kitchen across the landing.

Faith was the first to speak, as Deborah intended, pushing away the coffee that Deborah held out with a left hand.

‘What do you want of me?’ she asked.

Deborah Kane did not reply at once and her eyes travelled critically over Faith’s small, agitated face.

‘I haven’t entirely made up my mind. There hasn’t been much time to work things out. I only placed you three days ago.’

‘Placed me?’

‘As this man’s wife. You have gone up in the world, my dear.’

‘What’s that to you?’

Deborah lifted her left shoulder, and smiled.

‘A great deal, perhaps,’ she said. ‘After all you owe me a great deal, Faith.’

‘I owe you nothing.’

‘Would you call it nothing if someone whistled away the only man you ever cared a damn for and threw him overboard? Is that nothing, Faith?’

‘What man?’

‘Don’t be a fool, my dear; Philip, of course, Philip Voaze.’

At the sound of that name that Faith had deliberately shut out of her memory, her hand went to her throat, the fingers burying into the collar of silver fox.

‘It is a lie,’ she said, ‘you know it is a lie. When Philip took me away, I never even knew of your existence. I told you so, all those years ago.’

‘What difference does that make?’ said Deborah in a tone as hard as flint.

‘All the difference.’

Deborah Kane snapped her fingers.

‘Rubbish! none at all. If some woman came between you and this man Marlay, you wouldn’t want to know how to hate her.’

Faith’s head moved from side to side.

‘But why should you hate me? Not that it matters whether you do or not; but why should you? I never did you intentional harm. Do you think I didn’t pay for marrying Philip? It has been a nightmare to me, a nightmare.’

‘You enjoyed it well enough at the time,’ Deborah answered, ‘besides, if it wasn’t for that nightmare, you wouldn’t think so highly of what you have now.’

‘That’s true,’ Faith admitted. ‘But what’s the use of digging up the past? We were both hurt, terribly hurt, by the same man. That’s no reason for hating each other now.’

‘Hate’s the wrong word perhaps,’ said Deborah slowly. ‘Hate and love and passion are emotions one leaves behind. But they help us to learn common sense, my dear, and how to make the most of our opportunities.’

‘Have you made the most of yours?’ said Faith, and there was a touch of contempt in the way she put the question.

‘That’s what you will have a chance to judge,’ Deborah answered. ‘At our last meeting you held the best cards. You were married to the man I wanted and my chance of getting him back wasn’t one in a thousand; but now, my dear, the tables are turned and all the best cards are with me.’

Faith rose.

‘If you are trying to frighten me,’ she said, ‘you are wasting your time. I have nothing to be afraid of.’

‘Still I wouldn’t be in too much of a hurry to run away,’ said Deborah. ‘Perhaps you have more to be afraid of than you think. I don’t suppose this John Marlay would be over-pleased if it came to be known that his wife had started life as the mistress of a man with a reputation like Philip’s.’

‘You beast,’ said Faith. ‘I told him everything before we were married, everything.’

‘You misunderstand me,’ said Deborah, ‘I said, if it came to be known. Eminent men are never enthusiastic about their wives’ little peccadilloes being made public.’

Faith’s lower lip trembled.

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘Why not? I never set much store on reputation. After all, when one has ceased to take an active part in life one has to use whatever weapons one’s wits, and other people’s lack of wit, provides.’

‘Do you think your word would be believed against mine?’

Deborah shrugged her shoulders.

‘Perhaps not, I wouldn’t be so foolish as to expect that. But my word, backed up by a few rather indiscreet letters might produce a different effect.’

‘What letters?’

Deborah Kane pushed back her chair, and stared at the ceiling.

‘Letters that you wrote to Philip before he married you. I suppose he must have gone away for a change or something and you were afraid he might not come back. There wasn’t a great deal left to the imagination in what you wrote. Let’s see now, “Philip, Philip, I believed you when you promised to make me your wife. The thought of what we are now is killing me with shame,”—and a lot more like that.’

All vestige of colour had left Faith’s cheeks. They were pale as old ivory.

‘How have you seen those letters?’ she said, ‘you can’t have seen them.’

‘My dear Faith,’ said Deborah, ‘during the last few days I have handled them a score of times. You see by mere chance I saw your photograph on the illustrated page of *The Cable* last week and determined that you and I should have a little talk. I suppose you are fairly well off these days?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it will be pleasant for you to do something for a sister sinner who hasn’t been so lucky.’

‘Blackmail,’ said Faith, and then with unexpected force. ‘All right. Use those letters. I have turned my back on the past and neither you nor those letters nor anything else shall revive it. There’s not a newspaper in the land would publish them, and not a decent person who would believe any rumour or any lies which you tried to spread.’

‘It is a pity to take up that attitude,’ said Deborah, ‘a great pity, Faith. If you had used your wits about this it would have saved you a good deal of unnecessary pain.’

Faith picked up her handbag and fastened the collar of her coat.

‘I am going,’ she said. ‘Please understand, if you try to threaten or expose me, you will have yourself to blame for anything that happens. I shall tell my husband what you’ve said, and after that I think you might find it safer to leave me alone.’

‘Your husband?’ said Deborah. ‘Which husband? The man with whom you are living now or Philip Voaze?’

‘Philip’s dead,’ said Faith, ‘he was killed in France at the end of the war.’

Deborah Kane shook her head.

‘You believe that?’

‘I know it.’

‘Then how, I wonder, did I come to see him in a Paris theatre with a woman less than two years ago.’

‘It’s a lie,’ said Faith, but the hand at her throat fell to a chair and clutched it. ‘It’s a lie.’

‘No, the truth,’ said Deborah simply. ‘I have made a good many mistakes in my life, but that was not one of them. I waited in the foyer at the end of the play and spoke to him. There are not two men in the world like Philip Voaze. He looked at me with that drooping cynical smile of his. The woman who was by his side said, “Who was that who touched your arm?” and he answered, “A ghost, my dear, from an Australian graveyard,” then to me, “Still faithful, Deborah. Constancy is the most tedious characteristic in the feminine calendar.” The sound of his voice, seeing him so near, touching him, made me dizzy, I suppose, and, for the moment, I could say nothing. Then the crowds pushing out of the theatre swallowed him up and he was gone.’

Faith sat motionless with a hand over her eyes, swaying.

‘How awful,’ she cried suddenly.

Deborah’s voice took fire.

‘Awful that he should be alive? To you perhaps, but not to me. To me it was a miracle that re-made the world. Awful, you cry! That’s what your love’s worth, is it?’

Rising she struck the little table bell with the palm of her hand.

‘You’re naturally upset,’ she said. ‘You are happy with this new man of yours. But you’ve no right to him, understand. I have made that clear, I hope—helped you to see that your continued happiness depends on keeping on the right side of me.’

The waitress approached.

‘Take the bill out of this and keep the change.’

As they descended the staircase and came out into the pale winter sunlight, Deborah spoke again.

‘I have some bills to settle this week; quarter day, you know. I suppose you have your own private banking account?’ She fumbled in her bag for a card. ‘That’s my address, 44, Beaufort Hall Court, Westminster. Send me a couple of hundred pounds to go on with. I’ll let you know, later, what permanent arrangements are necessary. And Faith, do try and keep your head. It won’t do Sir John Marlay’s practice any good if his patients get to know that he has married a bigamist. As a reminder that I am on the map I shall send him one of those blank postcards each day. Of course, if you show any signs of being troublesome, I may be driven to write a few sentences on the backs of them. Good-bye.’

But Faith scarcely seemed to see the left hand that was held out to her. Deborah turned, and with a rakish stride mingled with the crowd upon the pavement. A tall, gaunt figure, her right hand tucked in the belt of her jacket, her left arm swinging.

CHAPTER V

It was not John Marlay's way to ask questions. He knew, by experience, that a willing confidence is a source of greater comfort than confidence inspired by questioning. And so, although swift to mark the sudden and alarming change in Faith, he said nothing.

He found it impossible to explain why she should have set out one morning, filled with happiness and good nature, and by the afternoon of the same day was huddled in a dark corner of the yellow-panelled living-room, a very ghost of herself.

Women, as he knew, are subject to unexplained nervous reactions. A nature like Faith's, capable of touching pinnacles of happiness pays for the privilege in occasional moods of despair.

During the earlier years of their marriage, he had often marked the bogey of the past appear, like a shadow, in her eyes; but that past, he told himself, was dead and buried beneath the fertile soil of their present happiness. As a doctor he was confident that she was suffering from a trouble of the mind, not of the body. His love for Faith was founded largely on primitive instincts of possession, and in defence of his own property he waited, apparently unconscious that anything was amiss, for the explanation to disclose itself.

He knew that Faith trusted him as implicitly as a child—a child incapable of reticence or deceit.

At their first meeting, with a frankness which might have created a real danger to herself, she had told him everything. After that there had been no secrets.

Sometimes he had wondered if her love of confessing, even the most trivial matter, had sprung from her upbringing in a convent. Faith was not a Roman Catholic, but the habit of unburdening the soul of its sins and omissions clung to her like a little white gown. In his mind's eye John always saw Faith in white.

The first indication she had given him that something was wrong with her was a sudden rebellion against the publicity which surrounded their lives, and in which, a few hours before, she had found such delight.

'Must I be photographed every time I go out of the house—plucked at—questioned?' she demanded, her voice rising hysterically. 'I cannot stand it; it . . . does . . . seem so silly.'

She covered her eyes with tightly pressed hands and stood rigid.

'Oh! wow! wow!' he replied. 'We are all being pestered and badgered about and questioned these days; but it doesn't matter, my sweet, does it?'

Stooping, he kissed the curve of her neck where it flowed into a huddled shoulder.

‘You love to treat me like a patient,’ she said.

‘Hardly,’ he returned with a laugh. ‘I don’t treat my patients that way, believe me.’

Ordinarily, she, too, would have laughed, but not now. She trailed the back of her hand across her forehead and moved away from him, nibbling at a thumb nail.

John Marlay watched her from beneath knit brows.

‘Publicity?’ he said to himself. ‘It can’t be publicity. What then? Interference perhaps—interference of the world outside with our private lives? I wonder. Hardly that. One resents interference, one isn’t frightened of it.’

For every outline of her figure, as she leaned half-swaying against the window curtain, was illustrative of fear.

There was another blank postcard on his breakfast table when he came down next morning. They were arriving with monotonous regularity.

John Marlay frowned, and carried it off to the consulting room to put it with its fellows in one of the drawers of his writing table.

Barbara was there before him, with a sheaf of letters for signature. To be outspoken was her creed. Without preamble she announced that something was the matter with Faith. ‘Did she tell you so?’ he asked.

Barbara shook her head.

‘One doesn’t want telling; one can see it for oneself. Why don’t you have it out with her, Uncle John?’

‘She may not want to have it out,’ he answered lightly.

‘I think you are wrong,’ said Barbara. ‘It’s awful cheek, but I cannot help thinking you are wrong.’

‘We are all liable to be,’ he answered, putting an arm round her waist and drawing her toward him. ‘But one thing I have discovered in life, Babs darling, and that is the mistake of turning up when and where one hasn’t been invited.’ He paused, and went on, gently, ‘In the quiet places of men’s and women’s souls, little stews are always fussing and bubbling away, but until the lid comes off the saucepan it is nobody’s business to inquire what the stew is made of.’

‘Um,’ said Barbara, ‘I’m not so sure. When anything’s wrong, I believe in having it out.’

‘That’s because you are twenty years younger than I am,’ he said with an affectionate pressure of his arm. ‘I have a conviction that, between keeping things in and having them out, there’s a small empty corridor along which one must walk on tiptoe. It’s kind of Tom Tiddler’s ground, Babs dear,

barred at either end with a door marked "No admittance." You may push one door open successfully enough, but the sound of your feet clattering along that empty corridor, very often persuades the person on the other side of the second door to shoot the bolts.'

Barbara screwed up her face.

'I suppose in the politest possible way you are telling me to mind my own business.'

'It isn't a bad policy,' he nodded. 'There would be a devil of a lot more work done in this world and a great deal less pain, if everybody *did* mind their own business.'

'I know you are generally right,' said Barbara, 'but no one is going to persuade me that it's right for Faith to look miserable.' She stopped short, in the presence of a sudden idea. 'Uncle John, you don't think she's going to have a——'

But John put a hand over her mouth.

'If ever you want to see the happiest woman in the world,' he answered, 'I should advise you to take a look at Faith, if and when she is ever going to have a——'

The door opened and Childers announced the arrival of a patient.

Gathering up her letters, Barbara slipped out of the consulting room by way of the laboratory.

BOOK TWO

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

In a single week, Deborah Kane, with great business acumen, extorted three hundred and fifty pounds from Faith to meet the incidental expenses occasioned by the quarter day of March 25th.

Nothing if not thorough, she instructed Faith to send for her perusal and return, a statement of her personal account at the bank.

The figures were disappointing, since most of Faith's private money was invested in War Savings certificates.

In a brief conversation, held with Faith by telephone on the fourth day, she notified the intention of being reasonable in her demands.

'I realise, of course, that you can get as much money as I want by asking that alleged husband of yours,' she said; 'but as long as you make no trouble and do what you can willingly, it is as well to do nothing to arouse his suspicion. I am not a greedy woman. I enjoy my comforts like anyone else; but you see this isn't entirely a matter of money. You sent me to hell with an easy conscience ten years ago. Through suffering I have learned some common sense. Perhaps suffering will help you to see things clearer, my dear. Naturally, if you lose your head, I shall have to apply to Marlay.'

'You won't dare to tell him,' Faith gasped. 'Even you wouldn't do anything so damnably wicked as that.'

A little hard laugh came back to her along the wire.

'The wickedness isn't on my side,' was the answer. 'If a man in his position intends to live in open adultery with a woman, he can hardly resent paying for the privilege.'

'It's a lie,' said Faith, 'and you know it's a lie. He believes Philip is dead, as I believed, until you told me the truth.'

'What made you believe he was dead?'

'His death was reported in a Sydney paper.'

'I have been turning that over in my mind,' Deborah replied. 'The actual wording was, "missing, believed killed."'

'It was never contradicted.'

'Are you so sure? Did you make inquiries at the right quarter? If you had, you might have found the report *was* contradicted. A good many mistakes are made in the casualty lists during a big retirement. Of course, as an *unconscious* bigamist you might get away with it, although it is perfectly obvious that Marlay could not go on keeping you with him after the truth was known. That little episode will have to be closed with decency and despatch. But as a *conscious* bigamist, a woman who had not taken every

precaution to assure herself she was free to marry again—well, my dear, I leave it to your imagination.’

‘Listen,’ said Faith; ‘John would never let me go; never, never. We mean everything to one another.’

‘I see,’ said Deborah, ‘then his practice would have to go—what? One or the other, let’s face it.’

‘You don’t understand John,’ said Faith, and her voice throbbed with emotion. ‘He’s not like other men. You don’t know the danger you are putting yourself in by treating me like this. I tell you, it isn’t I who will suffer if he finds out, but you—you—terribly. I don’t dare to think what he might do.’

There was something very sincere, very real, in the way she spoke these words, and Deborah, who assessed every situation from the emotions of those people who took part in it, paused before replying.

‘Very well, if that’s true, as I am prepared to believe, the more reason for keeping him in the dark. I daresay between us we shall be able to find a satisfactory arrangement. I shan’t press you too hard.’

‘Too hard,’ Faith repeated. ‘You have taken over three hundred pounds already.’

‘That isn’t much to you,’ Deborah retorted. ‘But don’t be afraid, if you behave yourself nicely perhaps I will ease things off a little.’

‘Listen to me,’ said Faith. ‘You shan’t have another penny, not another penny unless you give me back my letters.’

‘Um—yes.’ The voice at the other end of the line sounded dubious. ‘I suppose that’s not unreasonable. The letters are of very secondary importance, although I quite understand how, in the circumstances, you would like them back. I’ll think it over and let you know what I decide. By the way, if a Mrs. Denham rings up your house, you will know who it is.’

‘I forbid you,’ cried Faith. ‘I forbid you.’

But there was no reply. The line had gone dead.

CHAPTER II

Two days later, dull with apprehension—and with the joy of giving shrouded in misery, Faith Marlay entered Asprey's and bought the platinum and onyx card-case for John's birthday.

She was a regular customer with the firm, well-known in all its departments, therefore no comment was made when she asked the assistant who had served her to enter the purchase. She was given an invoice and this, with the card-case, she tucked into a little brocade bag which hung from her wrist.

On the pavement outside, she almost collided with a slim angular woman, dressed in a smart coat of sable-trimmed apple-green cloth.

'My good girl,' said this lady, 'why on earth don't you look where you are going?' Then in a different tone, 'Gracious, if it isn't Faith. My dear, what a ghost you look. Whatever can John be thinking of to allow you to get into such a state?'

The speaker was Florence Marlay, John's sister, a spinster older than himself by seven years.

Apart from a slightly characteristic facial angle, there was little to suggest relationship between John and Florence.

The humour, tolerance and vigour of his features were in no way reflected in hers. She was of an exact type, with inquisitive eyes, an intrusive nose and a mouth which was prim, censorious and didactic. Her whole face was a wedge, as if designed by nature to thrust itself into the affairs of other people.

From a store-house of unqualified experience and opinions based on a sublime ignorance of human nature, Florence Marlay had equipped herself to take part in the battle of life. An indefatigable adviser and an unremitting interferer in other people's affairs had united to inspire for her few friends and little esteem.

John, candid in all things, freely admitted very little taste for his sister's society.

She had disapproved of his marriage with Faith and had expressed her disapproval by cablegram and in a variety of explosive letters.

As, at the time, she was unacquainted with Faith and the circumstances in which John was marrying her, he had resented her interference in the liveliest manner. The result had been an estrangement, affording considerable satisfaction to both parties.

But Florence Marlay was a woman who moved with the times and the sudden heights to which her brother had ascended, persuaded her to make

efforts in the direction of a rapprochement.

Realising that John was unlikely to welcome a return of friendship which sprang from snobbish, rather than sisterly motives, she extended the olive branch to Faith, who was not a person to resent anyone, nor was likely to inquire too deeply into the causes of her sudden change.

Faith, with her confiding nature, which thought the best of everyone, was swift to accept Florence's advances.

On those nights when John had to go out, Faith would drive round to Florence's and sit sewing at her cross-stitch and listening to Florence's stream of small talk about what had occurred in the pseudo-fashionable world of which she was an ornament.

'My poor child, what is it?' Florence asked. 'For the wife of a well-known doctor to look as you do is enough to ruin his practice.'

Florence was the first person to comment on the change which had come over Faith's appearance, and it was, therefore, with a tone of half resentment she replied:

'I am quite all right.'

'Nonsense,' said Florence. 'I know what it is; like all busy men, John has no time to take care of his wife's health. I shall speak to him about it at the first opportunity.'

'No, don't, please don't,' Faith pleaded eagerly. 'I'd hate you to do that. He has been frightfully busy and I won't have him worried about me.'

'I have always said,' Florence replied, 'and will always continue to say, that you do not give yourself sufficient importance in the house. A wife,' she added, speaking from the fund of her ignorance on the subject, 'is, or should be, a husband's first consideration. But that, my dear, will never be so, unless we insist upon it. You should stand up for your rights and see that you get them.'

'I do get them and much more beside,' was the answer.

Florence made an effacing gesture with a lean gloved hand.

'Ridiculous,' she said. 'You are far too reasonable. I am glad we met this afternoon, for I was going to ring you up and ask you to dine with me at eight to-night.'

'I am afraid I cannot,' Faith replied.

'And why not?'

'I never leave John if I can help it.'

'Tell him to come, too,' said Florence.

'No, that's no good, I have just remembered. He's going out.'

'Then,' said Florence, with finality, 'there is no reason why you should not come to me. I shall expect you at eight sharp and please don't be late, for if there is one thing I cannot tolerate it is cold soup.'

She raised the knob of her umbrella to a passing taxi, jumped inside, with a kind of crisp agility, rattled an address through the off-side window, and was driven away.

CHAPTER III

In the chaos and misery in which Faith found herself, was an irresistible yearning to throw herself into John's arms and tell him everything. But this comfort, for his own sake, she was denied.

She loved John too much to tell him the truth. Her reasoning power, never the greatest of her possessions, told her that here was tragedy that none might share.

She tried vaguely to imagine what his feelings or actions would be if he learnt she was not his wife. Of his love, she was confident, of his chivalry, he had given her a thousand proofs, but often she had been aware in him of a certain puritanism which set its face against all that was slack and irregular in life.

John was not a man to let things slide. He would never be content for their lives to continue together, under the ever-present menace of another man with a first claim upon her, re-appearing out of the past. She knew the defensive pride with which he surrounded his possessions. It would be intolerable to a nature like his to hold with such a slender bond, a woman in whom he had no real title.

Once he knew the truth, he would not rest until Philip Voaze had been found and the hideous muddle of their present position had been cleared up one way or the other. And that, Faith told herself, could only result in publicity of a scandalous kind which would shake the whole foundation of his practice. From being one of the most conspicuous successes of the day he would become the subject of gossip, club anecdote, and newspaper notoriety.

Inevitably, his prestige would suffer, as inevitably as his peace of mind and all he had cherished most in life would be broken into pieces.

A public man is the natural target of scandal-mongers. To profess that neither he nor Faith had had the vaguest idea that her husband was still alive, might satisfy a few, but would not arrest the wagging tongues of a vulgar majority.

'He must never know,' she told herself. 'Rather than let him know I'd kill myself.'

It was then that the thought of death as a solution to the problem opened a wide door in her imagination.

'Perhaps I ought to kill myself,' she said. Perhaps I owe it to him. He took me from nothing and gave me everything. Am I to repay him by spoiling all he has worked for?'

But death is a nasty-looking customer for a timid soul to meet on the highways of a life, which until then, had held so much of happiness.

In the lonely dusk of Lansdowne Passage, Faith stopped and pressed a hand over her eyes.

An approaching newspaper reporter, returning from an unsuccessful attempt to interview Marlay, recognised her and whipped off his hat.

‘Pardon me, it’s Lady Marlay, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘Are you ill?’

She shook her head and looked at him with a scared expression.

‘I represent the International Press Bureau,’ he went on. ‘May I have the pleasure of escorting you home?’

Again she shook her head.

‘Please don’t trouble,’ she said. ‘I was a little faint, that’s all.’

‘No trouble, an honour,’ he replied, gallantly. ‘I have been trying, without success, to get hold of this husband of yours. He’s a difficult chap to land.’

Faith said nothing.

Side by side they came out into Curzon Street.

‘I suppose you wouldn’t use your influence on my behalf, Lady Marlay? A man who has brought off a great scientific discovery mustn’t be allowed to hide his light under a bushel. I suppose I can’t persuade *you* to give me an item of news.’

A sudden panic seized Faith and brought her near to crying out,

‘Yes. Yes. He isn’t my husband at all and he doesn’t know it. Tell that to your readers, Mr. Reporter, let them snigger over that at their breakfast tables to-morrow.’

How he would leap at such a piece of news.

What a scoop for the press. And with that thought, Faith hated the press, hated it with the loathing one has for a rat, a spy. It was because of the press that she was suffering now. Her whole happiness had been shattered by a three by two snapshot on an illustrated page of a daily paper.

Aloud she said.

‘No—nothing.’

Journalists are used to rebuffs, and the young man smiled agreeably.

‘Then perhaps you’d consent to edit the woman’s page in next week’s issue of *Panache*,’ he said. ‘It’s only a matter of putting a signature to stuff that has already been written.’

Faith did not reply. They had arrived at her doorstep. She admitted herself with a latchkey, said ‘Good-night’ to the young man, and left him on the pavement.

There were two staircases in the house in Curzon Street—a square well-staircase, and a semi-spiral which went up to John’s laboratory.

It was by the latter Faith mounted, and opening a little door at the stairhead, she stepped silently into the white-tiled, glass-shelved room in which his researches were made.

The impersonality of the place had always made it slightly detestable to Faith. In a way, she was jealous of it, since it absorbed much of John's time that otherwise might have been spent with her. On the shelves were hundreds of bottles, test tubes, retorts and glass jars with strange, inhuman-looking exhibits suspended therein or floating in spirits of wine.

At one end was a cabinet, the doors of which were kept locked. Turning her eyes towards it, Faith saw with surprise that they were open, and that a bunch of keys dangled idly from the lock.

From the consulting room beyond, came a murmur of voices. Faith stood still listening. Then, acting on impulse, moved quickly to the cupboard, threw back the door and looked within.

The shelves were crowded with mysterious odds and ends, and haphazard, Faith picked up a little brown bottle, with a glass stopper. It bore a red poison label on which, in John's handwriting, were the words, 'Acid Hydrocyanic.'

Removing the stopper, Faith sniffed at the contents and caught instantly a choking, acrid smell of bitter almonds. With a little shudder, she put the stopper back, closed the door, and tucked the bottle in her bag.

Like a ghost she vanished from the laboratory and passed down the stairs to the hall.

Taking off her moleskin coat, Faith threw it over a chair, and found Childers standing beside her.

'There was someone asking for you on the telephone,' he said. 'A Mrs. Denham, she said she would ring up later.'

Faith did not reply, but one of her hands drifted out for the banister rail. For a moment, she remained thus, rocking on her heels, then silently mounted the stairs, clutching the little bag of coloured brocade.

CHAPTER IV

The voices Faith had heard in the consulting room belonged to John, to Douglas Helder, and Barbara. For once in his life, as Barbara pointed out, with a kind of insolent amusement, John was taking himself seriously.

‘I am,’ he said, slapping his engagement diary down on the desk. ‘I have no choice. These publicity blokes will not leave me alone.’

‘It’s all very well, sir,’ Douglas protested, ‘but all the big chaps have been through it.’

John held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

‘Big chaps, I ask you,’ he said. ‘Of course, I am pleased at the success of the serum, as who wouldn’t be; but I do kick at details of my private life being plastered all over London.’

‘It is a personal age, sir,’ said Douglas. ‘The public are much more interested in the performer than his performance.’

John Marlay picked up a sheaf of press-cuttings and flicked them over, pausing now and then to point out colourful passages with an indignant forefinger.

‘“Sir John Marlay,”’ he read, ‘“is a passionate devotee to the works of Handel.” Apart from the song—“Alice where art thou” I am not conscious of ever having heard the works of Handel.’

‘He certainly didn’t write Alice,’ said Barbara with a snigger.

‘Well, there you are,’ said John. ‘And here’s a bit about me being something of a dandy. When, I ask you, have I ever taken more than ten minutes to dress in the morning?’

‘Most days,’ said Barbara.

‘Then all this trash about character, good citizenship and the rest of it.’ He turned up another cutting. ‘“Sir John Marlay is an exemplary husband.” Now that’s a rotten thing to say about anybody.’

‘But you are an exemplary husband. If you doubt it, ask Faith,’ said Barbara.

‘Perhaps I am,’ he replied, ‘but what business is it of the public’s to know that?’

‘There’s a big demand for that kind of information,’ Douglas explained.

‘Then in my case,’ retorted John, ‘the demand is going to exceed the supply. For how much of this are you responsible, Douglas?’

‘I have done my whack, sir.’

The twinkling humour in John’s eyes deadened and he put his next question with a frown.

‘Have you written anything about Faith?’

‘Only to say what a wonderful wife she’s been, and how she’s helped you with your work.’

‘But that’s beastly vulgar,’ said Barbara.

John rose from his writing table and crossing to a corner of the room, poured himself out a glass of water, which he drank at a draught.

‘The public expect that kind of thing,’ said Douglas, a shade ruefully.

John turned on him.

‘And if Faith had not been a marvellous wife, but been a great hindrance to my work, is the public to be told that?’

Douglas shrugged his shoulders.

‘I am employed by a newspaper and it is my job to get all the information I can.’

‘I know, I know,’ said John, his hand falling on the young man’s shoulder. ‘Everybody has a right to earn their living as best they can, but they have no right to interfere with other people who are doing the same thing. Interference is a deadly sin. Make your mud pie as pretty as you like, but don’t mess about with mine.’

Douglas Helder looked crestfallen.

‘It’s frightfully difficult to hold down this job without making a few floaters,’ he said, ‘but if you feel this way about it, I won’t write another word without your leave.’

There was something very sincere in the offer.

‘Oh, Gawd! don’t make me feel a hundred,’ said John, with a little laugh. ‘I have a kink in that direction. A man has a right to be left alone. Curiosity often leads to interference and interference makes me see red.’

‘Now everyone feels uncomfortable,’ said Barbara.

‘Good thing, too,’ said John. ‘Mine’s a very funny profession, probably the last in which a moral standard means much one way or the other. I am an ambitious man, Douglas, and up to now I have been a fairly successful man. I am not out to take risks. Archbishops, Princes, Prime Ministers may fall and rise again, but once a doctor hits the earth, he bites it.’

He turned away, embarrassed at the vigour of his own words.

Douglas and Barbara sought each other’s eyes.

Barbara’s mouth pursed into a little moue. John Marlay’s back was towards them, and stooping quickly, Douglas kissed the mouth and turned it into a smile.

‘There’s a looking-glass on the mantelpiece, Douglas, old man,’ said John.

There was more than a looking-glass on the mantelpiece; there was one of Deborah’s blank postcards which had arrived that morning. John picked it

up, and crossing to his table, took five others from a drawer. Fanning them between his fingers, he handed them to Douglas.

‘You are a bright sort of a lad,’ he said. ‘What do you make of these?’

‘Postcards,’ said Douglas, turning them to and fro in his hand.

‘There you are; he’s on to it in a minute,’ said John.

Douglas scrutinised the empty backs of the cards in silence, then:

‘There’s nothing written on them.’

‘There’s my name and address, a Westminster postmark and, if you examine the dates, you will see they run consecutively.’

‘Nothing on the back, I mean.’ Then turning them again. ‘It’s queer writing, do you know it, sir?’

‘I am getting to know. It might be disguised, do you think?’

Douglas shook his head.

‘Rather a job to disguise a hand effectively half-a-dozen times.’

John nodded.

‘There’s a queer slant to the characters. I had an idea it might be the writing of a left-handed woman,’ said he.

‘That’s much more probable. I’d go bail it’s a woman.’

Barbara, her head over Douglas’s shoulder, stared at the cards critically.

‘Whoever wrote them, hasn’t much to say,’ said she.

John’s face looked surprisingly serious for so small a cause.

‘Up to the present,’ he replied, slowly. ‘Anyway, it’s a pleasant little mystery for some one to unravel.’

Before he had completed the sentence Faith came into the room.

‘What mystery?’ she stammered. ‘What were you saying?’

‘Another of these blank postcards, my sweet.’

Faith struggled to make her voice sound natural.

Deliberately John looked away from her.

She forced a smile and held out her hand to Douglas.

‘How are you, Lady Marlay?’ he inquired. ‘Babs tells me you have been a bit off-colour.’

‘Not I,’ she replied. ‘Babs is a scaremonger.’ Then, slipping an arm through one of Barbara’s, ‘Has he been proposing again, this man?’

‘He has, rather,’ Barbara replied.

‘And have you been accepting?’

‘Good heavens, no. A newspaper man about the house used to be rather a thrill, but since Uncle John sprang to fame, one never sees anybody else.’

‘Sprang to fame, is right,’ said John. ‘You haven’t heard the latest honour this grateful country has bestowed upon me.’

‘Oh, not a baronetcy,’ Barbara exclaimed.

‘Not yet. It’s the wrong time of the year for that,’ he replied. ‘This is a much rarer distinction. F.R.S. if you want to know.’

‘F.R.S.’ Faith spoke with a hand pressed to her throat.

John nodded.

‘I bet a thousand pounds to one you haven’t the smallest idea what that is,’ said he.

‘Of course I have. A Fellow of the Royal Society.’

John laughed.

‘Marvellous,’ he said.

‘A Fellow of the Royal Society,’ Barbara repeated with a wry face. ‘But isn’t that awfully stodgy?’

‘Stodgy, stodgy,’ John returned. ‘My dear good child, haven’t you read your Encyclopædia Britannica—if you’re not jolly careful, I’ll give you one for a wedding present—where they tell you that the Royal Society is “a concourse of divers learned persons inquisitive into natural philosophy and other parts of human learning.” You’ll go a long way before you’ll find a more handsome phrase than that.’

‘It—it’s wonderful,’ said Faith, but the tone in which she spoke had more in it of dread than admiration.

‘For my part,’ said Barbara, ‘I should have preferred a slightly improved title.’

‘This is a title,’ said John. ‘Only it’s worn after a name like a tail-light, instead of in front.’

‘I’m tremendously glad, sir,’ said Douglas. ‘Can I deal with it in the morning’s issue of *The Cable*?’

John shook his head.

‘You cannot,’ said he.

Picking up a copy of the evening paper he disposed himself on the sofa at Faith’s side.

Her right arm stole round his neck, and she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

‘I am so proud, so proud, John,’ she said. ‘I do adore you so—and you.’ Her free hand strayed out and met one of Barbara’s. ‘I want to be everything to both of you.’

John twinkled an eyelid at Barbara, who tilted her head humorously in reply.

‘Don’t report that sentiment in your paper, Douglas,’ he said.

‘Whatever is the matter with her?’ Barbara asked.

‘I don’t know,’ John answered, ‘but it’s a sinister sign, when a woman you have been married to for seven years makes a public declaration of her affection.’

Faith started and drew away her hand.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Embarrassment, darling,’ he replied with a laugh, ‘embarrassment. It is always embarrassing to be hit in the eye by a bouquet from an unexpected quarter.’

‘Is it unexpected?’ Faith’s voice was tense.

For the first time in six days John looked her squarely in the eyes.

‘My lovely, you have got the jumps,’ he told her, ‘and I cannot allow it. A fortnight from to-day, we’ll put out from London and beat it for the desert. There’s an oasis in Algeria that I know—Berrian, it’s called—the Place of the Singing Wells. All day long you shall sit in the sun on an old mud wall and watch the green barley, the coloured crowds and lazy camels, and hear the splash of water and the squeaking of the well-pulleys.’

He was interrupted by the arrival of Childers, with an overcoat thrown over his arm.

‘I thought you might have forgotten your appointment at Wigmore Street, Sir John.’

John looked at his watch.

‘All right. Get me a taxi in five minutes. I don’t have to be there until six o’clock. And Childers, put me out a dinner jacket—I’ll dress when I come in.’

‘Very good, Sir John,’ said Childers and retired.

‘You haven’t told me where you are dining,’ said Faith.

‘With old Smythe who edits the *Clinic*,’ he replied. ‘A decent old sort. He wants me to meet this Swedish scientist—Professor Altzadjem. There’s an article about him in this paper.’ Turning a page, he read, ‘“The distinguished Swedish scientist who is generally accepted as the first living authority on Anterior Poliomyelitis and Disseminated Sclerosis.” That’s the kind of man I am.’

‘With whom did you say?’ Faith repeated.

John shook his head.

‘I am not going to say it all over again; it would give me lockjaw.’

‘Yes, but where does Doctor Smythe live?’

‘Westminster, darling. Beaufort Hall Court—No. 48.’

Faith’s body became rigid as stone, her hands clenched tightly into the cushions at the side of her.

Of course, it was a coincidence, and nothing more, that he should be dining in the same mansions in which Deborah Kane lived; but the coincidence, occurring at that moment when her resistances were strained to the final pitch of endurance, was almost more than she could stand.

Stupidly, like a child, she repeated the address.

John had risen and was not looking at her.

With an effort she struggled to regain her self-control, rubbed her forehead and said:

‘I always like to know where you are.’ Then, to hide her anxiety, she told of her meeting with Florence. ‘I knew you were going out, so I promised to have dinner with her.’

‘Then I should have something to eat before you go,’ said John, folding the evening paper and putting it on his table.

‘You’re rather hard on Florence,’ she said. ‘She isn’t a bad sort, really.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Barbara; ‘but until Uncle John’s upward flight she didn’t bother much with us.’

‘She didn’t think he should have married me,’ said Faith, and added, ‘Perhaps she was right.’

‘Then why has she changed her mind?’ Barbara demanded.

‘Florence has no machinery for changing her mind,’ said John. ‘It changes automatically with the fashion. Shall I see you when I come back, sweetest?’

Faith nodded—then:

‘John, I shall want some money, I am afraid I have been rather—extravagant, lately.’

‘Well, why not?’ he replied. ‘How much—a million?’

‘About two hundred.’

‘What, only a trifle like that? All right, I’ll let you have the cheque when I come in.’

‘If it’s all the same,’ said Douglas Helder, ‘may I take Barbara out of the room while this is going on? I’d hate her to get the notion that your answers are typical of husbands.’

John went out laughing.

‘I’m on duty to-night at *The Cable* offices,’ Douglas went on. ‘Coming to see me off, Babs?’

But Barbara saw no occasion to do anything of the kind. Douglas was too ready to take things for granted.

‘Nope,’ she replied.

It was Faith who persuaded her to satisfy the young man’s wish. Faith, with a little shake of the head, a tap from the back of her hand and a quite inaudible,

‘Be nice to him.’

‘You sentimentalists,’ said Barbara, and jumping to her feet, crossed to where Douglas stood and gave him a hearty, practical, matter-of-fact kiss.

‘There, will that satisfy you?’

Linking arms, they marched out of the room together.

CHAPTER V

Nothing was ever so bad when John was near. The few short minutes Faith had spent with him had revived in her a sense of being defended against harm and danger.

He was so easy, so confident, so sure. His feet were anchored to the floors of common sense.

With such a hand to cling to, with the knowledge that there was nothing in the world he would shrink from in her defence, her terrors of the last few days assumed unreality. She felt she had been a traitor to allow fear to master her, and she hated herself for having concealed from him this bogey from the past, which was spreading black wings over her happiness.

How much better it would be to make a clean breast of the whole affair and throw herself upon his strength and resource, safe in the knowledge that if any man could find a solution to the problem, he would.

But the faulty logic of a mind unused to grappling singly with a problem of any magnitude dissuaded her from taking this course.

Rightly or wrongly she had convinced herself that here was a battle she must fight alone. Any other course would be cowardice. Life had picked her up and tossed her into a maelstrom from which escape was only possible by her own unaided efforts.

Feeling in her bag for a handkerchief, her fingers came in contact with the bottle of prussic acid she had taken from John's laboratory. The cold glass sent a shiver through her body.

'No,' she said, 'that must be wrong, must be a coward's way.'

Springing to her feet she moved impulsively to the door of the laboratory, but before she reached it the muffled telephone on John's table buzzed imperatively.

Faith halted, dropped the poison bottle back into her bag and moved to the table.

'Hello? Yes,' she said, speaking into the receiver.

Childers' voice replied,

'Mrs. Denham is on the line for you, my lady. Shall I put the call through?'

'Yes.'

Faith heard a click as Childers switched the extension line on to the main; and then Deborah's voice hard and uncompromising with a note of insolent assurance.

'Lady Marlay?'

'Yes,' said Faith.

‘You alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good!’ said Deborah. ‘Now look here, Faith, I was expecting money from you this afternoon and it hasn’t arrived. If you can’t keep your contracts you mustn’t expect me to keep mine.’

‘Listen,’ said Faith. ‘I never said any particular time. I went to the bank but you have all the spare money I was able to get.’

Deborah laughed.

‘All the money you were able to get,’ she repeated. ‘I never heard such rubbish, a woman with a husband who must be earning ten thousand a year. You will have to think up better excuses than that, if you want to keep me quiet.’

‘It isn’t an excuse, it’s the truth.’

‘My dear girl, I am afraid an exchange of truth is going to be very unsatisfactory for both of us. It would be a pity if I had to drop a casual line of truth on the back of the little valentine that goes to John Marlay tomorrow morning.’

‘You mustn’t do that, you can’t,’ said Faith. ‘John’s promised me some money to-night. If I get it I will send it round to you, I promise.’

‘I think it would be better if you brought it round,’ Deborah replied. ‘It’s always a mistake to introduce third parties into affairs of this kind. Bring it yourself, Faith. I will be in about eight o’clock. I suppose you can slip away without any questions being asked.’

‘Very well.’ The reply was barely audible. ‘But you must give me the letters if I do come.’

‘I never talk business on the telephone,’ Deborah replied. ‘At least, I never talk details of business.’

‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair,’ Faith wailed; ‘you make life impossible.’

‘I shall expect you at eight,’ said Deborah, and rang off.

Like a tired child, Faith Marlay put the telephone back on the table and half stumbled across the room to the couch, where, with arms extended, she lay like one crucified. She made no attempt to cover her face, but lay crying shamelessly, her body shaking like the sail of a boat.

It was thus Barbara found her. Barbara had just escaped from the ardours of Douglas Helder, which invariably attacked that young man before the umbrella stand.

Barbara’s chin was pink from kisses, and she was in a state of emotional enthusiasm when she bounced into the consulting room to ask if Faith was going up to dress.

Faith did not reply, for, on hearing Barbara’s approach she had, with an effort, steadied herself. Her face was covered by the backs of her two hands.

‘Hullo, you asleep?’ Barbara demanded. Then, realising something was wrong:

‘Darling, what is it? What’s the matter?’

From behind the covering hands came a muffled, ‘Nothing, nothing. Go away, please go away.’

But Barbara Marlay was not the kind to abandon a friend in an hour of need.

‘You were all right a moment ago. What’s made you like this?’ Then, taking Faith’s wrists in her strong brown hands, ‘Faith, what is it?’

‘When you love a man,’ said Faith slowly, ‘when you’d die for him, kill for him—it isn’t fair.’

The last word drifted out on a sob.

‘Tell me, dear,’ said Barbara, ‘tell me.’

Drawing away her hands, Faith sat upright.

‘I haven’t been a failure, have I? I haven’t been bad? I’ve done my best.’

‘You are an angel,’ said Barbara. ‘We all know you’re an angel.’

‘I wanted him to be happy and great,’ the voice flickered on, ‘to help him to be happy and great—and now he *is* great and I’m afraid.’

‘Of what?’

Faith shook her head.

‘I don’t know, I don’t know. Suppose through me he lost it all, everything he has worked for—everything.’

‘What rubbish,’ said Barbara practically. ‘How could he lose everything?’

‘Others have,’ said Faith. ‘For such little empty causes all they have fought for—gone to nothing—to dust.’

She bit her lip and for a long while it was scarlet from the pressure of her teeth.

‘I may not be up to it—not equal—and it’s all so worth keeping, Babs. If one sins, one has to pay and it’s right one should pay, but if it were only I who had to pay.’

‘Pay,’ Barbara repeated. ‘Faith, you must be ill to talk like this. Pay—for what? What’s on your mind? You can trust me, surely.’

But Faith only shook her head.

‘What is it, dear?’

‘That first marriage of mine,’ she said, slowly; ‘that awful, sordid, first marriage.’

‘But that’s all over, Faith. He died.’

‘Nothing ends,’ said Faith. ‘It haunts me. It rises up like a ghost between me and all that’s worth having.’ She stopped, moved away to the window, and rested her forehead on the cold glass.

In the street below, a big limousine was drawing up before the door.

A policeman with heavy boots creaked slowly along the opposite pavement. Faintly in the distance, a barrel organ played.

Barbara moved to Faith's side and slipped an arm round her shoulder.

'Wouldn't it make it easier to tell someone what's worrying you?' she said, for she had forgotten John Marlay's little sermon about the empty corridor that stretches between having things out and keeping them in.

Faith shook her head and extricated herself from the encircling arm.

'Nothing at all, really nothing.' Her tone was defensive—'I've got the funks, that's all. I am not used to the size of everything. Just the funks.' She forced a little laugh. 'Forget all I've said, I want a change, I expect—too much excitement lately. I am better now.'

'Look here,' said Barbara. 'Stay in to-night and I will too. There's no point in seeing this stupid Aunt Florence.'

'I promised. I shall have to go. Barbara, don't say anything to John about me being so silly. I won't have him upset.'

Childers came quietly into the room.

'I beg your pardon, my lady, but a gentleman has called to see the doctor.'

'Has he an appointment?' Barbara demanded.

'No, miss.'

'You said he was out?'

'Yes, miss; but the gentleman was particularly anxious to see Sir John. He said if necessary he would wait all night.'

Faith shook her head.

'He won't see anyone else to-day, Childers, I am certain. What was the name?'

'Mr. Julian Ackroyd, my lady,' replied Childers, reading from a visiting card.

'Ackroyd,' Faith repeated. 'That's not one of his regular patients, Babs.'

Barbara shook her head.

'He has nothing to do with the papers, Childers?'

'No, my lady; I asked him that question myself.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he'd sunk low, but not so low as that.'

'Did he, though?' said Barbara excitedly, 'I wouldn't see a man of that sort. Probably a beggar.'

Childers shook his head.

'Oh, no, miss, very well to do I should imagine. He came in a big car and he brought with him an introduction from Dr. Braxtide of Paris.'

At the mention of this name Faith and Barbara sought each other's eyes. Braxtide was a doctor for whom John Marlay entertained the liveliest esteem.

'In that case,' said Barbara, 'better tell him to ring up in the morning, Childers.'

Faith shook her head.

'John always treats Dr. Braxtide's patients differently to other people's,' said she. 'Perhaps I had better see Mr. Ackroyd, Childers, and explain.'

'You wish me to send him up, my lady?'

Faith nodded.

'Please.'

'Want any support?' Barbara inquired as the door closed behind Childers. 'If not, I'll hop upstairs and change.'

Faith smiled and shook her head. As Barbara ran up the stairs, she heard Childers talking to a man with a low musical voice, syncopated by a little brassy cough.

'Sir John is out, sir,' said Childers, 'but if you would care to see her ladyship, she would perhaps arrange with you for an appointment some other time.'

Mr. Julian Ackroyd handed a soft black hat to Childers with a smile that pulled down the corners of his mouth.

'That would no doubt be a delightful experience,' he said; 'but it was with Sir John and not with Lady Marlay I was hoping to make the appointment.'

Childers' imperturbable mask suggested a tacit disapproval of such vain humour. He hung the visitor's hat on a peg and relieved him of a long fitting overcoat of foreign cut, embellished with a collar of opossum.

'Thank you,' said Ackroyd, in response to an invitation from Childers, 'but I will keep my cane. During my present indisposition I find I need a little extra support. If there are stairs to mount I should be glad of your arm.'

Doctors' servants are swift to form opinions on their masters' patients and Childers decided, as he offered an arm to Mr. Julian Ackroyd, that he had seldom, if ever, seen a man who looked more ill, nor one for whom he experienced a more profound distrust.

No one could fail but to have been impressed by Ackroyd's appearance. It was at once magnetic and repellent. His features were exquisitely chiselled. His eyes were a greeny-blue, like drops of channel water. His restless mouth curved with something of that cynical sensuousness to be seen in the mouth of the sphinx. It was a face which at one time must have possessed rare beauty and charm, but which had been remodelled by the heavy hands of self-indulgence and sickness. A handsome, uncomfortable

face, criss-crossed with cynical wrinkles and looped with little pouches which informed of a life misspent in many queer and shameful ways. His skin was of a grey whiteness with vivid highlights where it stretched over the bones. High up on his cheeks were two bright, pink spots like finger marks. His shoulders were high and square and accentuated the boyish slenderness of his waist and hips. His feet and hands were as small as a woman's. Indeed, there was something feminine in the fineness of his entire physique.

His manner of walking was mechanical and uncertain. A tendency to drag one foot which he tried to resist resulted in sudden clockwork movements which were uncanny.

He was fashionably, if elaborately dressed, with that kind of elaboration more often to be found in foreigners than Englishmen.

His manners were grave, courteous, and elegant, but one could not but feel that some imp of mischief was only imperfectly concealed behind an assumed chivalry.

Faith Marlay was standing before a mirror on the mantel removing the traces of her recent emotion with a powder puff, when Childers silently introduced the visitor to the consulting room and as silently closed the door and retired.

Julian Ackroyd cast an approving eye upon her back and placed upon John's writing table two envelopes, one large, one small.

The little brassy cough caught his throat and with a flicker of pain, a hand pressed against his chest bone, he dropped his head.

At the cough, Faith turned.

'I beg your pardon,' she said.

Their eyes met. For one horrified moment they stared at each other.

Then from Faith——

'You, Philip—you!'

CHAPTER VI

Philip Voaze was first to recover his composure.

‘Faith,’ he said, ‘this is amazing. I was told I should meet Lady Marlay.’ Then with sudden realization. ‘You’re not——?’

‘You knew,’ cried Faith. ‘You knew! Why pretend you didn’t know?’

Afraid that in the presence of so great a surprise she was likely to lose her head, Philip Voaze went swiftly to the door of the laboratory and closed it.

‘You *are* Lady Marlay? How appalling, how simply appalling.’

‘Why pretend you didn’t know?’ she cried hysterically.

‘Pretend? I hadn’t an idea. After your unhappy experience with me, Faith, I never imagined that you would risk a second marriage. Really, my dear, it would have been discreet to have told me, so that I could have kept out of the way.’

‘Told you, told you,’ Faith repeated. ‘It wasn’t until a week ago that I knew you were still alive.’

‘To be sure,’ he said and nodded. A smile at the absurdity of the situation crept across the lower half of his features. ‘That little mistake in the casualty lists! If I had imagined that you were contemplating a step of this kind, I would have given you private information, which, in the circumstances, I withheld from the War Office. You see, Faith, I was rather badly shot up and left behind on the battlefield during a retirement. A couple of sturdy Huns found me half-buried in the mud. One of them, a thorough sort of devil, suggested putting a bayonet through me. But the other was more soft hearted, a family man perhaps, and insisted I should be made a prisoner instead.’

Faith was holding her head in both hands.

‘The report of your death was never denied,’ she wailed.

‘Naturally not, for I did not wish it denied. I am a man who seeks to extract advantage from every possible situation. My life had been, as you will realise, fairly complicated, and it seemed to me not an unattractive idea that Philip Voaze should perish upon the field of glory and Julian Ackroyd, hitherto unknown, should be born into the world with the kind assistance of a medical officer on Ludendorf’s staff. I dropped my identity disc in the battlefield mud as the stretcher party bore me away.’

‘Then why are you here?’ said Faith. ‘If this is true, why have you come back now?’

He seemed surprised at the stupidity of the question.

‘Philip Voaze has not come back,’ he replied, ‘but a Mr. Julian Ackroyd, who, alas, is a very sick man.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Why not? Don’t I look a sick man? Haven’t I done enough in the past to have earned a little sickness now?’

Faith’s head moved from side to side.

‘I don’t believe you. It’s a lie, you are here to blackmail me.’

A furrourh appeared on his brow—a look of perplexity.

‘There’s nothing about it in this letter of introduction,’ he replied, pointing at the table with his cane.

‘Then why have you come to my husband?’

‘Was I ever satisfied with less than the best?’ His voice as he spoke the words was tender and lover-like. ‘It isn’t fair, Faith; you don’t look a day older.’

At the echo of the old admiration in his voice, Faith Marlay shrank back against the wall.

‘You wouldn’t dare to meet him,’ she said.

‘Why not? What does he know about us?’

Her eyes took fire.

‘Us! How dare you use that word. Of course he knows.’

Philip’s eyebrows went up and the corners of his mouth went down.

‘You told him?’ There was no need to wait for her answer to be assured of that. ‘You told him we had lived together before our marriage? Of the kind of man who had found favour in your eyes?’

‘I told him everything before he married me.’

Philip shook his head sadly.

‘That old love of confessing,’ said he. ‘A woman’s tenderest folly. And yet there’s not a man on earth who wouldn’t gladly be left in ignorance. Have you ever thought, Faith, how powerless a sense of honour makes us?’

She made no reply and he answered his own question.

‘I suppose not. You were always incorrigibly good. When I walked out of your life all those years ago, I left behind me a great deal of sweetness I have never had the fortune to rediscover.’

‘Did you go out of my life to come back into it again?’ she demanded, her voice trembling.

He lifted a shoulder and smiled. Fear, indignation, and resentment made her wonderfully attractive to Philip. Ill though he was, the bright colour of her cheeks, the trembling lower lip and the low vibrant notes of her voice gave a little *frisson* of the emotions.

‘You grudge me—a spectator—a peep into the past?’ he said, wistfully.

‘I prayed God I might never see you again,’ said Faith. ‘After you left me I went down on my knees and prayed.’

‘And before I left you, too,’ he remembered. ‘More than once. Take your mind back, Faith; a night in that cottage among the Blue Mountains. What a scene!’ His eyes seemed to be searching the past. ‘Your hair was long then and drifted across your face—a face like Niobe’s, all tears.’

‘Vanity prevents your understanding how much I meant in that prayer,’ said Faith.

Philip Voaze gave a light laugh checked by a spasm of coughing.

‘My vanity, like the rest of me, is a little out of sorts,’ said he. ‘But I always liked you, Faith.’ Again the cough shook him, and pressing his hand on his breast he stumbled into a chair by John’s table. ‘Yes, I always liked you. Your unshakable chastity was fascinating. Are you also a good mother to this new man of yours?’

Faith turned away her head, and he went on.

‘Lucky fellow, unless perchance he is like me and prefers his Ophelias without too much of sweetness? My dear Faith, why recoil? I am paying you a compliment that I would pay to very few other women who have helped to knit the tangles in my life. Believe it or not, I would do a great deal to win back one of those old looks of admiration, with which, in the past, you used to favour me. If I were given to regretting things, which, at best, is a waste of time, I should be sorry I took you, rather contemptibly, unawares. But if I hadn’t,’ he added, ‘I should have missed a very happy experience.’

The ‘God!’ Faith whispered was scarcely audible.

‘For me,’ Philip added, ‘you were out of the rut. The only woman I ever knew who risked her whole future in a hopeless attempt to redeem a hopeless case. Oh, when one looks back! Which is all a spectator can do.’ Again he coughed, and again the flicker of pain brought an added pallor to his cheeks. ‘Doesn’t it arouse your sympathy to see how sorry I am for myself? No? I hoped it would.’

It seemed to Faith as though she were in a chamber of horrors, the walls of which were closing in to crush her.

‘I only think of you to be ashamed,’ she said.

‘That’s foolish,’ Philip Voaze replied. ‘One need only be ashamed of one’s own misdeeds. For all that happened between us you were innocent of blame.’ Into his half-closed eyes came a look of amused reminiscence. ‘You weren’t the first girl to climb down the ivy when a troubadour sang beneath her window. How were you to know what a bad lot I was? Only love is apparent in the moonlight. I sang—you listened. I whistled and down you came.’

There was a mesmeric quality in his voice which, in spite of the horror Faith had of him, wove a spell about her. As in the old days she felt herself slipping—slipping.

‘Yes,’ she nodded, and again, ‘Yes.’

‘You had been taught that men in love were devils and so, my poor darling, you were off your guard. We troubadours owe a great deal to good mothers in that respect, and the mother strain in you desired to teach me to be good, too, didn’t it?’

She said nothing and he went on.

‘Only bad women are suspicious, and you never began to understand the meaning of the word bad.’

‘You gave me a fair example,’ she said.

His hand painted a feathery gesture in the air.

‘Examples don’t contaminate. You left the Court of Love without a stain on your character.’

‘By starting life as the mistress of a man like you.’

‘Damn it, Faith, I *did* marry you,’ he replied with a touch of irritation.

‘The cruellest thing you ever did to a woman.’

‘You held other views at the time,’ he answered, then chuckling. ‘That wedding! Will I ever forget that wedding? The parson, my dear, do you recall him? I think he must have been on the water wagon for a long time and the hospitality I offered was too much for him. There is something pathetically funny about a religious man attempting to resist the influence of alcohol.’

‘Is there nothing you are ashamed to say?’ said Faith.

‘I take life as I find it,’ he answered, ‘and when its dull commonplace is relieved by a gleam of humour, I am grateful.’

‘Humour,’ she echoed. ‘I suppose you find humour here—in what your return means to me.’

Philip Voaze shrugged his shoulders.

‘I find comedy and tragedy,’ he replied; ‘that ideal combination which gives piquancy to any situation. I cannot pretend to understand why my reappearance should distress you. After all it is a pure coincidence and, as such, may be forgotten or remembered at will. Neither you nor I have anything to gain by bringing Philip Voaze back to life.’

‘Nothing is ever forgotten,’ said Faith. ‘There is always someone who remembers.’

‘Remembers what?’

‘Our life together.’

‘My dear, you alarm yourself unnecessarily,’ he protested. ‘So far as I am aware, not a soul but ourselves has any reason to believe that Philip

Voaze did not die on the battlefields of France.'

'Ourselves and Deborah Kane,' said Faith. 'Deborah Kane.'

An expression of angry surprise flitted over his features.

'You are right,' he said quickly, 'she knows. At a theatre in Paris, some two years ago, I spoke to her. But what of it? There's not the least likelihood of her associating the old you with the present you.'

'She has, already.'

'What?'

Coming close to his side Faith spoke to him in rustling and hurried whispers.

'A week ago she saw a snapshot of me and John in an illustrated paper. Knowing you were still alive she saw that my marriage with John was no marriage.' Her voice rose to a frightened wail. 'Oh! don't you see what it means, Philip? She always hated me because you left her for my sake. What she knows puts me in her power utterly, utterly.'

There was nothing in the world Philip Voaze disliked more than other people's emotions. Putting out a hand he took her by the arm and shook her almost roughly.

'Please, please control yourself,' he begged. 'It's deplorable to get into a panic over this. What value would be given to the word of a woman of that kind against yours? The thing's unfortunate, but no more than that. How many people, do you suppose, go through life without uncomfortable echoes from the past?'

'You don't understand,' Faith persisted. 'It isn't only her word I have to fear, but she has letters of mine, letters I wrote to you before we were married.'

Philip Voaze rose awkwardly, pursed his lips and whistled a low soft note.

'Those letters,' he said.

'Why do you say that, as if you knew?'

'So she kept them all these years.'

He moved away from her and stood with one hand on the mantelpiece, looking down into the fire.

'You knew she had them?' Faith insisted.

A few seconds passed before he answered.

'Yes. I am afraid what I am going to say will be rather a shock to you, but I sent them to her.'

'Sent them to her! What do you mean?'

Philip deliberately avoided meeting her eyes.

'I don't defend myself,' he said. 'Although I acted under provocation. You saw what kind of a woman she was, that day up in the Blue Mountains.'

A passionate, exigent creature, who would not take “No” for an answer. I’d left her; Heaven knows why I was fool enough ever to imagine a menage with her would be tolerable, but, as I say, I’d left her and she wanted me back, begged, implored—entreated. The letters I wrote refusing had no effect and so I hit on the indefensible idea of putting a few of your letters in an envelope and sending them along.’

‘Oh God, for comparison,’ Faith cried.

Philip nodded.

‘I suppose few men ever devised a more caddish expedient, nor one that proved more effective.’

He turned and faced her and read in her eyes a look of utter loathing. Somehow it touched a nerve in his conscience, and dropping his head, he dug with the ferrule of his stick at the pattern in the carpet.

‘I am sorry about it, Faith,’ he said; ‘but this isn’t the first time I have been a disappointment to myself.’

Even when ashamed, Philip Voaze could not escape from the habit of turning a phrase to his own advantage.

‘Will you go?’ said Faith dully.

He shook his head.

‘Surely I could serve you better by staying?’

‘I ask you to go,’ she repeated imperatively.

At the tone of command Philip Voaze straightened defensively.

‘I have never yet acted in obedience to anyone’s commands,’ he said. ‘I came here to see Sir John Marlay and until I have seen him I shall stay.’

Faith gave a cry like a wounded animal.

‘I knew I could never be clean of your hands. Never clean.’ Then in a leaden voice. ‘Not that anything matters, now.’

Her eyes strayed to the corner of the sofa and lingered there as though hypnotised by the colour of the little bag which lay upon a cushion.

Philip Voaze looked from the bag to her and back again and, with an intuitive sense he read her mind. Aware that he had guessed what the bag contained, Faith made a swift dart for it, but was late. Seizing the bag he held it at arm’s length.

‘What have you got in here?’ he demanded.

Vainly she struggled to rescue it from him, but he held her off with his free hand.

‘Answer my question.’

With a broken cry, Faith sank to her knees and buried her face in the sofa cushions.

Plunging his hand into the bag, Philip Voaze withdrew the small bottle which she had taken from the cabinet in the laboratory and examined the

label.

‘Good God! Hydrocyanic! That’s prussic acid,’ he exclaimed, then taking her by the shoulders. ‘Where did you get this?’

But Faith continued to cry brokenly.

With an exclamation of annoyance he threw open the door of the laboratory and looked inside.

‘Oh, I see,’ he muttered, closed the door and came back to her. ‘You little muddler. Things aren’t as bad as all that. I think I’ll take possession of this solution to the puzzle, Faith.’ Dropping the bottle in a pocket of his coat he turned and rested a hand on her head. ‘Suicide is such a silly argument. Pull yourself together and tell me all about it.’

Faith lifted her face, rubbing her streaming eyes with the back of her hand.

‘I thought it was only money she wanted,’ she said. ‘But I know, now, it’s vengeance too.’

‘Try not to be hysterical,’ he persuaded her. ‘In my present state of health, other people’s emotions try my patience to distraction. Have you given her money?’

‘Over three hundred pounds.’

‘And she’s pressing you for more?’

With difficulty Faith answered.

‘Another two hundred to-night.’

‘My dear Faith, you must be mad,’ he said, angrily. ‘Has she given you anything for this money?’

Faith shook her head.

‘She promised me the letters and her silence.’

‘Did she say how many letters there were?’

‘Yes, four.’

‘And you believed that? Amazing.’

‘What do you mean?’

An inclination to smile at such pitiful credulity was too strong to resist.

‘I sent her six,’ he said. ‘Six. As a mercenary she might have sold you three or four at a price, but she’d stick to the others like glue. Hers wasn’t a forgiving nature.’

Faith made a hopeless gesture.

‘You mean it will go on and on?’

‘Ask yourself. Would you readily forgive? Have you forgiven me?’

Faith lifted her head and looked at him with a kind of lonely contempt.

‘I’ve forgotten you,’ she said.

A blow could hardly have stung or angered him more surely than those words.

‘Forgotten me, have you?’ he said, speaking through shut teeth. ‘I wouldn’t offend the one person who might be able to help you, Faith.’

‘How can you help me?’ she asked. ‘What can you do but give truth to her words.’

‘You say that, because it isn’t in your power to see farther than the length of your little finger,’ he replied. ‘What you’ve told me about Deborah Kane proves that with her at least I am not forgotten.’

A sudden hope came into Faith’s eyes.

‘You mean she might give the letters to you?’

‘Who knows,’ he answered lightly. ‘Once I had influence even over her raw temper.’ A gleam of malicious humour twitched the corners of his mouth. ‘It would be rather fun to have a shot at it.’

‘If I could believe you meant to try,’ said Faith.

He leaned forward and whispered.

‘What then? What would you give me as a reward?’

She drew back.

‘Nothing.’

‘Not even one of those old looks of admiration?’ Then, as she made no reply, ‘There, there—it’s a shame to tease you. Where is Deborah living?’

She gave him the address and taking a pencil from his pocket he scribbled it on the back of an envelope: 44 Beaufort Hall Court.

‘I suppose your husband knows nothing of this muddle?’

‘No,’ said Faith.

He smiled whimsically.

‘Even your confidence has its limits, Faith.’

‘You don’t understand,’ said she. ‘If he knew it would ruin him. Doctors are not like other men.’

‘All men are like other men,’ he responded, ‘although they vary a little in design. In my opinion you make a mistake in keeping the facts from Marlay. If the papers are to be believed, he’s no ordinary man.’

‘He shan’t be told,’ she said and repeated. ‘It would ruin him.’

‘You seem attached to this husband of yours?’

‘Attached! He’s like God to me.’

It was strange how the simple sincerity of those words piqued him. He turned away with a hitch of the shoulders.

‘Then comfort yourself with the reflection that Paradise is not so easily lost as you seem to imagine. It takes a good deal to put down the mighty from their seats. Having married an unconscious bigamist would hardly weigh very heavily against a man in the eyes of even the most censorious persons. However, I am glad of your reticence. It gives me an opportunity of fulfilling my object in coming here.’

‘I forbid you to speak to him,’ she cried urgently.

‘How selfish people are,’ he complained. ‘You forget that I came to see a doctor. I am a very sick man.’

Faith rubbed her forehead and tried to think.

‘If I let you see him,’ she pleaded, ‘will you swear to say nothing?’

‘Rest assured I shall say nothing about you and me. My present life in Vienna is far too complicated to encourage me to pick up threads from the past.’

Perhaps he hoped to arouse a spark of jealousy in making that excuse, but Faith scarcely seemed to have heard.

‘Those letters,’ she said. ‘Promise to try and get them back.’

There was something very appealing and helpless about her. The infatuation he once had for her was very understandable.

‘I promise to try, but I cannot promise to succeed,’ he answered.

From the hall below, came the muffled slam of the front door.

Philip Voaze nodded his head in the direction of the sound.

‘Is that——?’ he queried.

‘Yes.’

‘Persuade him to see me.’

Uncertain how to act, Faith searched his face, but there was only written upon it a tale of sickness and that old cynical, whimsical expression which might mean anything or nothing.

‘If only I could believe you,’ she muttered. ‘If only I could believe you.’

With a little run she went from the room.

CHAPTER VII

Philip Voaze was too familiar with delicate situations to be embarrassed by the prospect of meeting Marlay. His sense of humour relished the idea of consulting professionally a man who, believing himself to be Faith's husband, would be unaware of the real identity of his patient. Also he was curious to see what manner of man it was who had so completely captured Faith's admiration.

He had decided that Marlay would be a strong, heavy type, and his surprise was the greater when a man of light build, of swift and sure movements entered the consulting room, cast a quick glance at him, went to the writing table, turned over the pages of his engagement diary and said:

'I can give you an appointment at ten o'clock to-morrow morning which one of my patients has chucked.'

Philip Voaze made a deprecating gesture.

'That's disappointing, I'm returning to the Continent by the first train.'

'Perhaps when you come back,' said John.

Voaze shook his head.

'I live in Vienna. It is improbable that I ever shall come back; so I am afraid, Sir John, it will have to be this evening.'

At the insolent assurance of this remark, John Marlay cocked an eyebrow at his patient, looked him up and down, then crossing to where he stood, said, unexpectedly:

'We've met before.'

In spite of his calm, Philip Voaze experienced a sensation of uneasiness.

'I think not.'

'But I am sure,' said John. 'You were at Cambridge. You wrote a series of extraordinarily offensive articles which were published in the *Granta*. Wait a bit, now; you signed them "Spur," yes, that's it, "Spur."'

To be remembered after a long passage of time, even though the memory may be associated with an unpleasant incident, is an unfailing source of satisfaction to an egotist.

Philip's mouth arched downward.

'You are quite right,' he nodded, 'but that was twenty years ago.'

'I should have known you anywhere,' said John.

'You put me to shame,' was the reply, 'for, to be frank, I can't place you, Marlay.'

'Let's see if I can refresh your memory. Don't you recall a hot-headed undergraduate who turned up at your rooms one night with the avowed intention of thrashing you?'

Voaze gave a short laugh.

‘Vividly,’ he said, ‘most vividly. So you’re that Marlay. Marlay the Spartan, as they used to call you.’

John’s face broke into a smile.

‘I didn’t like the tone of those articles of yours,’ he said. ‘A healthy youngster’s contempt for brains, I expect.’

‘At least,’ Voaze returned. ‘You had the courage of your convictions.’

John gave a short nod.

‘I’m afraid I was a bit of a prig in those days; I’m not sure that I’m any better now.’

‘It was an amusing night,’ said Voaze. ‘A star night. If I remember rightly, I was profoundly drunk and you were eccentrically sober.’

‘Correct,’ said John. ‘I wonder which of the two states is the more depressing. At any rate we ended the evening amiably enough. I was quite sorry when you were——’

It was Voaze who finished the sentence,

‘Sent down.’

‘You asked for it,’ said John.

‘By playing the fool with the daughter of a Don. I was never remarkable for discretion.’

John laughed. It amused him to pick up the threads of this old acquaintanceship. The man who had written those articles twenty years before had made a lasting impression on his mind. Even as a youngster he was a good reader of character, and Voaze, as an undergraduate of twenty, had struck him as a man of unusual ability, which, directed in the right channels, might lead him anywhere.

A glance at the features before him, features aged and distorted by self-indulgence and vice, convinced him that Voaze had misused his gifts and declined sadly.

‘Discretion, no——’ he said; ‘selection was your strong suit.’

A flicker of embarrassment appeared on Philip’s face. He coughed and turned his head.

‘Spur!’ John repeated, ‘queer I should have remembered that. I don’t believe I ever heard your real name.’ He picked up the card which Childers had left on his table and read it. ‘Julian Ackroyd! no, that tells me nothing. So you want me to give you the once-over to-night?’

Philip nodded.

‘I have travelled a great many miles in that hope.’

John squared up a chair and beckoned him towards it.

‘Nothing much wrong with you, I hope?’

‘That’s what I have come to find out.’

‘Did you bring a letter?’

‘Yes, and an X-ray photograph. The letter is from Dr. Braxtide.’

‘Oh!’ A new interest shone in John’s eyes. ‘Old Braxtide of the Rue Savenac? You couldn’t be in better hands.’

‘I suppose,’ said Voaze, ‘that is why he thought a second opinion was necessary.’

John smiled.

‘We keep it to and fro—professional freemasonry.’ Then, while breaking the seal of the envelope, ‘Has Braxtide seen the X-ray?’

Philip shook his head.

‘No, it was taken in England, a couple of days ago.’

‘I see.’

The envelope contained a letter of two pages closely written in French.

‘Here’s a screed,’ said John, and screwing an eyeglass into his eye began to read.

Once he paused to consult an English-French dictionary of medical terms, and while he was so doing a sharp paroxysm of coughing attacked his patient.

Out of the corners of his eyes, John flashed a searching glance, then his attention reverted to Braxtide’s report.

‘Have you read this?’ he asked.

Voaze nodded.

‘Without understanding a solitary word.’

‘That’s as it should be,’ said John. ‘I’ll take a look at this X-ray if you don’t mind being left alone for a minute.’

At the door of his laboratory, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at the back of the man who sat by the table.

‘Smoke if you like,’ said he. ‘I suppose you carry hundreds of cigarettes?’

He went out shaking his head.

Philip Voaze lighted a cigarette and leaning back in his chair, composed himself to wait.

‘An attractive fellow, this Marlay,’ he thought. ‘Not at all what I expected. Sound, shrewd, sense of humour. Sort of man women rely on—and rightly.’

The cigarette smoke caught his throat and made him cough. A stab of pain pierced his chest like the prick of a needle. He put his cigarette on an ashtray and leaned forward in his chair, both fists pressed against his breast bone. He was bent thus when John came back from the laboratory.

John’s face was grave and did not recover its normal expression until he was within his patient’s range of vision.

‘Give me your wrists,’ he said, ‘both wrists.’

His sensitive fingers felt both pulses, marking how the pulse rates varied.

‘Had that cough long?’ he asked.

‘Some months. Too many cigarettes.’

‘It hurts you there,’ he touched a particular part of Philip’s chest with a forefinger.

‘Yes, it’s pretty damnable at times.’

‘I daresay.’

As John returned to his writing table, his hand fell for a moment across the shoulders of his patient.

‘Poor chap,’ he said, then; ‘look here, Ackroyd, I suppose since you came down from Cambridge you’ve knocked about a bit, gone the pace, lived rather immoderately.’

‘Moderation is a virtue I admire in others,’ said Philip Voaze.

‘But don’t practise, eh?’

‘But don’t practise,’ he echoed.

‘Do you drink much?’

‘If I may say so, most appreciatively.’

But John had no smile for this trivial pleasantry. What he had learned from the X-ray photograph during his brief inspection in the laboratory had been too serious for any appreciation of humour. He was confronted by the hardest task a doctor may be called upon to fulfil, and he was asking himself what would be the best way to set about it. Obviously his patient was an unstable individual who would need delicate handling.

‘I have made a thorough examination of that X-ray,’ he said, ‘so there is nothing to be gained by going over you with the stethoscope.’

‘The examination, I hope, was satisfactory?’ said Voaze.

John Marlay did not reply, but stood tapping his lower teeth with a finger nail and looking down at the closely written sheets of Braxtide’s letter.

‘What have you been told?’ he asked. ‘What did Braxtide tell you?’

‘To go slower.’

‘*Doucement, mon ami, doucement,*’ John mimicked. ‘Yes, I can hear him saying it. But about yourself—I mean, your condition?’

‘In effect nothing.’

‘You’re not curious, perhaps.’

Philip Voaze raised his shoulders.

‘Curiosity is a vulgar characteristic.’

‘My dear fellow, that’s rot. A man has a right to be curious about himself.’

‘I have come to you.’

‘Then my advice is the same as Braxtidge’s. You must go slower.’

A shade of disappointment clouded Philip’s forehead.

‘I was hoping you would spare me these old medical clichés,’ he said.

‘I wish I could,’ said John, ‘but I take it you are a man of sense.’

‘Of intelligence, perhaps.’

‘Well then, men of intelligence don’t take risks.’

The expression of disappointment gave place to one of concern.

‘Is there a risk?’

‘A very grave risk. You have what is called an aneurism.’

‘That’s only a name to me,’ said Voaze.

John took a sheet of writing paper from the rack, and picking up a pencil, began to draw.

‘Look here, this represents your heart, and this the large artery which carries the blood from the heart to all parts of your body. The wall of that artery has given way at this point, has ballooned, if I may use the word, like a weak inner tube. The pressure of that balloon on your breast bone produces pain and the pressure on certain nerves produces the cough.’

‘It all seems to follow in charming sequence,’ said Voaze. ‘And having traced the evil what does one do about it?’

John Marlay tossed the pencil into a tray and leaning forward looked his patient squarely in the eyes.

‘Are you prepared to cut out all that has made life——’

‘Tolerable?’ Voaze interpolated.

‘What it is.’

‘For a period?’

John Marlay shook his head.

‘No, for good.’

‘You are not serious?’

‘I was never more serious. If you pull yourself together now and cut out—well, I don’t need to specify in detail, but cut out *everything*, you have a chance. If you don’t, you haven’t.’

For a while Voaze neither moved nor spoke, while slowly a look of amazement spread over his features.

‘Are you telling me I’m going to die?’ he said, at last.

John put a hand upon his arm.

‘I’m warning you to be damned careful. That artery is stretched to the limit. The least exertion, the least emotion, the least added strain imposed upon it may, and probably will, have instantaneously disastrous results. You are carrying a live bomb in your breast that may burst at a moment’s notice.’

With the face of a dead man, Philip Voaze struggled to his feet.

‘Good God! Good God,’ he cried.

‘Steady,’ said John Marlay moving towards him. ‘I don’t want to have to tell you this, but for your own sake, I have no choice.’

But Philip Voaze was beyond reach of human advice. His egotism was overwhelmed by a wave of savage self-pity. With an angry gesture, he flung off Marlay’s hand and staggered to the window muttering, ‘God, God.’

Then, as with the slow return of normal consciousness the first terror of death passed away, a sudden idea consoled his imagination. Swinging round he pointed a trembling finger at Marlay.

‘It’s a lie,’ he cried, ‘a damned lie.’

‘Would I be likely to deceive a man on such a matter?’

‘An ordinary man, no,’ the tone was cracked and hysterical, ‘but me, yes.’

He came tottering across the room, clutched a chair back and thrust his face within a few inches of John’s.

‘Are you a damned cynic, Marlay?’

‘I will give you a letter to any doctor in the land and, if he isn’t a crook, he’ll tell you what I’ve told you,’ was the answer.

Philip Voaze slugged his head this way and that.

‘But it would be such an exquisite revenge.’

The voice rose wild and shrill.

John Marlay remained unmoved and slowly Philip Voaze’s head sank on his chest.

When next he spoke it was in the broken notes of a hurt child.

‘It’s true, damn you; you are sincere, it’s true.’

‘Look here,’ said John. ‘Sooner or later we all have to face it. Take a grip on yourself.’

He stopped, for there had come into the eyes of his patient a look of malevolence and hatred.

‘You must tell your wife the result of this interview, Marlay,’ he said, and laughed bitterly.

‘My wife?’

‘No, perhaps not—women haven’t a refined sense of humour, but it’s an exquisitely funny situation. Irony on the grand scale. In Australia you would have put a bullet through me; but here, under the canopy of civilisation, you *sentence* me to death.’

‘What are you driving at, Ackroyd?’

‘Not Ackroyd, Marlay, but Voaze—Voaze.’

John Marlay shot a look at the speaker and the muscles of his hands tightened.

Very deliberately he said:

‘So you are a relation of that—of—of my wife’s first husband.’

‘Philip Voaze, Marlay.’

‘Yes, Philip Voaze,’ John repeated.

There was no answer, and looking up sharply, he read the truth.

Afterwards he reproached himself with cowardice in delaying to accept what he knew to be true, by so long as he took to deny it.

‘It’s a lie.’

Philip Voaze shook his head, picked up words Marlay had used five minutes earlier and tossed them back.

‘Would I be likely to deceive a man on such a matter?’

‘You’re not serious.’

‘I was never more serious in my life,’ came the echo.

‘But Philip Voaze was killed in France in 1918.’

‘The report of his death was not the first mistake made by the War Office. It did not suit my convenience, Marlay, to enlighten them when the war ended.’

In silence John Marlay sat at his table expressionless, motionless.

In spite of the bitter impulse which had inspired Voaze to betray his promise of silence to Faith, he was conscious, at that moment, of a sentiment approximating to pity for the man whose happiness he had wantonly wrecked. Half shamefacedly he said:

‘I’m not boasting about it, Marlay.’

‘Hardly.’

The retort nettled him to add,

‘But your casual sentence of death tried me pretty high. Up to then, you’d had the cream of the jest, but now it’s my turn. It tickles me not a little, that as my medical adviser you must protect me from all violence.’

Still John said nothing. He was thinking—thinking in a circle which started from and came back to tragedy.

In the presence of that silence Philip Voaze moved uneasily.

‘Wasn’t it Shelley who wrote, “Our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught”?’ he queried. ‘I claim that quotation in defence.’

‘You came here knowing?’ said John.

‘No, on my honour; I came in all ignorance. I hadn’t an idea Faith had married again, or even that she lived in England.’

‘But you saw her? You were together in this room? She recognised you, of course?’

‘She could hardly have forgotten,’ said Voaze softly.

In an instant John was on his feet and although there was nothing between the two men in the way of height, he seemed to tower over Voaze.

‘She has forgotten,’ he said; ‘we’ve both deliberately forgotten. On the day we married, we left the past behind us for good. But understand this,

Voaze, whether you're alive or dead, Faith belongs to me.'

'Some of us are left with nothing but the past,' Voaze replied with a touch of self-pity.

'Then for God's sake get out of here and bury it decently.'

But Philip Voaze made no attempt to move. His eyes, looking out before him, were the eyes of a man haunted by an evil dream.

'I have decorated my life with a page of ugly scrawls,' he muttered, 'but there was one poem, Marlay, you lucky man!'

'Why do you say that when you know I can't kill you?'

'Nature will save you the trouble,' Voaze retorted. Then, 'Damn it! you and I have loved the same woman. There's nothing strange in that. Through my own foul behaviour I lost her. Be careful, Marlay, that you don't make a similar mistake.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ask Faith.'

'I am asking you.'

'Do you think we have confidences?' said Voaze, cocking his head to one side. Then: 'If so, why expect me to betray them?'

But John was not listening.

'Yes, I understand,' said he speaking half aloud. 'She couldn't tell me, of course, poor darling.'

'A comfortable solution,' said Voaze; but reading danger in John's eyes he went off on another tack.

'So far as I am aware, there is only {one} person in the world who knows of my marriage to Faith and who knows that I am still alive. A woman, rather a difficult woman. She has some letters written by Faith to me during the early stages of our courtship, letters which in the wrong hands _____,

'Might injure Faith,' John put in quickly.

'Exactly.'

'Blackmail you mean?'

'In effect, blackmail, inspired by jealousy, Marlay. The woman was one of my early mistakes.'

'How do you know this?'

'Through the accident of meeting Faith. She told me; you know that trusting nature of hers.'

John's clenched hand was drawn back to strike, but a spasm of coughing seized Voaze before the blow was ever struck.

'What have you to do with all this?' he demanded.

'I made a half-promise to try and recover the letters.'

'I will let you off that promise,' said John.

‘Have I asked to be let off?’

There was a challenging sparkle in his eyes.

‘I warn you, Voaze, ill as you are, it will be dangerous to interfere in my affairs,’ said John. ‘Where does this woman live?’

Philip Voaze lifted his shoulders.

‘Forty-four Beaufort Hall Court.’

John started and looked over to the part of the room where Faith had been sitting earlier in the evening.

‘Beaufort Hall Court!’ he repeated. ‘So that was why she started when—oh yes—yes.’ Once more he turned to Voaze. ‘What’s this woman’s name?’

Philip Voaze hesitated.

‘It would be a breach of chivalry to give away the name of probably the last woman on earth who has the slightest affection for me.’

‘Her name.’

John tapped the table-top imperatively.

‘Since you insist—Deborah Kane.’

Swiftly John wrote the name and address on the corner of his blotting pad and covered it with the engagement diary.

‘I warn you,’ said Philip Voaze, ‘you will have no success with her. I may yet have to take a hand. And further, I warn you, Marlay, to think carefully how to deal with this affair, or you may have reason to wish you had never interfered. Half an hour ago, in this room, I said to Faith, “You seem attached to this husband of yours,” and she answered, “He’s like God to me,” whatever that may mean.’ An unsuspected note of sincerity came into his voice. ‘Take care, if Faith finds out that you know who I am, it’s odds on she’ll do away with herself.’

‘I think we understand one another,’ said John, without looking up from the blotting pad. ‘I have been wanting for some time to find out what was hurting Faith. You have told me, and for that I am grateful.’ A few steps brought him to Philip’s side. ‘I implore you to get out of here before my gratitude wears off.’

Moving to the mantelpiece, he touched the bell and stood looking into the fire. Nobody noticed Childers who answered the bell. He did not remember ever having seen two men who stood more still and silently.

‘You rang, sir?’ he inquired.

‘Yes. Show this gentleman to his car,’ said John.

But Voaze did not move.

‘Sir John, you spoke of a free half-hour at ten to-morrow morning,’ he said. ‘If possible I would be glad if you would reserve it for me. This has been rather a shock.’

‘Come if you like,’ was the answer.

‘Thank you.’

Turning, Philip Voaze saw Childers at his elbow.

‘What is your name?’ he asked with charming simplicity.

‘Childers, sir,’ the servant replied.

‘Is it indeed,’ said Voaze. ‘Then, Childers, let me tell you this, a man without a future enters into a great loneliness.’

But Childers only bowed and offered an arm.

‘No, damn you,’ said Voaze with an angry gesture, and doubling up under an attack of coughing, stumbled awkwardly from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

From the window of her room Faith Marlay watched Philip's car drive slowly away.

In a fever of excitement she waited ten minutes before tip-toeing downstairs and knocking at the door of the consulting room.

'Come in.'

John's voice was perfectly normal and, drawing a breath of relief, Faith turned the handle and entered.

He had not moved from the fireplace since Voaze had left him, and it did not strike Faith that there was anything unusual in finding him thus. Had she taken the trouble to ask herself she could hardly have failed to realize that nothing was more remote from his usual habit than idleness.

He turned with a swift smile as she came in, met her in the middle of the room with a hand that ruffled her hair and strayed affectionately to her cheek.

'How pale you are, my sweet, aren't you?' he said. Then to save her the embarrassment of replying, 'I shall have to hurry up and dress or I'll be late. You, too, eh?'

'There is plenty of time,' she answered. 'I thought it would be nice to catch you for a moment before you went out.'

'Oh, of course,' he nodded. 'You want some money, don't you?'

'Not for that reason only,' she answered, with real pain in her voice.

John did not trust himself to look at her. He was possessed by a longing greater than any words could express for her to seize this chance to tell him everything, and shift the burden of her sorrow upon his shoulders. Not that he blamed her for silence. He understood perfectly that it was love which inspired it—love and a mistaken belief that for his sake she must solve this riddle alone. But silence set up a barrier between them that was agony to both.

As he opened a cheque-book and picked up a pen, he heard himself saying,

'I know, my dear. You always tell me the true reason for everything you do. That's what makes our life together so splendid—having no secrets.'

She started at the word 'Secrets,' and repeated it.

'That is so, isn't it?' he went on, intentionally avoiding her eyes. 'You and I have no secrets from each other.'

'No real ones,' she answered, turning away. 'Every woman has little secrets that she confides to no one: secrets of how fond she is and of all she would do because of that fondness.'

He nodded and began to write the cheque.

‘You wouldn’t grudge me those secrets, John?’

‘No, beloved.’

She moved towards him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Writing that cheque. Two hundred, you said?’

‘It isn’t extravagance, really, John.’

‘I am not complaining,’ said he. ‘So why do you explain? I have made it payable to bearer.’

He felt the hand on his shoulder quiver.

‘Why?’

‘More negotiable,’ he answered and tearing the cheque from the book, gave it to her.

‘John!’

‘Um?’

‘That man who was here just now——’

Unconsciously his muscles tightened. She was, after all, going to tell the truth.

‘Ackroyd, you mean?’ he answered and heard her give a sigh of relief.

‘Yes, Mr. Ackroyd, was he ill?’

Hardly able to mask his disappointment, John Marlay nodded.

‘Yes, very.’

‘Then he won’t be able to——’

Faith stifled the sentence with the back of her hand; for his answer had nearly startled from her the truth about Philip Voaze and the promise he had given to recover her letters.

‘How ill?’

‘He’s done for—dying,’ said John.

‘Dying,’ she repeated with a shuddering sigh. ‘Dying. How awful.’

John’s tone was cold and hard.

‘What, death? I don’t know. It’s Nature’s solution for certain problems and sometimes the only solution.’

He dropped the cheque-book back into an open table drawer, closed it, stood a moment with his face hard set, then turned and walked to the door.

Faith had neither moved or spoken, and before passing out he looked back at her over his shoulder. She seemed to suggest a little empty boat on a great wide sea.

From the street below came the cry of a running newsboy.

‘Further details of Sir John Marlay’s triumph. Paper—paper.’

The cry went echoing up the street and died away.

‘Further details,’ said John to himself, ‘but not the latest detail. Oh, Faith, Faith, you don’t even belong to me.’

An irresistible impulse of love and adoration drove him to return to Faith—so lonely and so woe-begone. Spinning her round he took her in his arms and kissed her eyes, her forehead and her hair. Then, as though ashamed of his own emotions, he hurried from the room.

BOOK THREE

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CHAPTER I

Faith dressed quickly and, without going into John's room, passed out of the house. Picking up a taxi at the corner of Clarges Street, she told the driver to take her as far as the Army and Navy Stores.

Since she had learned that Voaze was a dying man Faith had abandoned any hope of help from him.

Philip Voaze, the sublime egotist, was not a man in the hour of his own emergency to devote time or thought to the concerns of others. His warped and awkward nature, a nature unstirred by pity or compassion for the rest of the world, could not endure the smallest personal suffering.

There remained for Faith no choice but to continue the fight alone and pray that some kindly providence, or an unexpected quality of mercy in Deborah, would bring matters to a happy end.

Even though her loathing and terror of Philip Voaze could hardly have been greater, she was aware of an awkward sympathy for him when John had spoken the words, 'He's done for—dying.'

Her simplicity was too great, her charity too generous to allow her to realise that in Philip Voaze's death lay her salvation. Nature was fighting on her side, but she would not admit that. It may be, too, that the events of the past few days had clouded her vision and prevented her from seeing the smallest avenue of escape.

The taxi deposited her at the Army and Navy Stores.

The blinds were down and no lights shone within. The doyen of England's respectable shopping markets had closed its eyelids for the night.

Faith paid the taxi and, looking about her, half-fearful of being followed, turned south and along the road that slants in the direction of the Roman Catholic Cathedral. It was not yet eight o'clock, and, acting upon impulse, Faith went into the cathedral and dropped to her knees in the shadow of one of the great piers which support the roof.

The place was quiet as the grave, but suddenly there rang out, as if in answer to Faith's prayer, the deep notes of an organ and the bright sound of boys' voices singing in choir.

For five minutes she stayed listening to the radiant young voices filling the great Cathedral with song, and it was with a feeling of greater strength than she had known for many days that she passed out into the street and sought the entrance to the block of flats in which Deborah Kane lived.

There was no porter on duty at the hall door, for which Faith was grateful. Hung to the iron grill of the lift shaft was a card bearing the words,

‘Lift not working until 10 o’clock.’

Faith ran up the carpeted stairs to the second floor and saw number 44 on a door confronting her. The clock was striking eight as she stretched out her hand for the knocker.

CHAPTER II

Deborah Kane had looked forward to this visit from Faith Marlay even more intensely than Faith dreaded it. She had caused Mrs. Barme, more familiarly addressed as Barmey, to burnish up the flat in honour of the occasion.

Mrs. Barme, a lady of unflinching moral rectitude in so far as her own conduct of life was concerned, but of very latitudinarian principles in regard to the morals of her employers, had entered into this transaction with enthusiastic vigour, conceiving, as she did so, that the purpose of all this cleaning, polishing and arranging was probably the first step in a romantic encounter.

The garish decorations of Deborah's flat offered a never-ending source of delight to this excellent creature.

The gold walls, the ceiling of dull blue patterned with stars, the pink brocade hangings and carpet of heavy black pile, one and all contributed a note of colour to Mrs. Barme's otherwise drab existence.

Mrs. Barme did not 'sleep in,' in the houses of the ladies she 'did for.' In consequence there was nothing to discourage her belief that their own morality was as rigid as her own. As she had said to Mr. Barme, not once but many times, 'It takes all sorts to make a world,' and Mr. Barme, a night watchman by profession and on that account less sensitive to boredom than other men, nodded his head over this profound, if rather trite, observation and agreed that his wife was right.

'Although some may say,' she would add, 'that Miss Kane and other ladies I have had the pleasure of working for, do, from time to time take a drop more liquor than I care to take myself, but it doesn't do to judge people.'

And Mr. Barme, who made a regular habit of taking a drop more liquor than Mrs. Barme would have cared to take herself, agreed that the principle of 'Judge not' was wise, admirable and just.

Cointreau was the particular stimulant Deborah affected—which, at the time of consumption, invests the consumer with a mood of raffish gaiety whatever adverse effects may be experienced on the following day.

On this particular evening Deborah had done herself unusually well. She had drunk a pint of champagne with her dinner and had punished the Cointreau to such good account that Mrs. Barme, hatted, coated and ready to depart, had volunteered the suggestion that it might be advisable to open another bottle of 'Co-in-ter-ea' before leaving.

‘You’re in fine fettle to-night, my dear,’ she said, ‘and anyone who denies that is a liar.’

‘Go on, you talk too much,’ Deborah returned.

Deborah’s voice when she addressed Mrs. Barme was easy and companionable.

‘It’s not what you say, it’s the tone you say it in that matters,’ Mrs. Barme replied. ‘Now how would it be if I was to put you a bit of supper on a tray in case——?’

‘In case of what?’ Deborah demanded.

‘Well, in case,’ Mrs. Barme replied. ‘You can’t draw me into saying things and it’s not a bit of use to try.’

‘Do what you like,’ said Deborah, fumbling with a bunch of keys and opening the drawer of an escritoire from which she took a packet of letters.

‘How would you like a fiver, Barmey?’

‘How would I like it?’ replied that lady in genuine astonishment. ‘I would like it, dearie; as who wouldn’t being in their senses?’

Deborah gave a husky laugh.

‘All right, you old fool, hang on a minute.’

Picking up her cheque-book and a pen with a great green feather holder, she dashed off a cheque with her left hand.

‘Always surprises me to see you write with your left hand it does,’ said Mrs. Barme. ‘It seems so otherwise, if I may say so. It’s just the same with your knife and fork. The trouble I had to train myself into putting your glass on the left of your plate, instead of your right, you wouldn’t believe, not if I told you.’

‘Here you are,’ said Deborah, pushing the cheque into the work-stained hand.

Mrs. Barme shook her head over it as it might have been a child.

‘Well, I’ll be going along,’ said she and paused. ‘There, if I haven’t forgot to water the plants.’

The plants were a small blue bowl of crocuses and a ribbon fern.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Deborah. ‘I’ll see to that. And now you can go to hell.’

‘If I was to take you serious,’ said Mrs. Barme, with a cackle of laughter, ‘I don’t know where I’d be. But there! I know your ways and that’s what I’ve always said and always will say, “Know a lady’s ways and you know where you are.”’

‘Look here,’ said Deborah, rising and putting a hand on the woman’s shoulder. ‘If you blow off any more of that guff at me, I shall sling you out by your ear. Good-night, you old duffer, and have a good time with that

fiver. After all, a good time is the only thing worth having in this world,' she added, 'if you can get it.'

'And never was spoken a truer word,' said Mrs. Barme. 'Nothing is more uncomfortable than being uncomfortable. Oh, by the way, dear, if you want the lift, it's no good ringing. The porter has a colic and Fred don't come on till ten.'

'All right, I am not going out.'

As Mrs. Barme closed the door of the flat, Deborah Kane lit a fresh cigarette from the stump between her fingers. Deborah was seldom without a cigarette in her lips.

The life she lived and was living demanded a constant anodyne. The pillars that sustained her were nicotine and alcohol and, as a result of leaning too heavily upon them, her nervous system was always on edge.

Taking the packet of Faith's letters she went into her bedroom.

Throwing off the dress she had been wearing she put on a pair of black satin, close fitting trousers and a coat decked with petunia-coloured flowers of a conventional design. This done, she disposed herself before the cheval glass and nodded appreciatively.

Deborah admired herself in semi-male garments. They suited her style and accentuated the length of her limbs and that raffish quality that was so peculiarly her own. The contrasting colours distracted the eye from too close an examination of the ravages time had scored upon her features. She had told herself that age did not matter save when it inclined to drive a woman in the direction of the commonplace. No one could ever bring that charge against her. Loud she might be, vivid, angular, forbidding even, but commonplace, never.

The long, chalk-white face with its high cheekbones and deeply recessed eyes, the shock of hair, black as a raven's wing, were of a kind to defy the march of the onward years.

'Yes, I look all right, fine,' she told herself, dusting her face with a puff and carelessly streaking her mouth with a Tangee lipstick.

She nodded at her reflection. Few women of forty could put up a better show. There was, she felt, something original about the dexterity with which she used her left hand and the extreme passivity of her right, with its fingers tucked always in the belt or pocket of her coat. Sinister—someone had called it—and Deborah, who never troubled herself with etymology, approved that definition and had taken it as a compliment.

A glance at her wrist watch told her that it was only ten minutes to eight.

Returning to the gaudy living-room, she refreshed herself with a sip of Cointreau and turned on the wireless.

She was in the mood for music—the jangling, whistling cacophony of a negro band. But luck was against her, for a lady with an affected voice was discoursing upon gardening.

‘The snowdrop,’ said the voice, ‘has withered, and in its place the crocus, heliotrope and amber harbinger of spring, is thrusting its pointed head through the saturated soil beneath our lifeless trees.’

‘Oh, tripe,’ said Deborah, switched off and cast herself full length upon the couch. ‘Why doesn’t the little fool hurry up and come along.’

Deborah Kane had a profound opinion of herself, but she had, also, a profound dislike for her own undivided society. To her, loneliness was a woman’s greatest curse. She hated and resented being alone and yet, although her past life had been starred with periods of intense and vivid companionship, the Fates, sooner or later, had always conspired to throw her back on her own resources.

She had told herself that it was her own will that this should be so—that she tired of her companions—that love of variety made it impossible for her to settle for long in any one place with any one person. Yet if any of the men she had known or still knew, however base, had offered her a permanent home, it is doubtful if she would have refused to accept it.

Hovering in the foreground of a life spent upon the shifting seas of adventure, was a pitiable longing for security and that domestic atmosphere which she always affected to despise.

She raised her head as the first stroke of Big Ben striking the hour jarred sombrely in her ears.

CHAPTER III

There was a light patter of feet, a shadow on the glass panel of the front door and a tap upon the knocker.

Deborah did not hasten to admit her guest. She lit another cigarette before moving to the door and opening it.

Faith Marlay had muffled the lower part of her face with the collar of her coat. She was breathing quickly, and as the door opened she darted into the room as though fearful of being seen by someone outside.

Deborah closed the door and looked her visitor up and down.

‘Sit down, if you are out of breath,’ she said. ‘It’s warm in here, you’d better take off your coat, hadn’t you?’

Faith shook her head.

‘No, I am only going to stay for a minute. I’ve brought a cheque, so if you’ll give me the letters——’

Deborah’s eyebrows went up.

‘Oh! come,’ she said. ‘There’s no tearing hurry. This is the first chance we’ve had of a nice quiet talk together.’

‘I don’t want to talk, I am here on—on a matter of business.’

Faith’s voice was unexpectedly steady. She was surprised to find herself so little afraid. A feeling that Deborah had dressed herself up for this meeting and had, as it were, assumed a kind of cinema vamp effect, instead of increasing Faith’s alarm, gave her momentary courage. For the first time since their meeting in Bond Street she felt capable of dealing with the emergency with a clear head.

Swift to appreciate the emotions of persons with whom she came into contact, Deborah instinctively perceived this new attitude of mind and was swift to take action.

Frowning, she dropped into a high-backed chair, crossed her legs, and with a cigarette drooping from her upper lip stared at Faith.

‘I am glad you realise that this is a business deal,’ she said. ‘It will simplify things.’

Faith made no reply, but opening her bag, took from it the cheque John had given her. As she did so a small square of folded paper fell to the floor and lay, unseen, in the shadow of the sofa.

‘Here’s your cheque,’ said Faith. ‘You can have it when you give me my letters.’

Deborah laughed a hard uncomfortable laugh.

‘It isn’t quite so simple as that,’ she said. ‘You’re treating me like a Port Said carpet-seller. That take it or leave it attitude won’t do, Faith Marlay.’

Now, let's have a look at you.'

'Why?'

'So that I can judge what those letters are worth.'

'You fixed the price.'

Deborah lifted a shoulder.

'One can change one's mind.'

'Not about this,' said Faith. 'You've reached the limit.'

'My dear girl, that's rot, the limit is how much you care for this man of yours.' Suddenly her voice took on a warmer and more vibrant note. 'Do you think I would have burked at the price to get Philip back from you? Why, I'd have robbed the Bank of Australia. Happiness isn't for sale at cut prices.'

Faith's lips parted in an expression of disgust.

'You can't buy happiness in this world. You should know that.'

'No, but you can pay for keeping it,' Deborah retorted. 'I mean to get this deal squared up. Your present security against what I want. Can you see anything wrong in that?'

'Everything,' Faith replied. 'If I had willingly taken Philip away from you it would be different; but I didn't do that and you know I didn't.'

'This is old ground,' said Deborah, 'and it's a waste of time bringing it up again.'

'I am not harming you now,' Faith urged eagerly.

'I never suggested you were,' came the answer. 'Indeed, you are helping me very much.'

'Then aren't you ashamed to torture anyone who neither now nor in the past ever tried to hurt you?'

Deborah shook her head.

'Not at all,' she replied. 'I am out for equal chances in this world, and up to now I haven't had a fair share. Aren't you forgetting, Faith, in your present respectability, that you and I both jumped off the same plank; took a header into the deep end. Ever since I have been floundering about in rough water, but you made the shore, my girl and a very nice piece of shore, too. Happy marriage, successful husband, and all the rest of it.'

'And you grudge me that?'

Deborah pursed her lips.

'I can't see why you shouldn't pay for it.'

A disgust, amounting to pity for this woman arose in Faith and she shook her head from side to side.

'You talk as if life was a matter of luck,' she said, and then, with a flash of spirit, 'you couldn't make a man happy if you tried.'

Deborah rose, emptied her glass at a gulp and set it down noisily.

‘It won’t help you to say so.’

It was the first time Faith had succeeded in arousing her temper and she followed up the advantage relentlessly.

‘Philip told me that you always wanted what you had no power to appreciate.’

‘I wanted what you wanted,’ said Deborah, speaking fast and low, ‘what every woman wants, I suppose; but I wasn’t as lucky as you, that’s all.’

Faith nodded.

‘And so you blame everyone else for your failure.’

‘Who says I’ve failed? At least, I’ve never cheated a man that I’m better than I am. But if I did, I daresay I’d contrive to keep up the deception, at any rate, as well as you have.’

With an angry movement she went to the sideboard and filled her glass.

‘I’ve cheated no one,’ said Faith, ‘and concealed nothing about myself. It was only through you that I learnt that Philip was still alive.’

‘And have you told your—husband that?’

‘No, I can’t. Even you must understand what it would mean to a man in his position.’

‘I see. So you’ve just told him what’s convenient for him to know.’

Faith drew herself up defensively.

‘There’s nothing to be gained by talking about this. You wouldn’t be able to understand a man and woman telling each other the truth.’

‘You speak as if you’ve made the experiment.’

‘I have.’

‘I can’t imagine it giving the man much satisfaction to know that he was taking on secondhand goods.’

But the cruel stab did not seem to pierce any chink in the armour of Faith Marlay.

‘What happened to me before we met makes no difference to what I am to him now,’ she said.

‘What a man,’ said Deborah, sipping from her glass. ‘Perhaps he, too, had a few skeletons in the cupboard, and wanted a companion who wasn’t too particular.’

Faith said nothing and she went on.

‘So it’s only the public that must be kept in the dark, eh?’

‘And they shall be,’ said Faith, speaking urgently. ‘They shall be. He’s worked for his success and he’s got it. No one shall take it away from him.’

‘Thank you,’ said Deborah. ‘That’s what I wanted to know. Of course he must have his success.’ She dropped on to the sofa and crossed her feet. ‘You should have been a mother, Faith, then you would have been really happy.’

‘I wish you could see how vile you are,’ said Faith.

But it was Deborah’s turn to be unmoved.

‘I am afraid you are like the rest of them,’ she said, ‘when you have got your man, you don’t know how to keep him.’

Doubt came into Faith’s eyes.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He wants his success and he must have it, the darling, and now he’s got his success, does he thank you for it?’

‘I want his love, not his thanks,’ was the reply.

‘“I want his love!”’ There was a world of contempt in the way Deborah echoed those simple words. ‘Does success help him to love you? Does he see as much of you as he did? Does he want to?’ She nodded to herself as though answering her own questions. ‘I bet not. You took on a man, my dear, and one fine day, like the rest of you damned fools, you’ll wake up and find you’ve taken on a success instead.’ She paused.

‘Perhaps you’ve found that out already?’

But Faith was looking at her wrist watch and seemed unconscious of all that had been said.

‘If you’ll give me my letters,’ she said, ‘you can have this cheque. I came here for that purpose, not to listen to you talking about things of which you know nothing.’

‘Nothing. Oh, come!’ said Deborah. ‘After all, I’ve met a few men. Let’s be two women, Faith, and exchange confidences. All men are alike where women are concerned. They’re never so completely ours as when they fail.’

‘He isn’t going to fail, I tell you.’ The retort was stung from Faith in spite of her effort to keep it back. ‘I’d fight for his success if it lost him to me altogether, but it can’t do that, it can’t.’

Her eyes seemed to be searching the future for assurance.

Deborah laughed.

‘What comics we are. No sooner we’ve got our man than we set out to lose him. Either we give him success when he doesn’t want us or we get him to give us children when we don’t want him.’ She stretched out her left arm and yawned. ‘We don’t deserve to succeed.’

‘Do you know,’ said Faith, ‘I am almost sorry for you.’

Deborah Kane sat up and swung her feet to the floor.

‘You will need all your sorrow for yourself, Lady Marlay,’ then repeated contemptuously, ‘*Lady Marlay*. If you want to be a little tin martyr, you’re going to have every opportunity, believe me.’

As she spoke a shadow passed the glass panel of the front door and an electric bell rang.

Faith started and Deborah lifted her head with an expression of surprise.

‘Who’s that?’

‘How the hell should I know.’

Faith’s calm deserted her.

‘I mustn’t be seen here, I mustn’t. Is this some trick of yours?’

Deborah rose and shook her roughly by the shoulder.

‘Don’t be a fool. I’m not expecting anyone. Go in the bedroom over there and keep quiet. I will get rid of whoever it is.’

Taking Faith by the arm she led her to the bedroom and shut her in.

An unknown man, in an overcoat and evening dress, with one hand resting lightly on the ivory knob of an ebony cane, was standing outside when Deborah opened the door.

Without waiting to be invited he entered and laid his hat and stick upon a small table.

‘Miss Kane?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘Good. I was hoping to find you at home. My name’s Marlay, Sir John Marlay. Allow me.’ And putting out his hand he closed the front door.

CHAPTER IV

Deborah's brows came down in a hard set line and she stepped back a pace, looking her unexpected visitor up and down, with a mixed expression of indignation and bewilderment. He was the last man on earth she had reason to expect and what made things even more surprising was his apparent ease. He returned her scrutiny quite unmoved, a fleeting and rather uncomfortable smile playing in his eyes and crinkling the bridge of his nose.

'You have heard of me through my wife,' he said, pulling off his gloves and dropping them into his hat. 'And for the last few days you have honoured me with a rather one-sided correspondence.'

Deborah found her voice.

'Yes, I know of you. But that doesn't explain how you've heard of me.'

John lifted a hand and let it fall to his side.

'Explanations are always tedious,' he remarked. 'A great deal of information leaks out in various ways—it doesn't matter how. What matters is to keep that information within decent limits.'

The word 'decent' rang out with crisp authority.

'I agree,' said Deborah nodding. 'I entirely agree.'

But all the time she was asking herself what possible oversight or accident could account for this man's presence in her flat. It was impossible to believe that Faith could have told him. Every argument of common sense pointed to the folly of such reasoning. There was nothing on the postcards to have given her away. How, then, had he found out about her, and what was the purpose of his visit? But her perplexity did not prevent Deborah from appraising Marlay as a man. She was swift to perceive the charm of his personality and to realize that Faith would do a great deal to avoid anything which might lead to the loss of the affections of such a man.

John Marlay had walked a few paces into the room, looking about him with barely concealed amusement.

'I haven't the least idea why you have honoured me with this call,' said Deborah.

'I suppose it is rather mystifying,' he acknowledged, 'but I happen to be dining with a neighbour of yours in one of the flats above. What a very *jolly* place you have here.'

'Did you come here to tell me so?'

'No.'

He spun round and looked at her closely.

'I came here because you are blackmailing my wife.'

‘Your wife,’ repeated Deborah sceptically. Then, ‘Did you say blackmailing?’

‘I did.’

‘Rather risky, isn’t it?’

‘It is, indeed,’ he agreed.

‘Risky, I mean, to get on the wrong side of me, Sir John.’

‘My dear lady,’ he replied with a smile, ‘by getting on the wrong side of you, I’m putting myself on the right side of the law.’

Deborah frowned.

‘There are reasons why it would pay you to be polite to me,’ she said.

‘There are,’ he admitted, ‘but there are no reasons why we shouldn’t be truthful with one another.’

His manner was singularly disarming.

In happier circumstances Deborah felt that the society of this man would not be disagreeable to her. She became slightly more conciliatory.

‘You’re a disciple of the truth?’

‘In my profession I have to be,’ he said.

‘To patients, but not about yourself.’

He shook his head. ‘I mean to be disarmingly frank about myself, Miss Kane.’

‘To the world?’

‘To you.’

Deborah released a small sigh of relief.

‘I appreciate the distinction,’ she said.

He came a little nearer.

‘You have, I believe, some letters written by my wife, some years ago, to a man named Philip Voaze.’

John Marlay was evidently a man who believed in a frontal attack, and Deborah took her cue from that.

‘To her husband, you mean.’

She had hoped to see him flinch but was disappointed. It was all very perplexing. Apparently he knew everything.

‘Exactly, to her husband,’ John admitted. ‘That’s one of the points I want to clear up.’ His manner became impressive. ‘I want those letters, Miss Kane.’

‘I can understand that,’ she replied. ‘But I’m afraid they are rather expensive, Sir John.’

‘That’s a pity,’ he said, ‘for I’m not proposing to buy them.’

‘What then?’

He favoured her with one of his most encouraging smiles.

‘I want you to give them to me, please—and when you’ve given them to me, we’ll have a bonfire in the grate—and after that, Miss Kane—’ the smile vanished from his features which became suddenly hard—one of his hands shot out and fastened on her wrist, ‘And after that, I am going to persuade you to hold your tongue.’

Deborah wrenched her arm free, stepped back, frowned, then threw up her head and laughed. But in spite of her twopenny bravado, real uneasiness persuaded her to refill her empty glass from the bottle of Cointreau.

Over the rim she looked into a pair of confident blue eyes.

‘You’re treating me as if I were a child,’ she said.

‘Revenge is a childish occupation, and very unprofitable,’ he answered.

‘We shall see.’

‘Only if you insist.’

A threat lingered behind the words. He raised a hand and pointed.

‘Do you drink much of that stuff?’

Deborah frowned, set the glass down and moved to the mantelpiece.

‘You’re forgetting, aren’t you, that I’ve your future career in my hands, Sir John Marlay,’ she said.

‘As I have yours,’ he answered quite unmoved.

‘Yes, if you care to go to the police, but somehow, I don’t think you will.’

‘I am glad that, in our short acquaintance, you have already realized that I am a man who is able to look after his affairs without outside help,’ he answered.

‘What do you mean?’

Her voice was a little shaky.

‘It shouldn’t be hard to guess. If someone insulted my wife in the street, the last thing I should do would be to call a policeman.’

‘I see.’

‘After all,’ John persuaded, ‘the law very rarely reproveth a little primitive justice when circumstances occasion it.’

Deborah jerked up her head.

‘No doubt you’re a hell of a fellow in your own eyes,’ she said, ‘but for all that, exposure wouldn’t suit you.’

‘It would not.’

‘So that lets me out.’

‘That’s silly logic,’ he replied. ‘Going to the police is only one way of making people uncomfortable. You have been making my wife desperately unhappy without the help of the police. What you can do, Miss Kane, with respect, I can do.’ He paused, and added, ‘In my own fashion.’

Deborah was beginning to hate the threatening riders that he tagged on to his speeches. They made her awkward and uneasy, as though the ground were not solid beneath her feet. But she was a fighter who had never struck her colours, however powerful an adversary she was called upon to confront.

‘I think you are more likely to contribute to my comfort than discomfort,’ she said.

‘I should very much prefer to do so,’ he answered encouragingly.

Deborah threw out her left hand in the direction of the writing table, but John shook his head.

‘I hate to disappoint you,’ said he, ‘but I don’t intend to put my signature even to a blank postcard.’

‘Ah,’ said Deborah. ‘I expect you wondered what those postcards were for, eh?’

‘I admit for a day or so they puzzled me,’ John answered. ‘I suppose you thought those blanks would bring my wife up to the scratch.’

‘You will agree,’ said Deborah, ‘that it wasn’t a bad idea.’

‘I shall prove to you,’ he answered, ‘that it was a very perilous idea, Miss Kane. It’s a dangerous thing to play on a woman’s nerves in that way.’

‘Do you think my nerves have never been played upon?’ she flashed back.

John indicated at the glass which was travelling upward to her mouth.

‘Everything points to it,’ he said.

With an angry gesture Deborah set the glass down on the corner of the writing table.

‘Your wife broke my heart,’ she cried.

John shook his head.

‘You’re allowing your emotions to mislead you. A man’s inconstancy broke your heart, my wife had nothing to do with it. If you were married to a drunkard it would hardly avail you to smash whisky bottles on other people’s tables. Through no fault of her own Faith superseded you in this man’s affections, but your quarrel is with him and not with her.’

‘You doctors can talk all right,’ said Deborah, ‘that’s your job.’ Then with passionate vehemence, ‘Through her I lost the one man I ever cared twopence for. She whistled him away, not wanting him. That’s proved, they were only together a few months—and when he left her, what effort did she make to get him back? None, I tell you, none.’

‘Is that surprising?’ John asked quietly. ‘There are two considerations you seem to have forgotten; pride—disillusionment.’

Deborah brushed aside the interruption and went on.

‘The thought of her stuck in his mind and has been there ever since. There was no way back for me. When I entreated he had me thrown out of the house. When I wrote he replied by sending me her letters; the only good turn he ever did to me or any other woman.’

John Marlay had not asked himself how these letters had come into Deborah’s possession, and on hearing the truth, he could not repress an exclamation of disgust. Mistaking the motive which had made him act so, Deborah added triumphantly,

‘I’ve stuck to those letters tight, and now I have the chance to use ’em. I’ll make her suffer as I suffered.’

‘One moment,’ said John. ‘Am I to understand that other people’s sufferings mitigate your own?’

‘I have the chance I’ve been waiting for.’

‘The chance to do what?’

‘To get my own back.’

‘But is an action which materially affects my career and strikes a blow at the happiness of an innocent woman, yours to take, Miss Kane?’

‘If I choose to take it.’

John Marlay nodded gravely.

‘Then here’s where we differ,’ he said. It seemed as though he had come to an important resolution, he began to speak rapidly, ‘I shall waste no time in asking for your generosity.’

‘You’re not such a fool as to expect it.’

He shook his head.

‘No, there’s no reason why one should be generous in this world. There’s no reason why one should be anything except alive, and sometimes,’ he paused and looked at her queerly, ‘it’s very hard to find a sufficient reason for that. But it’s common sense to avoid trouble when we can.’

‘Is that what you are doing?’

‘It’s what I mean to do in spite of every difficulty.’

‘Myself, for instance?’

‘Yes. You think you have the whip hand, Miss Kane, but you never made a greater mistake in your life.’ He came nearer to where she stood. ‘You’re overestimating the value of these letters, however much my wife may have paid for them in advance.’

There was a tinge of apprehension in Deborah’s insolent ‘Am I?’

‘Successful blackmail,’ John went on, ‘depends on leaving no traces. That you appear to have over-looked. The blank postcards you sent me, the money you extorted from my wife would send you to prison for five years. Five years is a long price to pay for getting one’s own back.’

Deborah lit another cigarette and dropped into a corner of the sofa.

‘You couldn’t use that evidence without exposing yourself.’

‘That’s true. But haven’t I convinced you that neither of us can afford to do that?’

‘I don’t think I stand in much danger from the law,’ she said.

John Marlay took still another step nearer.

‘Not from the law alone, Miss Kane,’ he said, ‘but there’s an unwritten law.’

She repeated ‘Unwritten law’ with a contemptuous twist of her features.

‘You are interfering with the happiness of myself and the woman I love, and unless you give me your word here and now to drop it, Miss Kane, I shall have no choice but to prevent you—permanently.’

There was something very deliberate in the manner in which he spoke the final word and something awe-inspiring in the action which followed it. Unbuttoning his overcoat, he threw it over a chair back and took a quick glance round the room as though to assure himself that they were quite alone. Deborah shrank back against the piled-up sofa cushions.

‘You’re trying to frighten me,’ she said, and her lower lip shook so that he could tell that the attempt had not been wasted.

‘I’m not trying to frighten you,’ he said. ‘But any person who is fool enough to run trucks on my line must look out for a collision. You flatter yourself you can wreck my career by this exposure, as easily as you could upset a house of cards. You are wrong, Miss Kane. I am a fairly useful citizen and I am fairly well able to take care of myself and look after what belongs to me. The world isn’t quite so censorious as you imagine. It shows a good deal of loyalty to those men or women who have served it to the best of their ability.’

‘If that’s true,’ she retorted, ‘why all this trouble to avoid exposure?’

‘Because,’ he answered, ‘sometimes conditions arise that persuade a man to become both judge and executioner without seeking help from outside.’

‘Judge—executioner,’ she repeated. ‘You talk as though you meant to get rid of me. I’ve never listened to such bilge.’

‘There are two kinds of silence,’ he said, ‘voluntary and impressed. It’s up to you to make your choice.’

His fingers as he spoke felt casually in the pocket of his dress waistcoat and the light flashed on a little bright instrument as his fingers were withdrawn.

‘If I had a little less experience of men I might take you seriously,’ she said.

‘If you had a little more experience of me, you would,’ he answered.

Then, sitting down on the sofa by her side, his left hand closed tightly over her wrist.

‘Don’t move your hand, Miss Kane.’

She looked at him puzzled, uncertain. His right hand joined the left. The bright instrument flashed for a second in the lamplight and she felt a sharp prick in the back of her hand.

Deborah Kane screamed, snatched it away, and leapt to her feet.

‘God, God!’ she gasped. ‘It’s a hypodermic.’

Her eyes wide with terror, she sucked furiously at the spot where the point had pressed against her flesh.

John Marlay had not moved. His eyes watched her face critically.

‘No,’ he said and shook his head. ‘It’s a gold pencil case, Miss Kane. But it might have been a hypodermic.’ He sprang to his feet and came closer to her. ‘It might have been.’

‘How dare you?’ she stammered. ‘How dare you?’

‘How dare I threaten your freedom? That is how I feel,’ he answered. ‘I want your silence.’

Deborah Kane’s terror gave place to sudden and uncontrolled rage.

‘It will take more than a gold pencil case to get it.’

‘There are plenty of ways of doing the thing,’ he answered. ‘I can think of a dozen without taxing my imagination. A bunch of flowers sold to you at the corner of the street, a stranger pressing up against you in a crowded shop, a queer taste in this sickly drink of yours.’ He stopped and his voice fell to a low note. ‘We shall be playing on each other’s nerves, Miss Kane.’ Once more his fingers sought his waistcoat pocket and this time Deborah watched him as a bird watches a snake. ‘And somehow I think my nerves are the stronger.’

As he turned to pick up his coat, his hand strayed over the top of her glass. His finger nail tapped the rim so that it rang like a tiny bell.

‘What have you put in my glass?’ she cried. ‘I saw you.’

John Marlay looked at her with a funny smile, and raising the glass to his mouth he emptied it.

‘To your better sense,’ he said.

‘You damned bluffer!’ cried Deborah. ‘You bluffer, you nearly had me on the run. If you’d the pluck you boast of, you wouldn’t waste time in fooling. If you want those letters you can pay for ’em and pay for ’em and count yourself lucky you’ve still the chance.’

But John was unmoved by the threat. He looked at his watch and threw his overcoat over his shoulder.

‘I must go now,’ he said, ‘but I beg you most devoutly to believe what I’ve said.’

‘It’s so likely, isn’t it?’

‘Think it over from my point of view,’ he answered. ‘I may look in later this evening for a definite answer.’

‘Do; any time,’ she answered. Then, with a dash of gasconade, picked up a latchkey from the writing table and tossed it to the floor at his feet. ‘Take a key, Sir John, that’ll prove what I think of your threats.’

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

Stooping he picked up the key and put it in his waistcoat pocket. He passed out of the flat, closing the door behind him without another glance in her direction.

‘God,’ said Deborah, and found that her breast was heaving spasmodically like a runner’s after a race. ‘God,’ she repeated, snatched up her glass, refilled it, gulped down the contents, and throwing open the front door, sent an echoing peal of harsh laughter up the well of the staircase.

Standing before Professor Smythe’s flat, his hand on the knocker, John Marlay heard that hysterical outburst and nodded to himself after the fashion of a man who is satisfied.

CHAPTER V

To Faith Marlay, closeted in the bedroom and overhearing all that was said by her husband and Deborah, those twenty minutes had seemed a lifetime of fear and anguish.

There was only one explanation of John's presence in the flat. Once more, as in the old days, Philip had betrayed her trust. John had said nothing to her during their talk in the consulting room. He had seemed just like himself, save for the sudden, impulsive embrace he had given her before he went out.

With the knowledge that now he knew the truth, Faith was aware of a sense of relief.

Anything was better than deceit and concealment, but with all her heart she wished it had been from her and not from Philip that he had learned the truth. It was so like John to have acted at once, without a word to anyone. Had things gone differently in the interview between Deborah and himself, Faith could imagine how, later that evening, he would have come to her with the letters and an assurance of Deborah's silence.

She could picture the whole scene and picture John, with his clear logic and his power of achieving what to her seemed impossible, disclosing a way to smooth out the riddle of their future lives.

Bitterly, bitterly she reproached herself for not having gone to him with the whole pitiful story.

For the first few minutes of that interview which had taken place beyond the closed door, it had scarcely seemed possible to Faith that John could fail in his object. She did not believe any man or woman could stand up to, or defy him. Of course he would get his way. But her logic was one-sided and she had not taken into consideration those forces of jealousy and hatred which animated Deborah Kane and gave her a strength out of proportion to her character.

Deborah's defiance had proved a greater shock to Faith than John's sudden entry. Worst of all had been the last part of that duel, where John, realising the tenacity of his adversary and the danger with which he was confronted, had threatened to take the law into his own hand.

Not for one moment did Faith doubt his sincerity. In the years they had spent together she could not remember the least promise he had failed to keep. Unless Deborah could at once be brought to reason, the tragedy in which they were involved would inevitably lead to consequences too appalling to think about.

Deborah's awful laugh was ringing in her ears when she opened the door and came into the room.

Her throat was dry and aching and it was only with difficulty she could speak.

'Why are you laughing?' and again, 'why are you laughing?'

Deborah swung round, slammed the front door, and came towards her with the lithe, springy step of an animal.

'I'd almost forgotten you.'

'Why are you laughing?' Faith repeated.

'Didn't you hear?'

'Every word.'

A sudden realisation came to Deborah and she pressed her forehead with her long fingers.

'Of course, this double-barrelled visit was put up between you.'

Faith shook her head.

'I didn't know he knew. It's terrible that he should know.'

Deborah's eyes flashed a look of searching inquiry.

'What's that?'

'Do what he asks,' Faith pleaded, 'do what he asks. He never lies. He means everything he says—anything he says.'

'If you didn't tell him, who did, Faith Marlay?'

Faith's head was going from side to side.

'What does that matter?'

'Answer my question.'

'Philip must have told him.'

'Philip!' Deborah drew herself up straight as a pine. 'Say that again, Philip? Philip Voaze?'

Faith nodded.

'Yes, but what does that matter? All that matters is that this hateful business must end now, or there will be no end for you or any of us.'

Deborah came nearer and her hand fastened on Faith's wrist.

'You say Philip told him? When, how?'

'This afternoon, I suppose,' Faith answered faintly. 'I begged him not to, but when has he ever kept his word?'

'Let me understand this,' said Deborah, and her words were slow as the notes of a funeral march. 'He's here in London?'

Faith just nodded.

'You meet each other?'

'We met to-day for the first time.'

'He came to see you?'

Faith felt that Deborah's eyes were burning into her.

‘No, no, to see my husband, to consult him.’

‘That’s a lie,’ Deborah cried, her finger nails sinking into the flesh of Faith’s arm, ‘a lie—a lie. It was you he came to see, you. You’re still lovers.’

‘No,’ cried Faith and wrenched herself free from that tightening grasp. ‘No, he came because he was ill.’

‘He went to you because he’s ill, did he? to you, to you.’ A sudden wave of agony transfigured her. ‘Why not to me?’ Then realising that rage was the only weapon to defend her against the gathering sobs that she sought to stifle; ‘So it was all lies about you not caring for him and wanting to forget him! All lies, was it?’

‘No, no, no, you don’t understand.’

Deborah’s eyes were pools of angry tears.

‘You’ve got this man you call your husband—you’ve got him—got happiness—all the luck—all the simple easy things, but it wasn’t enough, you wanted the excitement as well. Oh, my God, you shall have it.’

‘Philip means nothing to me,’ Faith tried to say, but like a tiger-cat, Deborah seized and shook her to and fro. With a thud Faith’s bag fell to the floor.

‘You and him again!’ cried Deborah, ‘you and him again! It just wanted that to finish it. Get out.’

Exerting all her strength she dragged the frightened girl to the door.

‘Get out, you——’

With a terrified glance over her shoulder, Faith ran from the flat, down the empty, echoing staircase into the street. And Deborah Kane flung herself face down upon the sofa and beat the cushions with her clenched fist and sobbed as though her heart were broken in two.

CHAPTER VI

At the sound of a gramophone, straying downward through the open window from a flat above, Deborah Kane raised her head and fumbled for a handkerchief. Failing to find one, she dried her eyes on the heel of her hand, so that the paint smudged and smeared her cheeks. After the emotional storm through which she had passed, she felt bitterly cold and going down on her knees before the fire, stared into the coals. In them she seemed to see again, as she had seen years before, through the window of a little house up in the Blue Mountains, Philip Voaze, the one man to whom she had given her love, with a woman in his arms. The woman was Faith Marlay, then a girl. History was repeating itself. Philip had returned, and once more he and Faith were lovers.

Nothing could let her forgive that, nothing condone it.

The jealous fire revived during the past few days for the purpose of wringing money from Faith, was but a spark compared with the blazing hate and indignation that now burned within her. The thought of Faith and Philip being together robbed Deborah of reason, judgment, and common prudence.

She had never seriously intended to expose the truth about Faith and Marlay to the world. It had been merely a weapon of vengeance to be used for her own self-advancement; but now everything was changed, and careless of consequence, she determined to strike, and strike again, pitilessly.

‘I’ll show them,’ she said to herself, ‘by God, I’ll show the pair of them.’

Springing to her feet she rummaged among the litter of daily papers and picked up a copy of *The Cable*. On the top of the right-hand corner of the first page was the telephone number.

Picking up the instrument she rattled the receiver.

‘Fleet 8600,’ she said, and had to repeat the number twice because her voice was out of hand. ‘Fleet 8600—8600. Damn you! what’s the matter? Didn’t I speak distinctly?’

‘No swearing, please,’ came correctively from the Exchange.

‘Get that number,’ Deborah demanded.

She was rewarded for her impatience by a long delay. Presently a voice said,

‘Fleet 8600, *The Cable*, yes?’

Deborah took a grip on herself and began to speak very fast.

‘My name is Deborah Kane, forty-four Beaufort Hall Court. Oh! what’s the matter with you all? Deborah Kane, K—A—N—E, forty-four Beaufort Hall Court, Westminster. Yes. I’ve some special information about Sir John

Marlay—what? The man there's this fuss about in the newspapers. Well, who can I speak to? All right, I'll hold on.'

A minute passed before a cheerful male voice inquired,
'Hello, yes, what do you want?'

Deborah repeated her name and address and the object of her call.

'Yes,' replied Douglas Helder, for it was he. 'I am in charge of the publicity dealing with Sir John Marlay. What is this story of yours, Miss Kane?'

'A good one,' she replied; 'what you chaps in Fleet Street would call a scoop.'

Douglas Helder was not attracted by the way in which the words were spoken.

'I will be able to judge of that,' he replied, 'when I've heard what you have to say.'

Deborah hesitated.

'I'm not going to repeat it over the telephone,' she replied. 'If you want it, you can come along and hear it. But you'd better hurry or I'll ring up one of the other papers.'

Douglas did not reply immediately. Putting his hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone, he addressed a sub-editor who happened to be present.

'There's a mysterious woman on the line, sir. Says she has a cracker-jack story about Marlay and wants me to hop around and harvest it.'

'Does it sound like the goods?' his superior asked.

'Dunno, sir. The woman seems pretty agitated.'

'Well finish off that stuff we've been talking over, Helder, and pop along and find out what it's all about later on.'

'All right, sir.' He removed his hand. 'Hello, Miss Kane, I'll be round in an hour or so, good-bye.'

There was an exultant light in Deborah's eyes when she hung up the receiver. She had moved in her guns, found the enemies' range, and was only waiting to open fire. An hour, the reporter had said—a length of time which, in her present state of mind, seemed interminable. In a spirit of bravado, she took a sheet of notepaper from the rack and scribbled hurriedly.

TO SIR JOHN MARLAY.

Sir—I should be grateful if you would kindly call at my flat, after your dinner party with Professor Smythe.

Yours very truly,

DEBORAH KANE

Nodding triumphantly she tucked the letter into an envelope, licked the flap, and thumped it down with the heel of her hand. She reasoned that Marlay would not be likely to spend less than two hours in the flat above and so, when he called upon her later in the evening, she would have the satisfaction of telling him that the mine had been exploded in his absence.

‘That’ll square the deal,’ she said aloud. ‘I’ll make him pay for the fright he gave me.’

Passing through the front door of her flat, she rang the lift bell, but although she rang two or three times, there was no sound of an ascending lift.

‘Why doesn’t the damned fellow come,’ she said, leaving her finger on the bell push. She had forgotten that Mrs. Barme had told her that the porter was ill.

Getting no reply, she turned angrily towards her own flat, and as she did so, heard clattering footsteps descending from above.

Fred, the lift-boy, smiling, breathless, and buttoning himself into the tunic of his uniform, came to a standstill at her side.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss,’ said he, ‘only I’m not properly on duty yet, as you may say.’

‘Oh! it’s you, Fred,’ said Deborah, her annoyance in some measure abated by the cheerful, apple-cheeked youngster who addressed her.

‘Yes, Miss. The porter’s been took sick and I don’t come on till ten o’clock.’

Deborah nodded.

‘Oh, yes, I remember. Sorry, Fred, for forgetting.’

She rubbed her forehead, and the boy, quick to observe, noted her agitation and the signs of recent emotion still plainly to be seen on her face.

‘Is there anything you wanted, Miss?’

She nodded and beckoned him into the flat.

‘Yes, if you don’t mind, Fred. A little while ago I saw a gentleman pass to one of the flats above. He looked like Sir John Marlay, whose portrait is in all the newspapers.’

‘That’s right, Miss,’ Fred answered communicatively, ‘that’s right. Professor Smythe is giving him a bit of dinner.’

The smiling good-nature in the boy’s face somehow damped Deborah’s enthusiasm for revenge. She turned away her head and muttered,

‘I’ve been feeling rather queer.’

‘Come to mention it, you look rather queer, Miss,’ said he.

She nodded.

‘Yes, I don’t know what it is, but I’ve written a note I want you to take upstairs. It’s to ask Sir John Marlay if he’d be kind enough to look in here

later on.'

'Why don't I run up now and ask him to come down straight away,' Fred suggested.

'I said later on,' Deborah retorted irritably. 'Here's the note.'

'Shall I wait for an answer?' Fred asked, taking the note from her.

'No, slip it through the letter box.'

'Because I was just having a cup of cocoa on the staff floor,' he explained.

'That's all right,' said Deborah, then as he retreated, 'Fred'—she fumbled in her bag, found a shilling, and pressed it into his hand.

'Thank you, Miss,' he said gleefully.

As Deborah closed the door, she heard him whistling gaily as he ran up the stairs.

CHAPTER VII

When Philip Voaze was driven away from Marlay's house in Curzon Street, he sat back in the corner of the big car with glazed eyes, like a man in a dream.

For the past year he had been dubious about the state of his health, but, although he had guessed something was radically wrong, never for an instant had he suspected the truth.

His life, for as long as he could remember, had been made up of a changing pattern of adventures, but in the presence of the greatest adventure of all he found himself without resource or machinery to meet it like a man. He was going to die, and not a soul in all the world would care.

It did not occur to him to disbelieve Marlay's diagnosis. An inner sense told him it was true.

'Pull yourself together,' Marlay had said, 'give up everything and you have a chance. Go on as you are going on and you haven't.'

In saying that, Marlay must have known that he was giving advice that would never be taken.

Even at the approach of death a man is ruled by his habits and cannot escape from them. Philip Voaze bit the back of his hand to prevent him from crying out.

He was going to die, and that patchwork quilt of bright colours and queer, disordered shapes which was the statement of his life would be buried in the earth and forgotten.

He was going to die alone, and the thought of his loneliness was even harder to bear than the certainty of death. It was terrible to be alone in the final emergency, to have no one to turn to for sympathy, care, or love.

In that great city of London, to which he had returned after an absence of twenty years, there was not a door upon which he could rap and find a welcome waiting for him beyond. There was neither man nor woman to whom he might turn for friendship or for comfort.

At many of the great, grey clubs in St. James's Street, and Pall Mall, before which his car was passing, he had been a popular member, but now their doors were closed to him for ever.

He felt that he must stop the car, leap out, seize the arms of strangers, and pour into their ears the tale of his tragedy. But what was the use? Nothing mattered. Nobody cared. Had he ever wasted a thought upon other men's tragedies? No, not even when he was the cause of them. This callous world has no time for sympathy. A man must seek for and find what pity he needs in his own soul.

Philip Voaze rapped his cane on the glass that separated the chauffeur from himself and the car drew up at the corner of Haymarket.

Without a word he alighted and started off with rickety steps along the pavement.

The chauffeur engaged first gear and moved swiftly abreast of him.

‘Am I to wait, sir?’ he inquired.

‘Who are you?’ said Philip dazedly.

‘Shall you want me this evening, sir?’

‘God, no.’

‘Very good, sir.’

The Carlton was on his left and Philip stumbled into the American Bar.

‘Brandy,’ he ordered. ‘A bottle of brandy.’

A white-coated waiter put a bottle of brandy and a glass on the table and retired to attend to the needs of other customers. Philip half-filled a tumbler and emptied it at a draught.

Men of many nationalities crowded the bar, sitting on high stools or at tables, talking, laughing, discussing business, women, fast motor cars, bits of society gossip, scandal, and theatrical shop.

Alone at his table with the brandy before him, Philip Voaze reflected on the self-sufficiency of mankind. Not a soul in all that company had wasted a glance in his direction.

The idle rubbish they talked occupied them completely. He felt there was something callous and ironical in their lack of interest. His love of the picturesque had, with the approach of death, developed out of all proportion and he could not escape from the idea that there was something highly dramatic in a sentenced man surrounded by an unconscious crowd.

The importance of being about to die qualified him for some measure of the limelight, and to be ignored in his extremity was to be dealt with unjustly by the laws of compensation.

A murderer has his trial, his name rings in the public’s ears and their eyes are focused upon him. At the last hour crowds assemble before the prison gates, listening in silence for the tolling of the bell which means his passing. Yet all this was denied to him. His death was to be unaccompanied with pageant, glory, or regret.

Even among the women he had loved, few tears would be shed, scarce enough to damp the tiniest square of cambric from a lady’s sachel. At this thought, Philip Voaze put a hand to his eyes and found that they were wet. An uncontrollable longing to weep surged within him and to avoid shaming himself in the presence of strangers, he set his teeth, picked up the bottle, and replenished his glass.

A young man, describing with vivid gestures how on the previous night he had avoided collision with a taxi by a fantastic performance at the wheel, struck Philip's arm with his elbow and swilled the brandy over the table-top and the floor.

'Hello! there,' he exclaimed, 'astonishingly sorry, old man. Didn't know you were so close.'

'It's of no consequence, none at all,' said Philip slowly.

'Very decent of you to take that view,' was the answer, 'but I'm afraid I've punished the X.O. rather severely.'

'Please don't distress yourself,' said Philip. 'In ordinary circumstances, I might have been annoyed, but as I'm going to die, it doesn't seem to matter.'

The young man emitted a rather stupid laugh.

'Going to die?' he repeated, 'did you say going to die?'

'I did.'

Incapable of appreciating any remark that was not inspired by a wish to be funny, the young man retorted pleasantly:

'Well, I hope you have a nice day for it.'

He was genuinely surprised when Philip Voaze struggled to his feet, fixed him with a stare of utmost loathing and contempt, and walked unsteadily from the bar.

The white-coated waiter tapped Philip's arm as he reached the door.

'The brandy, sir,' he said:

Philip Voaze crumpled a loose fiver into the waiter's hand and went out. After that his movements were uncertain, but it was said that at a certain public bar in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, a place much affected by transport drivers and itinerant greengrocers, an impromptu entertainment took place at the instance of a tall and terribly ill-looking man who insisted on treating everybody present. His hospitality was on such a lavish scale that more than [of] one of his guests spent the night at the public expense.

There was singing, laughter, and plenty of good-natured obscenity. A tendency on the part of one or two of the elder revellers to indulge in the maudlin recitals of tragic events connected with their own personal experience was not encouraged.

The dispenser of all this hospitality was silent throughout. It was observed, with interest, that he drank an unbelievable quantity of raw brandy, which contrary to expectation, appeared rather to sober him than otherwise. But although he did not say very much, the changing expressions of his face were a source of great interest to beholders. At one time he looked, as one of his guests remarked in the ear of a companion, 'like "Old Nick" himself.' A moment later, his features were twisted with pain and

agony. Tears rolled down his cheeks and there was a look in his swimming eyes as though he were weeping for the sins of the world.

At a later stage of the proceedings he became bitter, quarrelsome, and savage, so that despite his hospitality, it was generally agreed that few occasions had been presided over by a more uncomfortable host.

The affair ended in his sudden disappearance without ceremony or farewell. Near the railings of Rochester Row Police Station Philip Voaze stood and steadied himself, allowing the cold night wind to blow upon his uncovered head. His walking had been a trifle uncertain but he could still think clearly enough. The sobering influence of tragedy had struck a balance with the intoxicating influence of alcohol. The result of his drinking was satisfactory, since it had given him temporarily the power to contemplate with dispassion the sentence of death that had been passed upon him.

His dread had become deferred rather than immediate. In the open spaces now left in his mind, which two hours before had been wholly occupied with self-pity, other considerations reappeared.

He had forgotten Faith and her little twopenny terror, but now he remembered her, recalling in detail every word that had passed between them down to his final half-promise to recover the letters.

‘Why not do that?’ he said to himself. ‘Take my mind off other things. Might be amusing, too.’

Then he thought of Deborah, that white column of a woman, with her shock of black hair and her scarlet mouth.

A curious wanton creature, but vital and alive. Better suited as an antagonist than a lover. Yet for a short while he had loved her vividly enough for her memory of him to have remained untarnished.

Fidelity, the most tedious characteristic in the feminine calendar.

Somewhere, sometime, he had used those words to her but could not recall now what had inspired them. Yes, it was a good phrase, keen-edged and with a sharp point. Yet perhaps, after all, there was a case of fidelity. In his present emergency, to spend an hour or so with a woman who still cared was not without attraction.

‘I have forgotten you,’ Faith had said. The cruellest blow a woman ever struck at him. But Deborah had not forgotten. He had scratched her heart too deep to allow of forgetfulness. Besides, she was of a different fibre. That purity of Faith’s which no contact with sin could ever rob of its bloom had given her the power to dip her body in cleansing pools that washed away remembrance of any harm that had touched her.

Deborah would not forget. Deborah would still hold out an arm to him. A yearning for a hand to hold—any hand, for a breast to rest his throbbing head against—any breast—caused Philip Voaze to rummage amongst the

papers in his pocket for the address he had scribbled in Marlay's consulting room. By the light of a street lamp he scanned it. Forty-four, Beaufort Hall Court, Westminster. He looked round for a taxi but the street was empty. A policeman coming down the steps from the station stared at him and asked what he wanted.

'What the devil has it got to do with you?' he retorted. Then: 'I beg your pardon, officer, Beaufort Hall Court, I'm looking for, Beaufort Hall Court.'

The policeman directed him to a turning on the left. 'But it don't do,' he added, 'to talk like that when you're spoken to.'

Philip said nothing. The few words with the man had interrupted his train of thought and by the time he reached the entrance to the mansions he had forgotten the motive that brought him there.

Was it to recover Faith's letters or in search of comfort? What did it matter?

The notice board in the Hall told him that Deborah lived on the second floor and a white card on some sliding gates that the lift was not working. He started to climb the stairs. A swift flash of memory reminded him of Marlay's warning against undue strain. He paused, doubtful whether to proceed. That damned balloon in his breast stabbed at him painfully.

'When the hell have I ever listened to anyone's warning?' he said, and taking a grip on the banister rail struggled onward.

CHAPTER VIII

The brandy and the constant turns in the staircase made his head reel, and when at last he reached Deborah's door, he tottered against it and bumped feebly on the panel with his elbow.

The door opened and he reeled, half spinning, into the room, clutched at a chair-back to steady himself, and let his hat and stick drop to the floor.

'Who says I can't climb a flight of stairs?' he said and heard a voice speaking his name in a tone of hushed ecstasy:

'Philip, Philip.'

He blinked his eyes to accustom them to the light and clear away the fog that was settling on his brain, then turned his head in the direction of the sound.

'Deborah, old thing—hello, sweetheart, surprised to see me?'

Again the hushed, 'Philip!'

He gave a cough that was half a laugh:

'You look fine, a splendid woman, Deborah, in this light.'

A chair invited him and he dropped into it.

'Well! come on. Nothing to say? Always begging me to come back and here I am.'

She moved nearer to him, her left hand fidgeting at her throat. A mass of conflicting emotions made speech difficult. Almost pitifully she managed to say:

'Philip, you're drunk.'

He did not deny the charge.

'Celebrating an early funeral,' said he. 'You're going to die, snuff out, that's what he told me.'

'Who?'

'Marlay, Sir John Marlay.'

He spoke the name contemptuously.

Deborah started.

'Then you *did* see him.'

Was it possible that Faith had told her the truth and Philip had called at Curzon Street on account of his health and not to pick up the threads of an old love affair?

'You *did* see him?' she repeated.

Philip made no attempt to answer her nor to wonder what inspired the question.

'The swine told me to go and die,' he said, 'to get out and die.'

Deborah moved to his side.

‘He threatened you too?’

‘No, the threat’s here.’ He beat his chest with his knuckles. ‘A penny balloon that may burst at a moment’s notice.’

Love, that neither time nor treachery could efface, startled from Deborah the cry:

‘It’s not true.’

But the expression in Philip’s eyes told her for once he was not lying.

‘Philip, Philip! how can it be true? what’s made you——?’

She left the sentence unended.

The old cynicism was pulling at the corners of his mouth as he replied.

‘The reward of vice, my dear. Your fault, Deborah, you shouldn’t have been so charming, you and . . . the rest.’

She drew back.

‘The rest—Faith Marlay, you mean?’

‘Lady Marlay by courtesy. That broke him up I tell you. A man doesn’t like to hold his dearest possession by courtesy.’ He shook his head and stared at the light reflected on the toes of his shoes. ‘Poor Faith! Poor muddling Faith, whose angel face makes man stand sentry at her gate.’

‘If it’s her you want to talk about.’ The words cracked like a whip.

Philip Voaze lifted his head and laughed.

‘Still jealous?’ he questioned.

‘I know you,’ she answered.

He laughed again but was stopped by a fit of coughing.

‘You should be grateful,’ he said at last. ‘It was Faith who told me where to find you, Deborah dear; told me that with you, at least, my memory was bright.’

Deborah’s quickening anger was softened by curiosity.

‘She told you that?’

He nodded.

‘And it flattered me, flattered me, brought me fluttering back like a dove to the cot.’ Then, sensitive to the least inflection of his own voice, he buried his face in his hands and muttered in a broken voice: ‘Lovers are scarce on the fringes of eternity.’

It was the first time Deborah had ever seen him cry, and in an instant she slid a hand across his shoulders and about his neck.

‘Don’t do that, Philip dear, don’t do that,’ she pleaded.

But once started, the tears were not easily stopped. His whole body shook with great, uncontrollable sobs. Between them she heard him say:

‘The loneliness, the terrible loneliness.’

The words were mal-inspired, for the loneliness he had thrust upon others he had never regarded as an excuse for sympathy.

Accustomed to a Philip Voaze who abused, commanded, controlled, and bullied, it was not easy for Deborah to abandon her natural defensiveness and become both nurse and mother.

She drew away and almost dispassionately found herself looking down on this poor, broken man who, in his time, had helped to cause the wreckage of her life.

‘Did Faith say anything about those letters?’ she demanded coldly.

‘No one to care,’ he murmured, rocking to and fro, ‘no one to care.’

Deborah repeated the question.

‘She wanted them back,’ he nodded.

‘And asked you to help?’

He rubbed his face, leaned back and looked at her.

‘Yes, she asked me to help.’

‘Is that what you are here for?’

Her tone was barbed.

Philip Voaze shut his eyes and tried to think. For the life of him he could not say whether it was for that or a more personal reason he had come to her. His answer was evasive.

‘I didn’t know, then, that I was going to die.’ Reaching out he caught her by the arm. ‘I didn’t know I’d want a hand to cling to.’ Terror shook his voice.

She tried to draw away but he held her fast.

‘You’re on her side?’

‘No, no,’ he replied, ‘not now, on my own side now.’

The nearness of death, combined with all he had drunk, robbed him of control. He shivered from head to foot.

‘Deborah, I’m on the drop. You wouldn’t leave me to die alone. I’ve crept back for sympathy and comfort. You can’t say, as she did, “I’ve forgotten you.”’

‘Faith said that?’

He struggled to his feet and reeled away from her to the sofa.

‘“I’ve forgotten you,”’ he repeated. Then, with an impotent gesture, ‘forgotten! without the power to make oneself remembered.’

Sinking down among the cushions, he mumbled the phrase over and over again.

Deborah hesitated and her pride fell from her like a garment. Dropping upon her knees she put her arm about his neck and pressed her cheek to his.

‘Philip, I could never forget you.’

The completeness of her surrender for the moment re-awakened his manhood.

‘I know,’ he said, ‘I know that. It was that certainty brought me to you, Egypt.’

‘Why do you call me that name—Egypt?’

‘It’s curiously apt. Have you forgotten how the corpse rose up from the stretcher in Kipling’s story, “Love o’ Women,” and stumbled towards the woman who was di’monds and pearls to him, with the words, “Egypt, I’m dying,” “And die here,”’ she said, ‘and held out her arms to him.’

‘Why talk of dying?’ Deborah pleaded.

Philip Voaze squared his shoulders.

‘Yes, you’re right, why talk of it? Let’s be jolly, let’s have a drink together, like old times. Some brandy, Deborah. You and I made things hum in our short while together and will again.’

The arm about his neck tightened impulsively.

‘Oh, my dear,’ she whispered, ‘I’ve got you now, haven’t I?’

Her strength supported him, but was not enough to drive the ugly phantoms from his brain.

‘I’ve got the terrors,’ he muttered, ‘the terrors.’ Deborah could hear his teeth chattering like the teeth of a frozen man.

‘Don’t believe what he said to you,’ she pleaded. ‘He’s all to gain by frightening you. He tried to frighten me not half an hour ago.’

‘Of whom are you speaking?’

There was a dull interest in the tone.

‘Of Marlay,’ she replied.

Philip Voaze sat up and his brain cleared.

‘Has Marlay been here?’ Then in answer to her nod, ‘Fool, the fool!’

His head relaxed again and his eyelids dropped.

‘We’ll beat him, you and I,’ said Deborah.

But he had forgotten what she was talking about.

‘I want to be quiet,’ he mumbled, ‘I want to be quiet.’

A pleasant drowsiness was stealing over him in waves.

‘Leave it to me, you’re mine now.’

‘Yours now,’ he echoed. ‘We’ll go abroad together, away from this filthy climate.’

‘I’ll think of things,’ she said.

The confidence in her voice aroused a spark of cynicism. Rolling his head away, he held her face at arm’s length with his two hands, and looked at it inquisitively.

‘Change for you to take control and me to be controlled. In the old days I kept you at arm’s length, guessing.’ She made no denial and he went on: ‘Took a delight in rousing that raw temper of yours.’

‘You never wanted the other side of me,’ she said, sullenly, ‘Yet I could have shown you more sweetness than Faith Marlay ever dreamed of.’

His nostrils twitched and he wetted his dry lips.

‘We won’t make a competition of it, if you please. I asked for something to drink. Is there no brandy?’

Deborah nodded, then shook her head.

‘Do you think you should drink any more?’

‘One isn’t sentenced to death every day,’ he answered.

‘I know, but——’

As in the old times, his temper flared up before the slightest opposition.

‘Don’t bully me to-night.’

The result was instantaneous. Deborah moved quickly to the sideboard and took out a bottle of brandy and a corkscrew. Her acquiescence galled him.

‘Don’t make me ashamed of you, Deborah,’ he said.

‘Ashamed, why?’

‘Of your willingness,’ he answered.

But that was too subtle for Deborah to understand.

‘I don’t care,’ she answered and gripping the bottle between her knees, inserted the corkscrew and drew out the cork.

Corkscrew and bottle she put side by side on the sofa table and went back to the sideboard for a glass.

In the silence Philip Voaze had become vaguely aware of the tawdry splendour of her apartment.

‘Who pays for all this?’ he asked.

‘I do.’

He gave a little gust of laughter.

‘Been here long?’

‘Ever since I came back from Australia.’

She half-filled a tumbler with the brandy and held it out to him.

‘Reunion,’ she said.

He emptied the glass greedily and gave it back, a wry expression on his face.

‘That’s not too good. Gosh!—the stuff they sell you women.’

But even though he disparaged it, the spirit warmed and cheered him.

‘Give me some more,’ he demanded.

Reluctantly she obeyed, and again he emptied the glass and returned it to her.

From one of the flats above, the sound of a waltz, played on a gramophone, stole softly into the room.

‘Not every man can walk back into a woman’s life sure of a welcome,’ said Philip, dreamily. ‘It’s a blackguard’s privilege.’ Then, reaching out for her hand, ‘What are we going to do with what’s left of me?’

It was the music persuaded Deborah to answer:

‘Anything you like, on one condition, Philip.’

He flinched at the word ‘condition’ and repeated it. She bent over and spoke softly.

‘Say you love me.’

‘A catch phrase,’ he answered.

She shook her head.

‘Not to a woman.’

‘Haven’t I proved it, being here, without a string of words?’

‘You’ve said it before,’ she pleaded.

He yawned and looked up at her out of the corners of his eyes.

‘Then for what it’s worth to you and what you’re worth to me, I love you,’ he said. Her lips sought his, but he turned his head aside to avoid them. ‘But you’re tackling a problem, my dear, and not an easy one. I shall expect everything from you and give nothing in return.’

‘How nothing?’ she demanded.

A line of Swinburne’s came conveniently to his memory.

‘No more “fierce midnights and famishing morrows.” You won’t like that, Deborah.’

‘If I have you I’ll be content.’

Her nearness sickened him and he shivered.

‘We live and learn,’ he muttered.

‘The knowledge that you need me, Philip, that’s what I want. That I can’t lose you.’

‘Because I’m worth no one’s while to whistle away?’ he said, with disgust. ‘Is life as base as this? How would you like to spend the rest of your life with me, Deborah?’

‘Philip,’ she whispered.

He threw up his head and laughed.

‘You would? Then I’m yours, dear, and when I’m dead, you’ll be able to say; “mine was the most faithful lover who ever lived.”’

‘I should wonder,’ said she.

He put her from him and reaching over the table poured himself out another drink. His relations with women provided no parallel to the present situation. Many had suffered at his hands and some few there had been willing to continue to suffer, but never had any woman offered him the abject, cloying affection Deborah offered.

If she had cursed or railed at him, he would have liked her better. Her present mood inspired only contempt and nausea.

The fates conspired that this, his last visit to the Courts of Love, should reveal it as something base, tawdry, and accessible; a thing stripped of every element of chance; flat and listless as a rotten pear.

He emptied his glass, set it down noisily on the table and stooped to pick up his cane. But in doing so the cough racked him and sent him tottering back to the sofa. Here, at least, was warmth, comfort, and even companionship. The effort of setting out again that night was more than he felt equal to undertake. Bitterly he reflected that love is not a sport to women but a key designed to unlock the doors to domesticity.

Deborah, watching, marked the pain and bitterness in his face, and misinterpreting the cause, sat by his side, possessing herself of one of his pale, emaciated hands.

‘You look so tired, Philip,’ she whispered, ‘so tired. Lean back and rest a bit.’

But the grim shadows of the future stood like a sentinel between himself and sleep.

‘Everything’s shutting in on me,’ he complained, ‘shutting in.’

A wave of alcohol lifted him out of himself, so that, for a moment, he felt as if he were floating between the earth and sky. Then, the unstable air thinned beneath his feet, and he was drifting downwards with the earth rushing up to meet him. He stretched out his hand to guard himself against the fall, and pitched sideways with his head in Deborah’s lap. Her arm went round him protectively.

‘This is how I’ve always wanted you,’ she said, ‘go to sleep.’

‘Sleep,’ he murmured; ‘that’s what I want—sleep.’

‘Is that light in your eyes?’

‘No, I just want sleep.’

The last word faded out on an expiring breath. Still as a thrush in her nest, Deborah stayed with the dying man’s head in her lap. In that moment she attained greater heights of happiness than she had ever known. A smile that was almost beautiful played about her hard mouth. A softness that had not been there before was in her eyes. A tenderness such as no other man had inspired was in the touch of her fingers as they caressed the troubled lines upon his forehead. Nothing, she said to herself, could rob her of the enchantment of that moment. Beside it all the past pleasures of life faded into insignificance. Her lover had come back out of the lost years to die in her arms, and in that thought she found greater comfort and greater security than his return to live in her arms could have offered.

The rough hands of fate, which, until then, had treated her so harshly, had softened, and granted her the rapture of being the one woman in Philip's life to whom, at the end, he turned.

CHAPTER IX

The clock on the mantelpiece tinged the quarter and startled away her daydream. With a flash of memory, she recalled how, barely half an hour before, she had rung up the newspaper, and how the arrival of the reporter was imminent. Would it be too late now, she wondered, to prevent him coming? At least she could try. Leaning back she tried to reach the telephone from the table behind the sofa; but the movement, slight as it was, disturbed Philip's uneasy sleep. With a sudden jerk, he lifted his head and stared about him uncomprehendingly.

'Where am I? What is it?' Then, realising his surroundings, 'You woke me.'

'Philip, I couldn't help it,' she said, 'but there's a man coming, a newspaper reporter and I thought——'

'Reporter,' he echoed, his voice thick and angry, 'what for? Damned inconsiderate to disturb a man.'

'It was about those letters. Faith Marlay's letters. Marlay frightened me and I was going to hit back by exposing him.'

'What's that?' The muddled brain of Philip Voaze suddenly cleared. 'Hit back—you? Nothing of the kind. Not on your life.' He spoke incisively and commandingly.

'I shall, why not,' said she, sullenness stealing back into her face.

Philip slugged his head from side to side like an angry child.

'Why worry with that trash? You've me to think of now.'

'That doesn't let her out,' said Deborah.

He struggled to his feet, pointing a trembling forefinger at her.

'If that's a sample of life with you——'

'No, no, no, it isn't, Philip.'

But he swept that assurance aside.

'For years you've plagued me to come back to you and now I'm here you ask for some vulgar vengeance to amuse you.'

A charge of vulgarity never failed to get Deborah Kane on the raw.

'If only on your account I owe them something,' she repeated, sulkily.

He tossed up his hands in a gesture of contempt and seizing the brandy bottle filled his glass.

'You're blind, senseless! You can't attack a public man like Marlay without coming off worst.'

An old suspicion re-awakened in Deborah's mind.

'Are you trying to defend Faith?'

He laughed at that.

‘Defend a woman who’s forgotten me! Have you no sense?’

‘Then why blame me for saying what I know to be true?’

‘And branding yourself a blackmailer,’ he replied.

‘No, I wouldn’t.’

‘The cheques she’s given you—what of them?’

The growing suspicion in Deborah’s mind became a certainty.

‘You are trying to defend her!’

‘Fool,’ he stormed, working himself into a passion. ‘I’m defending myself—my own comfort—the comfort only you can give me. Do you think I’ll sacrifice that to let you take part in a vulgar brawl?’

Even that slender declaration of dependence re-won Deborah.

‘Then I do mean something to you?’

He took a gulp from his glass and stared into it as though it were a crystal.

‘What else have I got?’

In an instant Deborah’s arm was round his neck.

‘I never dared hope to hear you say that,’ she said. ‘Tell me what I must do.’

Philip Voaze rocked unsteadily on his heels and struggled to get his thoughts into focus. The motive of his visit was clearing now. He told himself it must have been to recover Faith’s letters he had come. Even his ugly record was not base enough to justify any other excuse for picking up the threads of such a companionship as this. But he knew Deborah well enough to be aware that if he were to succeed he must use his wits.

‘Send that reporter away,’ he said.

‘And the letters?’

‘Give them to me.’

‘To burn?’

‘To return to Faith Marlay,’ he replied. Then, in answer to the indignation in her eyes, ‘Sign the note enclosing them, Deborah Ackroyd.’

‘Ackroyd,’ she repeated.

‘The name by which I am known to-day.’

Deborah thought for a moment, then nodded triumphantly. The subtlety of that idea, expressing as it did her final conquest, was more ingenious than any vengeance her wits could have conceived.

‘You shall have them,’ she said.

Going to the settee, she dived her hand behind a cushion where she had buried the letters on Faith’s arrival.

Philip’s face was puzzling as he took and counted them between his fingers.

‘Write that letter now,’ he commanded, emptied his glass, and dropped into a chair.

For a few moments Deborah was silent, biting the green feather of her pen and considering how best to begin. At last the inspiration came and the pen plunged easily across the paper. Over her shoulder she said,

‘I shall say it was me you always cared for and she can go to the Devil.’

Philip rapped his finger tips on the table-top.

‘No. Say that you have no further concern with the enclosed and feel she might wish to have them back.’

‘Yes,’ Deborah protested, ‘but that would be——’

‘Better manners,’ he snapped.

Deborah humped her shoulders.

‘Oh, very well.’

Philip Voaze had sunk back in his chair with Faith’s letters lying in his lap. Mechanically he picked up one of them and scanned it with a clouded, whimsical interest. A line captured his attention and he read it twice. Slowly the hard light in his eyes softened. He turned the page and read on and, as he read, it seemed to him that a voice, the tenderest voice to which he had ever listened, was calling to him out of the past. Such simple words she used—untrammelled by the fetters of style—words a child might have spoken—clear and limpid in their meaning as the sayings of a child.

Philip Voaze read on while the green feathered pen of Deborah ploughed its furrow of cheap triumph. He turned to the next letter—a letter full of fear and doubt, but phrased in the same simplicity. He had not read far before the page became misty and illegible. He rubbed his eyes and found that his fingers were wet.

‘The innocence!’ he murmured, and again, ‘the innocence!’

‘I’d give something to be there when she reads this,’ said Deborah with a hard laugh.

Vaguely Philip wondered whence that jarring sound had come. He read on and repeated as before, ‘The innocence!’ Then with a break in his voice. ‘All over!’

Deborah finished with a flourish and said aloud:

‘Deborah Ackroyd. Here, will this do?’

‘Never any more,’ muttered Philip Voaze nodding over the letters.

Deborah rose, and coming towards him, held out the note at arm’s length.

‘Spelling’s all right, isn’t it?’ she asked. ‘Read it, while I address an envelope.’

Mechanically Philip took the note and crumpled it unread into his pocket. His eyes, grey with tears, were still resting on Faith’s letter.

Deborah had gone back to her writing table, but now she turned to him again with the words:

‘Go on. Read it out aloud.’

‘Read these aloud to you?’ Philip heard himself answer, ‘you wouldn’t understand them.’

For a moment Deborah didn’t realize what he meant.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

‘Tender, simple words, like tears,’ he answered.

And suddenly Deborah became a fury.

‘Here, here, you’re reading her letters.’

She tried to snatch them but he flicked them away, his right hand fastening on her wrist.

‘They are mine, aren’t they?’ he snarled.

‘Stop that, and give them to me.’

There was a dangerous light in his eyes as he looked at her.

‘Quiet, you—quiet!’

But he had as much hope of stemming the tide as the flood of indignation that surged from Deborah’s lips.

‘I suppose you think because I’m willing to take you back, I’ll stand for anything.’

‘And will you not,’ he flung back at her, ‘with that coarse nature of yours that uses things of beauty as bludgeons?’

‘So her letters are things of beauty now, are they?’ she cried.

‘Not to you, no,’ he answered, holding the letters above his head as if they were a beacon. ‘But to me, yes; things of beauty I can never touch again.’ At the sound of his own words his voice broke emotionally.

‘Look here! You look here!’ she gasped, ‘take care!’

He struggled to his feet, crammed Faith’s letters into his pocket and thrust his face within a few inches of Deborah’s.

‘Of what have I to be afraid? A struggle with you? I might as well die here as eke out what’s left of life in such tawdry company.’

Her voice became shrill.

‘So that’s it, that’s it! I’m tawdry company now.’

‘Now, as always; as always,’ he snarled.

‘And what of you? A fine man to talk. Cast-off rubbish, good for nothing, good for no one.’

‘Except for you—a greedy-minded slut who lives by picking purity to bits.’

‘Slut—slut!’ she shrieked. ‘You’ll say you’re sorry for that, beg my forgiveness on your knees.’

Before the fury in her eyes, Philip Voaze backed like a beast at bay.

‘Quiet, I tell you, quiet.’

Deborah’s voice rose to a scream.

‘You could say that once, but now it’s my turn to call the tune.’

‘Tune, tune!’ Hysteria had him in its grip and he was shouting and laughing and rocking on his heels. ‘Tune—the croaking of a bawd.’

‘Was it to behave like this you came whining back?’ she cried, fighting against tears.

Half crazy with the clamour of her voice he answered:

‘Like the beast that goeth downward to the earth.’

‘Why did you come then?’

‘Because I was drunk; drunk.’

‘Drunk or sober, you came to the one woman who would help you.’

‘Oh, quiet,’ he groaned, rocking to and fro. ‘God shelter me.’

But the tempest howled in his ears.

‘Who else would move a finger to help a broken husk like you?’

‘There’s only one degraded enough; I came to her.’

‘Not the writer of those letters you’re moaning and shedding sickly tears over.’

Philip’s blue eyes were wide open and staring, and his hands clenched tight.

‘Is there no silence in this world?’ he prayed. ‘Silence, I order you!’

‘I’ll show you who’s in charge now,’ she raved, ‘from whom you take your orders. I’ll show you, beast that you are, beast, beast.’ And fury carrying her beyond control, she clawed at his face, trying to rip the flesh from the bone.

Philip Voaze grappled with her in silence, broken only by the sharp gust of their breathing. With the dying embers of his strength he threw her from him, so that she fell with her face in the cushions of the divan, and her body racked with sobs.

White as marble, he stood looking down on her, and while he stood, mingled with her sobs, came the jangling of a jazz tune from the flat above.

‘And you and I were to have gone on a journey together,’ he said.

His hand dragging the air for a support came in contact with his coat which he had thrown carelessly over a chair-back when he first came into the room.

Snatching at it, he put one arm through a sleeve and plunged awkwardly with his left hand to find the other. But drink, emotion, and the struggle had given to his limbs a sudden waywardness, and failing to find the armhole, his hand dived into a side pocket of his jacket, his fingers closing on a cold, hard object that lay there. With interest he withdrew it, and there in his palm was the bottle of prussic acid, with Marlay’s writing on the label.

Surprise, wonder, and a devilish determination was in his eyes as he looked at it. Without troubling to find his other coat-sleeve, he pulled out the stopper and emptied the poison into his glass of brandy. Laying the bottle on the table and dropping the stopper into his pocket, he picked up the glass, and holding it at arm's length, moved across the room to where Deborah lay.

Her sobs were rarer now, but her shoulders still moved spasmodically. Philip Voaze put out a hand and touched her hair.

The jazz tune in the flat above had resolved into a softer theme.

'Deborah,' he said, and his voice was tremulous, like the note of a 'cello. 'Deborah, dear, let's put an end to all quarrelling. You and I have little time to waste.'

She raised her head, sniffed, brushed the hair away from her eyes with the back of her hand, and saw him standing over her, smiling that queer, whimsical smile that might mean anything or nothing.

'Come, drink, drink,' he said. 'Drink to forgetfulness.'

She rose, and for a moment stood with her forehead resting against his cheek.

'Oh, my love, my love,' she said.

'Drink,' he insisted, and held the glass to her lips.

'Forgetfulness, Philip,' she answered.

The raw spirit trickled over her tongue. She smiled up at him and saw that his eyes had become dreadful. Then something seemed to clutch at her throat—burn it—a liquid, strangling fire that stifled her—that was killing her.

She tried to cry out, but no sound came. She saw Philip holding the glass and with the fingers of his other hand pressed tightly to his mouth. He was watching her like a cat—his eyes were large—enormous, he seemed to have grown to the size of a cloud—a hideous thunder-cloud from which leapt white and blazing lightnings that smote every nerve in her body and charred and shrivelled and destroyed them. Racked, tormented, she doubled up, clutching at herself and stumbling on and on towards the cogs of a huge spinning wheel that caught her up and tossed her headlong into the black spaces of Eternity.

The chiming of a clock startled Philip Voaze from his contemplation of the dead woman, who sprawled across the divan.

He spoke her name, 'Deborah, Deborah.' There was no reply and he gave a whicker of fright.

'I must get out of here—get out,' he muttered.

Forcing an arm through the other sleeve of his coat, he recovered his hat and stick from the floor, and reeling like a ship at sea switched off the lights.

Opening the door an inch at a time he listened and, as there was no sound, passed out and closed it silently. His shadow flitted across the glass panel and vanished in the direction of the stairs.

BOOK FOUR

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER I

It was half past eleven when John Marlay bade farewell to his host and the Swedish professor with whom he had spent the evening.

Declining an offer of the lift, he walked down the two flights of stairs. At the door of Deborah's flat he halted and listened attentively. Neither light nor sound came from within and there was no answer to his knock.

Memory of Deborah's laugh, with its ill-concealed note of terror, argued that he might be well advised to take no further action that night, but leave her to ponder over what he had said until the following day. But against this argument was a wide experience which had taught him that temperamental women, such as Deborah, are more ready to act at the instance of emotion than of reason.

His first visit had been partially successful in shaking her nerves and giving her a sense of the personal danger in which she had placed herself, but he had recognized the fighting strain in her, typified by the bravado of her gesture when she tossed the key of her flat at his feet. On the strength of that, he determined to clear up this business once and for all. Taking the latchkey from his pocket he unlocked the door and stepped into the darkness beyond.

'Miss Kane,' he said.

There was no answer and he repeated:

'Miss Kane.'

The flat was curiously silent. Closing the door John Marlay struck a match, looked about him for the electric switch and turned on the lights.

His eyes travelled to that part of the room where she had been standing at their last meeting, and not until he turned his head did he see the body sprawling across the divan. One arm and her head hung in an attitude of awkward discomfort.

Going down on his knees he put his hands upon her shoulders and rolled the body over so that she lay flat upon her back. At the first touch he knew that she was dead. With a startled exclamation he rose and stared at her in bewilderment.

A faint odour of bitter almonds was stronger when he stooped and put his face near to hers.

'Prussic acid,' he exclaimed.

Casting a quick glance round the room he saw the brandy glass on the corner of the table a few yards away. Picking it up John sniffed and felt the venomous fumes of the poison clutch at the membranes of his throat.

‘She’s killed herself with prussic acid.’

But at once he was conscious of a flaw in his reasoning, for the effects of that poison are almost as quick as a shot through the brain. How, then, came the glass to be on one side of the room while the body lay five yards away? Of course, she might have drunk the poison at the writing table and tottered across the room afterwards but the effects of prussic acid are so immediate that it was vastly improbable that her twitching muscles would have carried her so far or allowed her to put the glass down. In normal circumstances the glass would have fallen to the floor or remained clutched in the hand.

With the intention of ringing up the police, John took up the telephone, but before he had lifted the receiver something lying on the floor a few feet away arrested the action. Putting down the telephone, he stooped and picked up Faith’s bag.

The ghastly significance of this discovery in the flat where the dead woman lay, for the moment paralysed every nerve in his body. Sweat started on his forehead and his face was blank with horror.

‘No, no, no,’ he said to himself. ‘Not Faith, she couldn’t.’

Taking a grip on himself he opened the bag and emptied its contents on the table beside the half-empty bottle of brandy. There was her handkerchief, her puff, some small change and the cheque for two hundred pounds he had given her earlier that evening.

The faint perfume of the scent she used rose from the little heap of personal belongings. Lilies of the Valley. Its fragrance gave the lie to his suspicions. Faith could not have done this thing, and yet——. It was then he saw the poison bottle lying where Philip Voaze had tossed it beside the plate of sandwiches on the tray Mrs. Barme had laid for Deborah’s supper.

Reaching out a hand, John picked it up, read the label—his label, with his writing on it, proclaiming the ghastly truth more surely than any spoken words.

‘Oh, God—oh, God,’ he cried and sinking into a chair, pressed his fingers against his forehead and groaned aloud.

Faith was a murderess—a murderess!

What had happened was clear as writing. Because of the love that she bore him—to protect him from possible harm—she had killed Deborah Kane and in her terror had fled from the flat, leaving her bag and the poison bottle as signatures to the deed.

With sudden determination, John straightened his back and looked about the room. Faith had done this thing to protect him, and Providence, working on their side, had put into his hands the power to efface the evidence of her guilt. Yes, that was it—the only thing to be done. There was little likelihood of being disturbed. With the bag in his pocket—with the label scraped from

the poison bottle, no clue would remain to associate Faith with the crime. And suddenly there came into his mind an inspiration. Why not remove all traces of a crime having been committed? With a little ingenuity it would not be difficult to transform murder into the appearance of suicide.

He stood up, took from his pocket a pair of gloves, and put them on. There had been no porter at the main door of the flats when he had arrived earlier in the evening. Professor Smythe had apologized for the man's absence, which had necessitated his guest walking upstairs. From his examination of the body, it was evident that Deborah Kane had been dead about two hours. This being so, Faith must have arrived at the flat only a short while after he left it and might well have ascended the stairs without meeting anyone. This was, of course, hypothetical, but the chances were favourable.

With a silk handkerchief John Marlay began systematically to polish the backs of chairs, door handles and other objects upon which his fingers or Faith's might have left imprints. To the neck of the brandy bottle he gave special attention as it was inevitable that Faith must have touched it when diluting the poison in the glass.

It then occurred to him that an investigator would expect to find Deborah's finger prints upon the bottle. Their absence might be the cause of arousing suspicion. To avoid this danger John picked up Deborah's dead hand and pressed the cold fingers against the neck of the bottle three or four times, before restoring it to the tray.

The next thing to do was to remove with a knife the tell-tale label from the little empty bottle of poison. But the gum held fast and with an angry exclamation he abandoned the attempt, and taking the glass, he emptied the mixture of prussic acid and brandy into a bowl of crocuses and refilled the glass with water from a jug on the sideboard. Into this he dropped the poison bottle, and while the label soaked and softened he made an investigation of the room for evidence of anyone having called at the flat during the evening. He picked up the match he had struck a few minutes before and dropped it into the dying embers of the fire. The grate was littered with cigarette ends and these he examined carefully to assure himself that all the cigarettes were of a similar brand. The result was satisfactory and returning to the table he took the poison bottle from the glass and easily succeeded in removing the label. This done, he dried the bottle and placed it between the stiffening fingers of Deborah's hand.

For a moment he stood looking down at her cynically. His knowledge of poisons was not profound, but he remembered hearing that victims of prussic acid are usually found lying on their backs. The position in which she lay, therefore, required no re-arrangement.

With a nod he returned to the table, emptied the water from the glass into the bowl of crocuses, polished it with his handkerchief, sniffed it to assure himself that the odour of bitter almonds no longer remained and poured into it a small measure of brandy. Sitting down he coldly surveyed his disposition, trying to construct the attitude of mind of any person entering the room and finding things as he had arranged them.

It was curious how cold and dispassionate he felt now that everything he could do had been done. No stab of conscience pricked him. The dead woman was a blackmailer, and blackmail is the cruellest and most cowardly of crimes. He felt no regret for her, no sympathy, but deep down in his soul was a burden of pain which he knew that neither time nor circumstance would relieve. In wiping out one terror, Faith had created for herself and for him another terror from which there was no escape. He knew the tenderness and gentleness of her nature too well to cling to any false hope that this would be otherwise. She had taken life and the price she would have to pay on earth would endure always.

He rose, shook himself, and detail by detail re-examined his dispositions. So far as he could tell nothing had been left to chance. There was not a weak link in the chain of evidence pointing to suicide. Taking the key of the flat from his waistcoat pocket, he returned it to its place on the writing table and walked slowly to the front door.

As his hand reached out for the light switch the brightest inspiration of all came to him and fumbling in his breast pocket he withdrew the letter which had been delivered at Professor Smythe's flat, asking him to be kind enough to call on Miss Deborah Kane later in the evening.

'Why not?' he said to himself, and stuck one hand against the other. 'Smythe told me the lift-boy would be on duty at ten o'clock—why not?'

Click went the light switch and the room was dark.

John Marlay vanished like a ghost, and closing the front door softly behind him, took the knocker in his hand and knocked vigorously.

There was no reply but this did not discourage him and for two minutes John Marlay knocked repeatedly at the door. Apparently despairing of getting an answer he crossed to the lift shaft and rang the bell. Below he heard the gates open and shut—then the whine of the ascending lift.

It was Fred who opened the gates and addressed himself to the tall, pleasant-looking gentleman in evening dress.

'Good-evening, sir.'

'Ah! I wondered if anyone was on duty,' said John. 'I've been trying to make myself heard at this flat.'

'At Miss Kane's, sir?'

John nodded.

‘Yes, I believe that was the name.’ He produced the letter. ‘A note was delivered to me while I was dining with Professor Smythe.’

‘That’s right, sir,’ said Fred, ‘you’re Doctor Marlay. I brought it up myself.’

‘Nobody answers the door,’ said John. ‘You might tell Miss Kane that I called.’

‘She hasn’t gone out, sir,’ Fred answered, ‘leastways not since I’ve been on.’

‘Well, give her that message in the morning,’ said John, and stepped into the lift.

But Fred was sympathetic for the welfare of tenants and hesitated.

‘She may have come over bad, sir,’ he said. ‘She looked bad when she gave me the letter—and you being a Doctor—I’ve got a pass key, sir.’

John shrugged his shoulders.

‘If you think that,’ he said.

‘Beg your pardon, sir, if you wouldn’t mind me just seeing.’

‘Go ahead,’ said John.

The boy produced a jingling bunch of keys and fitted one of them in the lock, then opening the door, put out his hand for the switch and turned on the lights.

CHAPTER II

The divan upon which Deborah's body lay was out of the boy's line of sight. With the words:

'She may have gone to bed, sir,' he passed to the door below the fireplace and rapped upon it with his knuckles.

'Miss Kane,' he said. Getting no reply he repeated her name rather more loudly. 'Miss Kane.'

He turned the handle, entered the bedroom, switched on the light, looked round and came back shrugging his shoulders and smiling.

'Seems as if she 'as gone out, sir, after all.'

John Marlay had remained by the open door of the flat.

'Then give her my message when next you see her,' said he.

'Very good, sir,' said Fred. 'Sorry to have troubled you.'

Moving towards John, he stopped, pointed and grinned.

'Why, she's here all the time,' he said; then, dropping his voice; 'having a bit of shut-eye.'

John took a few paces in the room, looked, and nodded.

'A sound sleeper,' he remarked.

'You're right, sir,' Fred answered, and tilting his head towards the nearly empty brandy bottle, added:

'Looks as though she's been making a night of it.'

'H'm,' said John. 'Yes.' His eyes focused on the bottle of brandy.

'Well, here goes,' said Fred, and approaching the divan on which the body lay, stretched out his hand. Suddenly he stopped, shrank back half pace, and fumbled at his mouth with trembling fingers. 'I say! Look here, sir! Coo! Look here.'

'Why, what is it?' John demanded.

There was alarm bordering on terror in the boy's reply.

'I dunno—dunno. I don't like the look of it.'

'Come, come, my boy, you mustn't get the wind up, she's only——' He stopped, pushed the boy aside and went quickly to his knees beside the body. 'Hello—but this——' He pointed at the poison bottle, gripped in the cold hand. 'Look at that.'

Fred the lift-boy shrank back with wide-open eyes against the end of the sofa.

'Coo! Suicide?' he gasped.

'Steady yourself,' said John over his shoulder. He lifted Deborah's arm and let it fall. 'She's been dead the best part of two hours.'

‘I’d a feeling something was wrong,’ Fred stammered. ‘I’d a feeling. Oh, coo! It isn’t half a lucky thing you was here.’

John came down and put an arm round the trembling boy’s shoulder.

‘It’s too late for a doctor to be of use,’ he said. ‘We must inform the police. Do you feel up to slipping downstairs and finding a constable?’

Fred nodded.

‘Yes, sir, all right, sir—only, ain’t it awful, sir?’ He stopped and tried with his teeth to control the quivering of his lower lip. ‘Nice thing for the Mansions, eh? Coo!’

With a little run he started for the door, but changing his course moved to the window and pushed open the casement,

‘Here, what are you up to?’ John demanded.

‘There’s a policeman on point down below, sir, or was ten minutes ago. Yes, he’s still there.’ Leaning over the sill he called into the darkness. ‘I say, I say! You’re wanted. Something wrong, number forty-four. Come up, will you?’

A low rumbling voice, muffled by distance, inquired what was the matter.

‘Oh, come up,’ said Fred querulously.

‘All right,’ said the voice. ‘I’ll be up.’

CHAPTER III

Police Constable James Cleaver was a stolid and uninspired member of the Force. A few moments before he had been reflecting that although many persons held views to the contrary, a policeman's life was both irksome and monotonous.

This monotony he had attempted to relieve by indulging in the forbidden practice of smoking, when misfortune had descended upon him in the person of Chief Inspector Haynes.

Cleaver had made the mistake of enjoying his cigarette at the corner of the Mansions, instead of following the highly technical practice prevailing among midnight smokers of the Force of only lighting up in those streets which do not provide their seniors with the chance to come upon them unexpectedly.

The ideal police smoking-room is a street with no turnings, where persons offer at least a hundred yards' warning of approach.

In other respects P.C. Cleaver was observing proper precaution. The lighted end of his cigarette was held in the palm of his hand, which hand, while not engaged in travelling to or from his mouth was screened behind his back. A desire for the soothing influences of nicotine had over-ridden prudence, and Cleaver's first consciousness of the presence of the inspector was when Haynes, in plain clothes and rubber-soled boots, appeared suddenly round the corner, plucked the cigarette from his finger and thumb and said in a cold, uncomfortable voice:

'You will hear more of this.'

As 'Hearing more of this' in the Police Force is accompanied with unpleasant consequences, P.C. Cleaver was distressed and alarmed. Chief Inspector Haynes, an economist in words, proceeded on his way without further comment and was fifty yards distant when Fred's cry for help sounded from the second floor window.

Although infallible in some ways, P.C. Cleaver was not lacking in a sense of self-preservation. It at once occurred to him that by a prompt action in the present circumstances, the crime in which he had been apprehended, might be expunged. Although nothing to speak of in the way of a runner he put up a capital sprint which brought him to the Inspector's side.

'Go back to your point,' said Haynes.

'Beg your pardon, sir, but there's something wrong in number forty-four of the Mansions. I thought as how I'd better warn you before I went up.'

Disciplinarian instincts gave way before the emergency of which the constable had spoken, and wheeling round the Inspector retraced his steps

with Cleaver at his side.

At the imminent approach of the police an unnatural calm had descended upon John Marlay. In a few moments the success or failure of his labours would be put to test, and it was with an almost professional interest he awaited their coming.

He satisfied himself that his voice was steady and normal by exchanging a few words with the excited lift-boy.

‘A good deal of brandy seems to have been drunk,’ he said, touching the bottle with a finger nail.

‘Ah! you’ve said it, sir,’ was the response, ‘and a good deal has been drunk, not to say too much, her being out of it now, in a manner of speaking.’

John nodded.

‘Is that so?’

Sententiously Fred echoed an oft-heard fragment of maternal wisdom.

‘Liquor never did a woman any good, sir——’ he broke off at the sound of approaching footsteps, ran to the door, and threw it open.

Chief Inspector Haynes, followed by the constable, entered the flat.

Haynes was a clear-eyed, square-built man with straight brows and a short official moustache. Although studiously polite, he was always crisp and incisive. He never allowed himself to reveal emotion of any kind.

His movements were precise and deliberate and had about them a certain ponderous grace. Pride of office was the one luxury he permitted himself in an otherwise spartan life.

The police force represented to him the Alpha and Omega of all that was best in the British constitution. The particular division which he adorned, the Westminster Division, controlling as it did the Palace of His Majesty the King, the Houses of Parliament, and most of the Ministerial Offices, stood for the final expression of all that was best in the way of police methods and police manners.

Westminster was the flower and the chivalry of the force, and Chief Inspector Haynes looked to it, so far as he was personally able, that its reputation was maintained.

‘What’s the matter here?’ he said, addressing Fred, but Fred, who had not expected a plain-clothes officer, clutched P.C. Cleaver’s arm and pointed at the divan.

‘Boy,’ said Haynes, ‘please understand that I’m in charge of this investigation and when I address you I expect an answer.’

‘Over there,’ said Fred and pointed.

The chief inspector turned in the direction indicated, raised his eyebrows, and removing his hat with a superb gesture handed it to Fred.

‘Case of suicide,’ Fred stammered.

‘How do you know it was suicide? Were you here when it took place?’

He put this question without taking his eyes off the body.

‘No, sir.’

‘Then you don’t know it was suicide.’

This observation was couched in the same tone as the one which had discomforted Cleaver a few minutes earlier.

‘I was only repeating what the Doctor said,’ stammered the boy.

‘Doctor, what Doctor?’

John Marlay stepped from the window bay where he had been standing.

‘He means me,’ he said, ‘my name is Marlay—Sir John Marlay.’

At the sound of so well-known a name the inspector drew himself up to attention and raised a hand in salute.

‘Sir John Marlay,’ he repeated. ‘My respects to you, Sir John, I’m Chief Inspector Haynes of “A” Division. I was passing the flats when the lad here gave his warning.’

‘It’s very fortunate, Inspector,’ said John.

Haynes nodded.

‘In the circumstances it would seem to be, Sir John. So you say it’s a case of suicide?’

John Marlay made a non-committal gesture.

‘I merely suggest that the facts speak for themselves.’

The chief inspector nodded, and turning allowed his eyes to wander from the dead woman’s face to the poison bottle in her hand.

‘As you say, Sir John,’ he admitted, ‘the facts would appear to speak for themselves.’ He turned to the constable. ‘Cleaver, the telephone—get on to the Station and tell them to instruct the Divisional Surgeon to come here straight away.’

Cleaver picked up the instrument and put through the call. ‘Yes, I’ll hold on,’ he said, and stood with the receiver to his ear.

Haynes had moved down to Marlay with a question as to whether he was a friend of the deceased.

John shook his head.

‘I saw her for the first time to-night,’ he replied.

‘Then, sir, may I ask how it happens that I find you in this apartment?’

For answer John produced the letter Deborah had sent to him.

‘This note was brought to me while I was dining with my friend Doctor Smythe in one of the flats upstairs.’

‘Brought to you, by whom?’

‘The lift-boy.’

The inspector read the letter in silence. At length, 'Deborah Kane,' he said, 'is that the deceased's name?'

'I imagine so.'

At this point Fred, who had been standing first on one leg then on the other, intruded himself into the conversation. The first terror of his discovery was giving place to intense interest in the proceedings.

'That's her name right enough, sir,' he said, and she says to me, "Fred," she says, "wasn't that Dr. Marlay that went upstairs?"'

'She saw him then?' the inspector interrogated 'How could that have been?'

'I suppose her door was open,' the boy replied.

'Door? which door?'

Fred jerked his thumb towards the front door.

'Was the door open, Sir John?'

John lifted his shoulders.

'How should I know?'

'You don't remember?'

'No.'

'Ah, I see,' said the inspector nodding, 'you are not her regular medical attendant?'

John shook his head, and once more the Inspector addressed Fred.

'Go on.'

Fred swallowed and plunged into the tale.

'Well, she says to me, "Fred," she says, "I feel a bit queer" and I says, "Come to look at you, you do look queer."'

'Never mind what you said. She gave you the letter to deliver?'

'That's right.'

'And you delivered it?'

Fred nodded.

'Say "yes" or "no" when I speak to you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And after that?'

'She gave me a bob.'

'Gave you what?'

'A shillin', sir.'

'Yes.'

'And then I went up to the staff floor for a cup of cocoa.'

'Never mind the cocoa,' said Haynes incisively.

'You see, sir, the duty porter had a colic.'

'I've not asked you about the duty porter.'

‘No, sir, I know,’ said Fred desperately, ‘but what I wanted to say was that I didn’t come on duty myself till it was ten o’clock.’

Haynes pondered over this information, took out his watch and examined the dial.

‘Over an hour ago. Then there was no one on the main door during the earlier part of the evening?’

‘No, sir.’

‘How long would you say this woman has been dead, Sir John?’

‘In my opinion, over two hours.’

‘I see. And you came down to the flat in answer to her written request?’

John nodded, and once more Fred took up the tale.

‘The gentleman here he comes down, knocks and can’t make himself heard, so he rings for me.’

‘Ah! so it was you who let him in?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Is this part of the boy’s story correct, Sir John?’

‘Flawlessly.’

‘All right,’ said Cleaver, as he put down the telephone, then to Haynes, ‘divisional surgeon’s out with friends near by, sir. They’ve put the call through.’

Chief Inspector Haynes returned to his silent contemplation of the body. He had taken out a notebook in which he was making some rapid jottings of time, place, and the position in which the body had been found. Leaning forward he smelt the bottle and turned to John.

‘Bitter almonds kind of smell.’

‘Yes,’ said John, ‘it’s prussic acid.’

Haynes’s brows arched.

‘Instantaneous, eh, Sir John?’

‘Practically.’

For a while Haynes busied himself moving about the room observing details pertinent to the case.

Cleaver, no longer occupied with his duties at the telephone, was also giving his professional attention to points of interest in the case.

His brain was not, perhaps, highly skilled in the science of investigation, but the more than half empty bottle of brandy, the corkscrew with the cork impaled upon it, and the single glass told their own tale. He felt justified in surmising that, before taking her own life, the deceased had indulged herself somewhat freely.

Attracting Fred’s attention, he nodded towards the brandy and then at the corpse.

‘Was she a bit that way disposed?’ he questioned in a low rumbling voice.

Fred made a nervous gesture.

‘It wouldn’t be fair to say that,’ said he, ‘although, mind you, there was times when——’

Cleaver nodded, gravely.

‘I know what you mean and though you’re too young to take my meaning, it’s very often the drink that leads to other things.’ He tilted his head towards the rich, barbaric hangings in the room.

‘She was a generous woman,’ said Fred, thinking of the shilling in his pocket.

‘They often are,’ said Cleaver, ‘very often.’

He turned and addressed Marlay.

‘You’ll excuse me, sir, but this room—I daresay some would say there’s no harm in it, but it’s hardly Sunday School, sir.’

John nodded.

It was Fred who took up the cudgels in loyal defence of his patron.

‘There’s all manner of tastes,’ said he.

This interesting, if unprofitable, discussion was interrupted by the Inspector.

‘Where does that door lead?’ he demanded.

‘Kitchen, sir,’ said Fred.

‘And that?’

‘The bedroom, sir.’

Haynes entered the bedroom with a brisk, official step.

‘Take a look round the kitchen, Cleaver,’ he ordered.

Nothing of significance was found in either the kitchen or the bedroom, and a moment later the two officers of the law returned. As Haynes was passing the writing table, a small square of folded paper lying on the floor beneath one of the sofa flounces caught his eye. Stooping, he picked it up and straightened out the folds.

It proved to be merely a bill for a platinum and onyx card-case purchased that day at a cost of seventy-five pounds from Asprey’s.

With sickening anxiety, John moved behind the inspector and caught a glimpse of the bill. What he read was a great relief. There was nothing in that crumpled slip of paper to suggest to him that it had belonged to Faith.

Inspector Haynes did not appear to attach any importance to his find, which he tossed on to the table beside the drinks.

John was returning to his seat in the window bay when a shadow appeared on the glass panel of the front door, followed immediately by the whirr of the electric bell.

‘Answer that,’ said Haynes.

Cleaver opened the door. The visitor was Douglas Helder, who stared first at the constable and then at Haynes, whose great bulk screened Marlay from his view.

‘Hello!’ he exclaimed, in mild surprise. ‘What sort of a party is this?’

‘Who are you?’ demanded Haynes incisively, and added, ‘Police speaking.’

Douglas smiled.

‘I guessed that much,’ said he. ‘My name’s Douglas Helder.’

‘And what’s your business, Mr. Helder?’

‘I’m a reporter on *The Cable*.’

‘Then you’ll kindly stay outside,’ said Haynes. ‘You should know better than to thrust your way in here before the police investigation is concluded.’ Douglas looked bewildered and Haynes went on. ‘How did you get your information? You’re not one of the station crowd.’

‘I don’t know what you’re getting at,’ Douglas replied. ‘The last person I expected to find here was a policeman.’

‘I’m asking you, Mr. Helder, how you knew there was a suicide in this flat.’

‘I didn’t. Hadn’t an idea. I came on private business connected——’

At that moment John Marlay interrupted him with:

‘Good-evening, Douglas.’

‘You, sir,’ said Douglas. ‘Then this wasn’t a fool’s errand?’

Inspector Haynes looked from one to the other.

‘Are you gentlemen acquainted?’

‘We are very well acquainted,’ said John.

‘Then am I to understand, Sir John, that this young man is here at your instigation?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘I came in answer to a telephone call if you want to know,’ said Douglas.

‘From whom?’

Douglas pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket upon which he had written a name and address.

‘A Miss Deborah Kane,’ said he.

Inspector Haynes looked him up and down.

‘That’s rather unlikely, Mr. Helder.’

Douglas Helder, who was not accustomed to having his word doubted, frowned and coloured a deep red.

‘I don’t know what makes you think so.’

‘That,’ said the inspector, and drawing Douglas into the room, pointed at the body of Deborah Kane.

Douglas took a couple of steps forward, looked, turned his head, looked again and exclaimed.

‘Good God!’

‘She appears to have taken her own life,’ said Haynes. ‘What time did this alleged telephone conversation take place?’

‘As near as I can remember, a little before or after nine. Yes, round about then.’

Haynes nodded.

‘Yes, that might have been possible. What was the subject of the conversation?’

Douglas hesitated and his eyes sought John’s as though asking for leave to reply.

‘Come on, Douglas, tell us about it,’ said John, firmly.

‘Well, it’s rather odd,’ said Douglas. ‘You see, she asked me to come along for a story.’

‘A story? What kind of a story,’ the inspector demanded.

‘Well,’ again he looked at John, ‘it was about you, sir.’

‘About me?’ said John incredulously. ‘My dear fellow, what are you talking about?’

‘That’s the plain truth,’ was the answer.

‘A story about Dr. Marlay,’ said Inspector Haynes. ‘That’s very strange. I understood you to tell me, Sir John, that you were unacquainted with the deceased.’

‘Until to-night, inspector.’

The inspector looked into John’s face but saw nothing to suggest that he was not speaking the truth. Switching round he addressed Douglas Helder.

‘Did she indicate, in any way, what this story was to be about?’

Douglas shook his head.

‘No, she refused to do that. She insisted that I should come along and find out.’

‘And so you have, for what it’s worth,’ said John.

Again the inspector looked at him.

‘I don’t get your meaning, Sir John.’

‘Well, I may be wrong, but putting two and two together gives me this impression of what might have happened. I passed this woman’s front door, which as you remember must have been open at about eight o’clock, and she saw and obviously recognised me. A little later she rang up *The Cable* offices and said she had a story about me and invited them to send a reporter.’

‘I don’t see what you’re driving at,’ said Haynes. ‘What possible motive could she have for doing such a thing?’

‘Scarcely so much a motive as a psychological reaction,’ said John, choosing his words slowly. ‘The minds of persons on the verge of suicide are in a very unstable condition. They do not respond to normal influences. Just lately my name has been given an enormous amount of publicity and seeing me so near at hand, I suppose she thought——’

‘I’m beginning to see your point,’ Inspector Haynes interpolated. ‘You mean a suicide’s love of, what I might call, the spectacular, Sir John?’

‘Exactly,’ said John, ‘exactly, inspector! That craving to be conspicuous. Of course you’re better qualified to speak on such matters than I am, but I believe it’s a fairly common thing for them to excite as much attention as they can to their going out.’

The inspector nodded.

‘Good gracious! yes, sir,’ said he. ‘You’ll find them heaving themselves off Eiffel Tower when a bedroom window would do just as well. It constantly happens.’

‘Then you think,’ said Douglas eagerly, ‘the story was that Sir John Marlay should be found in her rooms after she’d taken her life.’

Inspector Haynes favoured him with an almost pitying expression.

‘That’s apparent, since she sent up a note by the porter asking him to come down.’

‘By George! it must be a queer satisfaction, though,’ said Douglas. ‘There’s no doubt she’s given me a story all right.’

CHAPTER IV

The arrival of Dr. Puttock, the divisional surgeon, put an end to the conversation.

Dr. Puttock was a pathetic little man, who sought to disguise a humble disposition behind a voice and manner better suited to the person of a retired Anglo-Indian cavalry officer.

Being very short-sighted, he wore thick pebble glasses which had the effect of shrinking the pupils of his eyes to minute dimensions.

Upon his upper lip bristled a white and military moustache. Over a seedy dinner suit he wore a trench coat. On his head was a bowler hat and about his neck a thick woollen comforter. He carried, over a crooked arm, a round-handled umbrella. His hands were encased in a pair of white woollen gloves which he had acquired free gratis and for nothing from police stores.

Acknowledging Cleaver's salute with a gesture of superiority, he entered the room, peering about him for a familiar face, and came to a stop beside the inspector.

'Oh! it's you Haynes!' he said, 'what the devil did you want to haul me out for this evening?'

Haynes explained the reason in a few brief sentences. Tucking his bowler hat under one arm and pulling off his gloves, Dr. Puttock looked at the corpse with manifest displeasure.

'She would choose a night when I'm in the middle of a game of bridge,' he said, testily. Then flicking out his handkerchief blew a gallant blast upon his nose.

'Extraordinary creatures,' he went on, 'all alike . . . no consideration, kill themselves or have babies at most inconvenient times.'

His short-sighted eyes fell upon Douglas Helder and he moved towards him with short springy steps like a bantam.

'Who are you, sir?'

'My name is Helder.'

'Press?'

'Yes.'

Dr. Puttock sniffed contemptuously.

'I thought so,' he said and turning became aware of another figure which hitherto he had not observed.

'And your friend, too?' he demanded.

'My friend happens to be Sir John Marlay,' said Douglas ironically.

In the presence of so exalted a member of his own profession, Dr. Puttock's air of irritable authority vanished.

Crossing the room with an extended hand, he addressed John with deepest reverence.

‘This is indeed a privilege, Sir John; good gracious me! Yes. My name’s Puttock, Frank Puttock. You must allow me to congratulate you on your splendid achievement. Very fine work, dear me! Yes. Wish I had had the brains to do it.’

But John had little enthusiasm for his colleague’s adulations.

‘It was mainly a matter of luck,’ he replied shortly.

Dr. Puttock held up a protesting hand.

‘You’re too modest, Sir John! Altogether too modest! Luck indeed!’ His tone became intimate. ‘Mentioning luck reminds me that I had damned bad luck this evening. Do you play bridge?’

John’s disinterested, ‘no,’ with its accent of finality startled the little doctor.

‘You don’t?’

‘No,’ said John as before.

Dr. Puttock peered with surprise into the speaker’s face.

‘You’re not a bridge player?’

‘No,’ said John again.

Dr. Puttock breathed defensively through his nose. Himself a man who, on the least provocation, relapsed into anecdotage, he found it hard to believe that anyone would willingly and effectively discourage him at the outset of what he knew was a most interesting tale.

Marlay’s disinclination to listen to a tale of any kind, was, however, apparent and, cheated of his prey, Puttock dropped his hat and umbrella upon the sofa and addressed Haynes.

‘All plain sailing?’

‘It appears to be,’ said the officer.

‘She was not a friend of yours I hope, Sir John.’

‘No,’ said John.

‘Sir John happened to be in the Mansions, upstairs,’ Haynes explained.

‘Any suspicious evidence?’ Puttock inquired.

‘I have found nothing to suggest it.’

‘Hm! No callers here to-night?’

Haynes nodded towards the tray containing the sandwiches, the plate, the knife and fork, the brandy bottle and the glass.

‘Only one glass used,’ he said.

Dr. Puttock picked up the brandy bottle and held it to the light.

‘Used pretty freely, I daresay. Low tide, what?’

The humour of this observation pleased him to such an extent that he felt justified in repeating the joke so that it might be shared by a larger audience.

But the present company appeared to be lacking in sense of humour, and returning the bottle to the table, he crossed to the divan upon which Deborah's body lay and began systematically to make his examination.

'Would you mind if I make use of the telephone?' John asked, 'I told my wife I shouldn't be late.'

'By all means, Sir John,' said Haynes.

'Thanks.'

He picked up the instrument and gave the number of his house. While he waited to be put through Dr. Puttock remarked,

'Been dead, roughly, two hours. You agree, Sir John?'

John nodded.

'A perfectly straightforward case,' said the little man.

John Marlay could hardly resist a sigh of relief.

Childers answered the 'phone.

'Look here, Childers, I may be delayed some little while,' John said. 'Is her Ladyship in?'

'Yes, sir. She returned quite early and has gone up to her room.'

'Then don't disturb her. I'll be along as soon as I can.'

He was about to ring off, when something Childers was saying, stopped him.

'What? I didn't hear that. You were trying to get me on the 'phone? Where? Oh! at Professor Smythe's. I see, yes. What for?'

'Dr. Eaton rang up about three-quarters of an hour ago from Richmond, Sir John, in regard to the case of Lady Sevening,' Childers replied. 'He takes a very serious view of her condition and asked if there was any possibility of your being able to go down.'

For a moment John did not reply.

'Do you hear me, Sir John?' Childers repeated.

Nothing in the world was more unwelcome than a case which would probably keep him from home all night, when every instinct of devotion urged him to reassure Faith at the earliest moment. But the rigid discipline of his profession made it impossible to desert a patient at a critical stage. He had done all that was humanly possible to conceal the traces of Faith's guilt. In the agony of mind from which she would be suffering, it might well be better to leave her alone for a few hours.

'Very well,' he said, 'ring up Dr. Eaton and tell him I'll come down right away; and Childers, tell Fielding to stand by with the car and see that my usual things are put into it. Don't sit up. It looks like an all-night job.'

A wave of fatigue went over him as he put down the telephone. He stood rubbing his forehead, wearily.

'An urgent case, Sir John?' Haynes interrogated.

‘Hopeless, I’m afraid,’ he answered.

Dr. Puttock rubbed his hands together.

‘I’ve always found,’ said he, ‘that cases crowd themselves together, “They come not single spies but in battalions.” Do you remember where that quotation comes from?’

‘Yes,’ said John in a tone that invited of no further enlightenment on the subject. But this time Puttock was determined not to be discouraged.

‘By an odd coincidence,’ said he, ‘I had a case of suicide this day last week. A couple of young lovers and a gas stove. Quite a tragic affair. I’d just been to the theatre, I remember—that show in Shaftesbury Avenue. Let’s see, what is it called? Dear, dear! I shall forget my own name next.’ He cocked his head up like a sparrow. ‘Have you seen it, Sir John?’

‘No,’ said John, taking his coat from the end of the sofa and throwing it over his arm.

Dr. Puttock seated himself in an armchair, and stretched out his feet to the fire. Producing a pipe, he knocked out the ash on the toe of his boot and started to fill the bowl.

‘A straightforward case of death from prussic acid,’ he said. ‘Quite unusual for a woman to use an effective drug. Most of them try and do themselves in with plate polish or some damned silly thing.’

John turned to the inspector.

He fumbled for a match, found one and lit his pipe.

‘As this case is in official hands, is there any need for me to stay?’

‘None at all, sir,’ said the inspector. ‘You’ll be required at the coroner’s court.’

John had realised that this was inevitable.

He nodded.

‘Formal evidence of discovery,’ said Haynes.

‘I quite understand,’ said John, and turning to Douglas, ‘are you coming my way?’

Haynes answered that question.

‘I must ask Mr. Helder to stay here,’ he said. ‘He may be an important witness in this case.’

‘I see, I quite see,’ said John. ‘Well, good-night, Dr. Puttock.’

‘Good-night, Sir John,’ the little man replied, ‘very glad to have met you. By the way, did you happen to read that little article of mine last month in the *British Medical Journal*?’

‘Yes,’ said John and passed out of the flat, closing the door behind him.

Dr. Puttock held up his hands in dismay.

‘Not what I should call a genial sort of fellow,’ he observed as the sound of John’s footsteps died away down the echoing stairs. ‘I wonder if that

discovery of his is any good. I very much doubt it. Well, so far as I'm concerned, Haynes, everything here is in order. If you want the coroner's officer along, I should get on with it.'

'I don't think there are any further details we need trouble about,' Haynes agreed. 'It's apparent that the woman consumed a considerable amount of alcohol and subsequently took her own life. One of those temperamental women, Doctor, judging by her clothes and the place she lived in.'

In search of copy, Douglas Helder moved from the corner of the room to the writing table.

Few articles of furniture express character more clearly than a writing table, and Deborah's, with its coloured feather pen-holders, its ink-pot of yellow china, fashioned in the form of a bird, its box of coloured wax, the red lacquer blotter and blue bowl of crocuses was a statement in itself.

Taking a postcard from the rack Douglas glanced at it carelessly.

Suddenly he started and his eyes grew wide with surprise. The yellowy buff card in his hand, with its narrow, scarlet margin was an exact replica of those mysterious postcards which he had examined in John Marlay's consulting room earlier that evening.

John's presence in the flat, which he had nimbly explained away on the grounds of a suicide's love of ceremony and publicity, had, by the discovery of this postcard, assumed a new significance.

It was impossible, now, to believe that he had arrived at the flat by coincidence.

Douglas Helder quickly turned over in his mind what had been said when discussing the cards. John had declared that the writing was unfamiliar to him but had also suggested it might be the writing of a left-handed woman. This afforded Douglas a clue and before weighing the consequences of his question, he turned to the inspector and asked in which hand the poison bottle had been found.

'The right hand, of course,' was the reply.

But to assure himself that he had answered correctly, Haynes rose and crossed to the body.

'Yes, the right hand.'

While his back was turned, Douglas cast an eye over the tray that Mrs. Barme had laid for Deborah's supper. At once he observed that the knife was on the left-hand side and the fork on the right-hand side.

Scarcely aware of his motive, unless it was an impulse of loyalty to a friend, Douglas stretched out his hand with the intention of reversing the position of the table implements, but before he had the chance to do so, the inspector turned.

‘Don’t touch anything please, Mr. Helder,’ he said, authoritatively. ‘You should know better than that.’

Coming to Douglas’s side, he looked down at the tray, and for the first time saw what Douglas had seen.

‘Hello!’ said he, ‘this is very strange, knife and fork reversed.’

He snapped his fingers and beckoned to Fred.

‘Looks like bad staff work,’ said Douglas. But Inspector Haynes ignored the suggestion.

‘Now, you, boy,’ said he, ‘was the deceased left-handed by any chance?’

Fred put his head on one side and scratched his neck.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said emphatically, ‘most extraordinarily left-handed, her right hand was practically useless.’

‘Is that so?’ said Haynes slowly. ‘That’s very interesting. Did you hear what the boy said, Doctor? The deceased’s right hand was practically useless, then what’s the poison bottle doing in her right hand?’

For a moment Dr. Puttock opened imaginary bottles with his fingers, then nodded.

‘Yes, I see your point, that’s odd.’

‘As you say, Doctor.’

He sat a moment in silence rapping the table-top and thinking.

‘It may put quite a different complexion on this affair. Yet there’s no evidence to suggest that any visitor came to this flat to-night. Only one glass has been used.’

He stared at the brandy bottle and picked up the corkscrew with the cork still upon it.

‘Everything points to this bottle having been opened this evening; in which case a very great deal of brandy has been drunk—for one person.’

Again he turned to Fred.

‘Was the deceased the worse for liquor when she gave you that letter?’

‘No,’ said Fred, ‘no, sir, that I’ll swear to. She was as sober as a lord.’

‘H’m. What time did that interview take place?’

‘About nine, sir.’

‘And she’s been dead how long, Doctor?’

‘Over two hours.’

Haynes examined his watch.

‘That seems to argue that she died half to three-quarters of an hour after giving the boy the letter. In that time she consumed three-quarters of a bottle of brandy—neat. I very much doubt whether a woman could do that and still be sober enough to poison herself.’

He scratched his head and picked up the bill from Asprey’s.

‘Clever, take a look round the bedroom and see if you can find a platinum and onyx card-case anywhere about.’

While the constable was absent, Haynes examined the contents of Deborah’s bag and felt in the pocket of the flowered pyjama coat she was wearing.

Bending over the body a new idea came to him and he started to look about for the glass stopper of the poison bottle.

With an anxiety that he could not attempt to explain, Douglas Helder watched the proceedings.

‘Can I be of any assistance?’ he asked.

‘I’m looking for the stopper of this poison bottle,’ was the reply, ‘it doesn’t appear to be on the divan. A thing like that would show up on a black carpet.’

P.C. Cleaver returned and reported that the card-case was nowhere to be found.

‘Make an examination of the kitchen and the bathroom and see if you can find a small glass stopper,’ said Haynes.

He crossed to the writing table and started to examine the contents of the drawers. Stooping to pull out the bottom drawer brought his face within a few inches of the bowl of crocuses, from which arose a faint and choking smell of bitter almonds.

The inspector’s body became rigid, and putting his nose nearer to the earth in the bowl, he sniffed critically.

‘Dr. Puttock,’ he said, ‘would you oblige me by coming here a moment, sir?’

‘Eh, certainly,’ said Puttock, moving to his side.

Haynes tapped the bowl of crocuses.

‘Do you notice anything strange about that?’ he said.

‘Strange?’ Puttock repeated.

‘A smell of bitter almonds, sir.’

A look of interest came into the little man’s eyes, and leaning forward he sniffed the earth as the inspector had done.

‘Prussic acid,’ he exclaimed.

Chief Inspector Haynes nodded triumphantly.

‘I thought so.’

‘But even if you’re right,’ said Douglas, anxiously, ‘even if some of the poison was poured into that bowl, what conclusion is to be drawn?’

The inspector’s tone was a trifle contemptuous.

‘It’s no part of my duty, sir, to answer questions, but it seems to me that rather a significant conclusion might be drawn. For instance, someone might have emptied the glass containing the poison into this bowl and

subsequently washed out that glass and refilled it with brandy. I'll not trouble you any further, Mr. Helder, if you'll leave me your address. You will be informed in the event of being wanted.'

Turning briskly to Fred, he remarked:

'If there's any more of that cocoa on the staff floor, bring it down. We shall be here some time yet.'

He opened the door for Douglas Helder and wished him 'Good-night.'

BOOK FIVE

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CHAPTER I

It was nearly nine o'clock when Faith arrived at Florence's house, but Florence, who had only the vaguest consciousness of time, had not noticed that she was late.

She had sent the servants out for the evening to attend a lecture on the subject of household control and, in consequence, there had been no one to remind her that it was past the usual time for her evening meal.

It was Florence's habit to invite people to dine on the nights when the servants were out—it saved her the trouble of shifting plates and dishes to and from the sideboard.

The meal was of a frugal simplicity, consisting of a tinned tongue, no salad, a glass dish containing three Bartlett pears and a piece of unserviceable cheese.

'People,' Florence complained, 'bother a great deal too much over what they put into their insides. It's food for the mind this nation wants. Food for the body is of secondary importance.'

It must be admitted that the food for the body to be found on her table was indeed of secondary importance.

Florence liked to gobble up her victuals at top speed, the sooner to return to the more energizing delights of conversation.

She admitted Faith to the house and hurried her, headlong, into the dining-room.

'Let's get dinner over as soon as we can,' she said. 'I've any amount to talk to you about.'

She did not notice how pale and agitated Faith was looking, which may be attributed to a mind filled with more interesting matter, or to the bleak illuminations of the dining-room, which consisted of two strong electric lights, in white opal shades high up on the ceiling, whose uncharitable rays contrived to impart the pallor of death even to the healthiest complexions.

While Faith left her food untouched, Florence Marlay wagged the tongue Nature had given her and consumed the tongue the grocer had sold her.

She had that afternoon attended an address in the Geographical Section of her Club from a lady who had recently returned from the Balearic Islands. She had enjoyed the proceedings mightily, not so much on account of what the lecturer had said, which, from the fragments she repeated, appeared to be the vapourings of a half-wit, but on account of her own bitter criticisms at the conclusion of the address.

‘I went straight up,’ said Florence, ‘when she came down from the platform and I was rude to her—absolutely rude.’ She paused to allow Faith an opportunity to appreciate this statement. ‘I told her,’ she went on, ‘that what she had said was ridiculous and absurd. Of course,’ she added, ‘I’ve never been to the Balearic Islands, but one doesn’t need to go to a place to form one’s opinion about it.’

With a little exclamation, Faith started, fumbled in her lap and pushing back her chair stared at the carpet by her feet with frightened eyes.

‘Good gracious, child! What are you doing?’ Florence demanded.

‘My bag,’ said Faith, ‘I can’t find my bag.’

‘Nonsense, of course you’ve got it.’

But Faith shook her head.

‘I haven’t. Do you mind if I look in the passage and see if it’s with my cloak?’

‘There will be plenty of time when dinner is over.’

But Faith had gone.

A moment later she came back looking thoroughly scared.

‘It isn’t there,’ she said.

‘Now, it’s no good running round in circles and getting excited,’ said Florence. ‘The proper way to find a thing is to sit down and remember when one had it last.’

‘But I can’t remember. Oh, dear! Where can I have left it?’

‘Pull yourself together at once,’ said Florence, ‘and while you’re up, dear, just change those plates and put the pears on the table.’

Faith obeyed mechanically. Her face was white and agitated and she kept fidgeting at her lower lip with her fingers.

‘Even if you’ve lost the bag there is no reason to get into that state about it.’

‘Oh! I can’t think where it can be,’ was the answer.

‘Now sit down at once and concentrate,’ said Florence. ‘Did you have it in your hand when you came out of the house at Curzon Street?’

‘Yes,’ said Faith. ‘I know I did because——’ she stopped abruptly, ‘because——’

‘Because why, because of what?’

‘Well, I’m sure I had it, Florence.’

Florence rapped her knuckles on the table.

‘Did you have it in the taxi that brought you here?’

‘I paid the taxi——’ Faith began, then checked herself and said, ‘I didn’t come in a taxi, I walked.’

‘Walked in that thin cloak and satin shoes?’

‘I generally walk.’

‘Very well, then,’ said Florence, ‘it’s clearly evident that you didn’t bring the bag at all and you’ll find it when you get home. And now, my dear, if you don’t want a pear, we’ll go upstairs to the drawing-room.’

Faith contrived to put herself in a dark corner where her agitation was less likely to be observed.

Her brain was still reeling as a result of what had taken place in Deborah’s flat. John’s voice, with its note of warning, still echoed in her ears. Over and over she repeated to herself the last words he had spoken to Deborah.

‘I shall return later for a more definite answer.’

Would he do that? she asked herself. Would he make use of the key Deborah had given him? And if he went back and found her still obdurate, what then?

This was a question she dared not answer. But she had already determined, when John came home to tell him everything—everything.

If he wished, she would go away until such a time as the law allowed her to return as his real wife. While these thoughts drifted through her brain, Florence Marlay’s rat-tat of highly emphasized small talk went on and on.

‘As I said to Mrs. Deanery, servants to-day are all alike. One pays them enormous wages and, instead of saving, they fritter away their money on silk stockings, cinemas, and having their hair permanently waved. And what is at the back of it? Bolshevism, my dear. I tell you that the seeds of Moscow are sown in the servants’ halls of every house in the country. Take, for example, the story Mrs. Price told me the other day. Ada, their young housemaid, had a fainting fit in Oxford Circus, but instead of sitting down in an A.B.C. teashop and recovering quietly, what must the girl do but put herself in a taxi and be driven home. A taxi!’ Florence repeated. ‘Imagine it for yourself, a girl like that in a taxi.’

‘But I didn’t take a taxi,’ said Faith, ‘I walked, Florence, and I’m sure I had the bag when I started out this evening.’

Florence was really offended. She had put a good deal of spirit into her exposition of the servant problem and Faith’s remark, which conclusively proved that she had not paid attention to a single word was almost more than flesh and blood could bear.

‘My dear child,’ she snapped, ‘if this wretched bag of yours is more important than what I’ve been telling you, the best thing you can do is to go straight home and look for it.’

Perceiving that an hour might pass before such another opportunity for escape would present itself, Faith jumped up and hurriedly kissing her sister-in-law on the forehead, ran downstairs for her cloak.

‘But you’re not really going,’ said Florence who had followed her.

‘I think I will, if you don’t mind. I’d like to. I don’t feel up to much to-night, somehow. It was sweet of you to have me, Florence.’ Without another word slipped through the front door and ran down the street.

Childers let her in. Light rain had begun to fall and he was surprised to observe by the wetness of his mistress’s cloak that she had been walking.

‘I’ve left some warm soup by the fire in your room, my lady,’ he said.

Faith gave a wan smile of gratitude.

‘That was kind of you, Childers.’

‘Sir John suggested I should do so,’ he replied. ‘He told me you were dining with Miss Marlay and might feel the need of a little sustenance when you came in.’

Faith repeated the wan smile.

‘Sir John isn’t in yet?’ she asked.

‘Not yet, my lady.’

Faith went up to her bedroom and taking off her frock put on a soft wrap and passed through to the little boudoir that adjoined.

A cosy fire was burning in the grate and Faith curled herself up on the floor before it and held out her hands.

‘I hope he comes soon. Oh! I do hope he comes soon,’ she prayed.

The longing to unburden herself of all she had concealed was almost more than she could bear.

But time went on. Clocks chimed, the rumble of traffic in the street lessened, the sound of the feet of passers by grew rarer and rarer.

It was after half past eleven when she heard Childers’ voice speaking over the telephone. Opening her door Faith leaned over the well of the staircase and looked down.

The old servant hung up the receiver and was moving towards the foot of the stairs.

‘Who was it, Childers?’ she asked.

‘The master, my Lady. He rang up from somewhere to say he might be detained.’

A sudden fear clutched at Faith’s heart.

‘Detained,’ she repeated.

‘It was lucky he did ring, my Lady,’ Childers went on. ‘I was able to give him Dr. Eaton’s message.’

‘What was that, what message?’

‘About Lady Sevening’s case at Richmond. Sir John is going down there straight away. He said it looked like an all-night job.’

‘Did he tell you he was going on anywhere else?’

‘No, my Lady.’

Dull with disappointment, Faith returned into her room.

An all-night job! For another whole night confidence must be delayed. Some small comfort she found in the thought that if John was already on his way to attend a patient, nothing dreadful could have happened.

She heard Childers passing on the way to his room and opening her door she asked:

‘Where did the doctor ring up from, Childers?’

‘That I can’t say, my lady. It wasn’t from Doctor Smythe’s because I tried to get him there about ten minutes beforehand.’

Faith hesitated.

Again the dull fear clutched at Faith’s heart.

‘All right, Childers, that’s all. Good-night.’

‘Good-night, my lady.’

She turned into her room and crouched down before the fire.

CHAPTER II

When Philip Voaze left the entrance of Beaufort Hall Court, he came into an empty street. Neither going nor coming had he met anyone on the staircase of the flats. A few minutes' walk brought him to Victoria Street. While he walked he reflected that Providence had worked on his side that night and that the chances of his identity being associated with the crime were practically negligible.

The cold night air and the part he had played in the tragedy had completely sobered him. Thinking things over with a clear brain, he was surprised to find how little of his first terror of the crime remained with him. He was walking and thinking quite steadily. Deborah Kane was dead. Faith Marlay's letters were in his pocket, and John Marlay's prophecy that the least exertion would inevitably prove fatal had been disproved.

'Damned alarmists, these doctors, all alike,' he muttered, and laughed.

Who would have thought that he, a dying man with a penny balloon in his breast that might burst at a moment's notice could have wrangled and struggled and fought with a woman and, at the end, have had the strength to kill her?

Philip Voaze had never yet been pricked by conscience. His egotism was too strong for regrets, and his egotism, at that moment, reacted in the direction of pride. It was no small achievement that this night's work placed to his credit. In a way it was the most complete achievement in his whole career. Many a woman's heart had he broken and her faith destroyed—many a woman's life had been wrecked by contact with him, but never before had he enjoyed the tremendous power of destroying life.

To kill is the final expression of power, the last word in mastery.

With Deborah's voice no longer racking his nerves he found himself uncertain why he had killed her. A variety of reasons might have inspired the act, but, looking back, he could not be sure of the actual motive.

Was it re-awakened affection for Faith and a long-delayed desire to make amends to her? Was it an outraged sense of justice; retributive justice? He stopped in his tracks and shook his head. He found it impossible to associate himself with a motive of conscience. Honourable instincts were alien to his nature. He was too much of a cynic to credit himself with anything of that kind. Much more likely intolerance had persuaded him to put an end to Deborah's life—intolerance of the clamour of her voice with its detestable note of command, its insupportable suggestion that, in the future it was she who would control his destiny.

Philip Voaze nodded. He could understand himself committing a murder for such a cause. Never in all his life had he admitted an authority, worldly or spiritual, superior to his own.

Again, he might have killed her for an æsthetic motive; for daring to disturb a mood of sudden sentiment with her vulgar, brawling voice. Anyhow, he had done it, and whys and wherefores mattered as little to him as the act itself. His days were numbered, and a man on the threshold of death is outside the law.

By God, he thought, what power this nearness of death gives to man. It sets him free of all restraint and responsibility. It makes him one with Napoleon—Cæsar—Pharaoh. As the grandeur of this thought took possession of him, Philip Voaze filled his lungs, and with head erect, walked like a king.

He felt uplifted by a strength no physical disability could rob from him. He began to whistle, with the same sweet, triumphant notes that years before he had whistled in the Convent garden beneath Faith's window.

A passing taxi drew up beside him and the driver touched his hat.

'Want me, sir?' he demanded.

'Want you? No,' Philip rejoined. 'I want no one, I'm sufficient unto myself.'

In Victoria Street self-sufficiency gave place to a desire for an audience, and he joined a crowd of people who were boarding an omnibus.

The 'bus was full inside and he had to stand. Marking how ill he looked a girl rose and offered him her seat.

'No, no, no, my pretty,' he answered with a smile she remembered all her life. He added insolently: 'if I wanted anything from you, do you think I'd be afraid to ask?'

The girl blushed and dipped her head into a copy of *Betty's Paper*, in which was a very romantic serial from the palpitating pen of Denise Chesterton.

Philip Voaze leaned back against the fareboard and started whistling.

A man with a bowler hat, a walrus moustache, and an unattractive wife, conceiving such conduct to be improper inquired correctively:

'Look here, old man, you don't want to make that noise, do you?'

'If you consider the beauties of our language,' Philip replied, 'you will agree that "that noise" is a poor description of the notes a blackbird pipes to his mate when Spring is putting forth a green livery in English lanes.' And having delivered himself of this observation, he (Voaze) continued to whistle as though the interruption had never occurred.

'Poor fellow,' said the unattractive wife, 'must have got a slate off, I should say.'

But the little girl who was pretending to read *Betty's Paper* found that her attention was wandering, that her throat felt strangely hot and that her heart was beating in such a funny way.

Presently the conductor came to demand fares.

'You must hop upstairs, sir,' he said addressing Philip. 'No one is allowed to stand inside a 'bus.'

Philip stopped whistling and smiled.

'If you wish to succeed in this world,' he said, 'the best way is to ignore rather than to observe duty.' He took a pound note from his pocket and offered it gracefully.

The conductor shook his head.

'I can't change pound notes,' said he.

'I have not asked for change,' said Philip; 'I don't want any change. I have arrived at that stage of life where economy ceases to have the slightest significance.'

'By rights,' said the conductor dubiously, 'I ought to put you off.'

'If you did that,' Philip replied, 'I should resist you, and as I was told a few hours ago by the most eminent doctor in London that any undue exertion would kill me, your action would result in your becoming a murderer.'

The conductor shivered and examined the parchment-white face before him.

'I'm sure that's the last thing I want to be,' he remarked.

'You're right,' said Philip. 'As a last thing, it cannot be improved upon. Only when we take the life of a fellow creature do we understand the true meaning of supremacy.'

By this time everyone was staring at Philip with varying degrees of surprise and interest.

'It is because Society will not tolerate supremacy,' he said, 'that capital punishment was invented.'

At Charing Cross he alighted, but before leaving he stooped and kissed the top of the small black, candle-snuffer hat on the girl's head. And so incredible are the emotions of the very young that this same girl kept that same hat for many years and never knew why.

He completed his journey to the hotel on foot, acknowledging the salute of the porters at the swing doors with a smile.

It was not until he reached the foyer that his uplifted spirits began to wane. A wave of fatigue prompted him to seek a few moments' repose upon a couch.

Two seedy-looking foreigners, evidently waiting to keep an appointment with someone who had not turned up, were the only other people present.

They looked grubby, carelessly shaved, and out of their element.

Philip Voaze resented their presence, and when one of them addressed him in indifferent English, he was swift to express his displeasure.

‘I ask your pardon, sir,’ said the individual, ‘but for our informations, woot you be goot enough to egsplain where we can wash?’

‘All over,’ said Philip Voaze, ‘all over,’ and rising with an ironical laugh, he moved away in the direction of the lift.

CHAPTER III

In a house on Richmond Hill, overlooking the Thames Valley, John Marlay and Dr. Eaton were at breakfast.

Eaton was an elderly man and the night's work had told on him considerably. The case had reached its critical stage an hour before dawn, the patient hanging on to life by a thread. . . .

'Show me a first-class dry-fly fisherman,' Eaton said, 'and I'll show you a first-class doctor, that is, if the fisherman has taken up medicine. The way you played that woman's life on a fine tackle was the most delicate performance I've ever witnessed.'

John did not resent his colleague's enthusiasm, for the night's work had demanded a degree of self-discipline such as he had seldom called upon himself to make.

The gravity of the case had not allowed him to relax his vigilance for one instant.

'Why not come along to my place and have a bath and an hour's sleep before returning home?' Eaton suggested.

But John shook his head.

'Afraid I can't manage it, I've a heavy day before me.'

The evening dress he was wearing looked queer and crumpled in the pale morning sunlight.

'It's an exacting job, ours,' said the older man, 'but after a show like to-night's I'd be the last to say that it hasn't its compensations.'

John laughed, a forced, cracked laugh, which caused Eaton to peer at him with professional interest.

'If I didn't know you well enough to believe you are incapable of fatigue, I should say you were "all in," Marlay.'

The lower half of John's face was hidden behind a coffee cup.

'Don't try your tricks on me,' he pleaded.

'I mean it. That was a damned unhealthy laugh of yours.'

John made no reply but he reflected that it had been a damned unhealthy cause which had inspired it. He rose, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and tossed it on the table.

'I'm for home,' said he.

Eaton rose too.

'You must have been putting in pretty long hours lately, exploiting this discovery on top of your other work. Why not go abroad for a spell?'

'P'raps I will, when I've cleared things at this end.' He held out a hand.

'Good-bye, Eaton, I'm glad we brought this off. Call me up in the event of

things taking an unexpected turn. I'll probably run down after dinner—unless . . .' he paused.

'Unless what?'

The question startled him.

'Oh, nothing. So far as I can see nothing on earth can prevent me.'

He waved his hand and taking his coat and hat from a peg in the hall, descended the steps to where his car waited at the curb.

Fielding, the chauffeur, who had been in attendance all night, was lolling on the back seat, fast asleep.

Getting into the driving seat, John allowed the car to roll gently down the hill. There was promise of Spring in the air. Yellow catkins hung from the trees in the terrace gardens and puffs of pussy willow nodded their white heads gaily. A warm, wet wind swept over the Thames valley, bringing with it a taste of the sea and a patter of rain. Enormous clouds went sailing by. The tops of trees bent and dipped as the wind shook them from their winter slumber.

The windows of the little, old-world town winked at the snatches of sunlight and the crowds upon the pavement were happy, busy, and glad to be alive.

As he drove, John wondered what he should say to Faith. For the life of him he could not determine. What could he say? He knew that this terrible deed of hers had been done for his sake and yet he would gladly have sacrificed all he had in the world, every gain he had made, every friend, work, ambition and all the future might hold, to undo what she had done.

As the car passed over Putney Bridge, Fielding woke with a start and realised that he had been asleep. Lowering the window he addressed John in tones of indignation.

'You pull up and get into the back at once, sir,' he said. 'Later on will be time enough to talk about whether I'm to have the sack or not.'

John knew Fielding too well to be offended.

'Go on, have your sleep out,' he said.

'And let the other chauffeurs in Curzon Street see me be driven home by my master,' the man demanded. 'You do as I say or else it will be me who gives you the sack.'

'Have it your own way,' said John and pulled up at the curb. It was one of his principles never to interfere with another man's job.

Fielding's face was purple when he stepped from the car and changed seats.

'By rights, you ought to have put your foot in my stomach,' said he, 'stead of letting me hog away at the back like that.'

John laughed.

‘Get on with it,’ he said.

‘And so I will,’ said Fielding. ‘And, what’s more, I shall have something to say to her Ladyship about me before the day’s out.’

John seated himself beside Fielding, who frowning deeply, ran through a scale of gears and licked along the Fulham Road at an angry forty-five.

‘Sorry I offended you,’ said John, presently.

‘It’s me that offended myself,’ Fielding replied. ‘I takes a pride in my job—’n’ being asleep ain’t no part of it. I never did hold with that story of Napoleon Bonaparte doing sentry-go for the chap ’oo was having a bit of shut-eye. They used to rub it into us at school as how the sentry was grateful for the rest of his life; but I looks at it otherwise and reckons it was Bonaparte who got the plum out o’ that pie. All the sentry got was the reputation for being a sleepy hog. Do your own job’s my motto, and no thanks to the chap that does it for you.’

John Marlay was too occupied with his own thoughts to be more than vaguely aware of Fielding’s quasi-historical parallel.

The car was passing the Walham Green Empire when a poster caught his eye.

SUICIDE OR MURDER. WAS SIR JOHN MARLAY WRONG?

With a grip of fear he gave an order to stop and jumping out, retraced his steps to the newsvendor’s shop, bought several papers, and opening one at the middle page hurriedly scanned the report of Deborah Kane’s death. As the car continued the homeward journey, oblivious of his chauffeur’s remarks, he stared at the road before him and searched his brain for the weak link in the chain of evidence he had forged.

CHAPTER IV

Barbara had not seen the morning papers when, after a lonely breakfast, she went to the consulting room. She knew nothing of the details of last night's affair, which under a variety of headlines occupied so much in the newspapers. Childers was the first to tell her anything about it—Childers, who, for once in his life, was indignant and agitated.

Barbara put a parcel on John's table. His birthday present.

'He isn't back yet?' she asked.

'No, Miss. He went down to Richmond before twelve o'clock last night and hasn't returned.'

'It's a nice thing,' said Barbara, 'when a man doesn't show up on his birthday. Has he rung up this morning?'

Childers shook his head.

'Lady Marlay wasn't down to breakfast,' said Barbara, opening the day's correspondence and arranging it in little piles.

'No, Miss Barbara, she complained of feeling a little out of sorts. Frances took breakfast to her room on a tray.'

Barbara looked up.

'Out of sorts! I didn't know. I haven't been in to see her yet. Wonder what's upset her?'

Childers hesitated.

'It might have been the papers, Miss Barbara.'

'The papers?'

'Yes, miss.'

He looked at the table where lay three or four daily papers, but seeing they were still folded in their original creases, he shook his head.

'No, it can't have been that, for no one's looked at them yet.'

'Not more of that silly slush about Uncle John, Childers?'

'Slush, Miss?'

'Fulsome praise, I mean.'

Childers shook his head.

'Hardly, miss, in fact, this morning there's a tendency towards animadversion, if I may use that word.'

Barbara laughed.

'I certainly should, it's a beauty,' she said.

'Of raillery—of criticism, miss.'

Barbara's smiling features resolved themselves into a frown.

'You don't mean? What frightful cheek. What do they say? Show me.'

Childers picked up a newspaper and, while turning the pages in search of the required paragraph, remarked:

‘It’s about a woman who was found dead, last night, in the block of flats where the doctor was dining.’

‘Really?’

‘Here you are, miss.’

He pointed.

The headlines read

DEAD WOMAN IN A FLAT
MURDER OR SUICIDE
WAS SIR JOHN MARLAY WRONG?

Barbara did not read the whole report; she satisfied herself with a glance here and there.

Mystery surrounds the circumstances of a woman’s death in her flat at Beaufort Hall Court, Westminster. By a curious coincidence, Sir John Marlay, the eminent physician, in company with a lift-boy, was first to see the body. He informed the police, who arrived a few minutes later, that, in his opinion, it was a clear case of suicide. The woman was lying on a divan in her sitting-room—a bottle which had contained prussic acid clasped in her right hand. The Divisional Surgeon, Dr. Puttock, concurred with Sir John’s opinion, and it was not until later that one or two unexpected details of evidence came to light, which cast a doubt upon the manner of the woman’s death.

Chief Inspector Haynes, in charge of the case, declined to inform the press his precise reason for refusing to accept the theory of suicide.

When pressed he would only consent to say that the stopper of the poison bottle was nowhere to be found in the woman’s flat.

Our special representative expressed surprise at the officer’s scepticism in regard to Sir John Marlay’s diagnosis. To this the Inspector replied that although Sir John was unquestionably a great authority in his own profession, a knowledge of medicine did not qualify a man to speak with authority on the subject of detection.

With an angry gesture Barbara slapped the newspaper down on the writing table.

‘This is *The Cable!*’ she exclaimed. ‘Douglas’s paper! And only yesterday Uncle John was saying to him——’ She turned to Childers. ‘Do you realise Mr. Helder must have written this?’

‘Yes, miss.’

And at this highly unpropitious moment Douglas Helder came into the room.

It did not require much introspection to realise that he was in a hostile atmosphere. The smile of greeting that he flashed at Barbara hit a stone wall of silent indignation.

When he turned to the old servant with ‘Good-morning, Childers,’ Childers avoided meeting his eye.

‘The doctor still out?’ he asked.

‘He is, sir.’

‘That’s a bore, I was hoping to see him.’

Childers said nothing.

‘Childers, just vanish for a moment, will you?’ said Barbara, ominously.

Douglas Helder intercepted him on his way to the door.

‘By the way, were there any more blank postcards with this morning’s mail?’

‘No, sir, for the first time for a week,’ was the reply.

Douglas frowned.

‘But perhaps,’ Childers added, ‘I ought not to have said anything.’

‘Why not?’

‘Copy, Mr. Helder,’ Childers replied, and pointing at the crumpled newspaper, passed with dignity from the room.

Douglas stood for a moment with his eyes fixed on the closed door.

‘Have I been snubbed, by any chance?’ he queried.

‘You have, and deserved it,’ said Barbara. ‘Douglas, I’m furious with you.’

‘Furious?’ he repeated. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

For answer Barbara picked up *The Cable*.

‘That’s what I mean,’ she said, and pointed at the report of Deborah Kane’s death.

Douglas Helder was not at all discomfited.

‘So you’ve seen it, have you?’

‘I never thought you had much brain,’ said Barbara, ‘but I did think you were fairly loyal.’

‘It wasn’t my fault, darling.’

‘Not your fault? Rubbish,’ she replied. ‘Because Uncle John said he was sick of being wonderful, he didn’t want to be exhibited as—as fallible.’

Douglas put out a hand and pulled her towards the sofa.

‘It’s no use,’ she said, drawing back.

‘You must listen to what I have to say,’ he insisted. ‘I did my best to keep Sir John out of this show, but my editor refused. The agency reporters were along about ten minutes after he left the flat, and you might as well try to stop Niagara as muzzle the press when they’re on the warpath.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Barbara, ‘but you know Uncle John wasn’t wrong. It’s his job not to be wrong.’

‘I know it is,’ Douglas admitted, ‘but the case wasn’t as simple as it looked, Barbara.’ He drew her down to the sofa beside him and began to talk swiftly and earnestly. ‘Everything pointed to a case of suicide, until something turned up to cast a doubt.’

As briefly as possible he reconstructed the happenings in Deborah Kane’s flat the night before. The discovery of the bill for a piece of jewellery bought that day but nowhere to be found—the unavailing search for the stopper of the poison bottle—the smell of prussic acid in a bowl of crocuses and finally finding the bottle in the woman’s right hand, although she was known to be left-handed.

‘He wasn’t supposed to know that,’ Barbara protested, ‘and he’s not supposed to be a detective either.’

But for the first time in their acquaintance she was unable to convince Douglas of her rightness. His face, she thought, was unusually serious, for after all, although the affair might be tiresome, it was no more than that.

‘It’s all so trivial,’ she said, ‘and I can’t see why you make such a mountain out of a molehill.’

Douglas took her hands and looked into her eyes.

‘Babs, darling,’ he said, ‘between people who love one another you believe in cards on the table—no secrets of any kind?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Well, I’m as worried as hell.’

Certainly he looked worried.

Impulsively she put an arm round his neck.

‘Why, Douglas, why? Tell me about it, old man.’

‘Four walls, darling, and not a breath outside.’

Barbara nodded.

‘It’s just this,’ said Douglas. ‘Do you remember the last time in this room that we talked of someone who was left-handed?’

For a moment Barbara sat with wrinkled brow, then:

‘Yes, I do—of course I do. The writer of those postcards.’

Douglas nodded, and diving a hand into a pocket of his coat brought out a buff-coloured postcard with a scarlet margin.

‘I found this in the letter rack of the dead woman’s flat.’

Barbara was silent, then jumping to her feet, ran to John's writing table, and opening a drawer, took out the six postcards he had received during the week.

With the card Douglas had given her in one hand and the six in the other, she compared them and found they were exactly alike.

'What an extraordinary thing,' she said. She did not know why her voice wobbled as she spoke. Taking a grip on herself, she added, 'I daresay heaps of people use postcards like these.'

'Do you really believe that, Babs?'

'Even if they don't,' she exclaimed hotly, 'even if they don't, Douglas, it means nothing.'

'I'm not prepared to say that,' he answered, his eyes staring at the pattern of the carpet. 'But you must admit, Babs, it's something more than a coincidence.'

'What is?'

'Why—that John Marlay should be in the flat of a dead woman, who, during the week that preceded her death, had sent him one of those cards by the first post every morning.'

'Yes, it's odd, it's very odd,' she admitted. 'Perhaps, when he comes in, he'll tell us why he was there.'

'I think,' said Douglas, gravely, 'when he comes in it would be wiser to say nothing about it.' Once more he reached out for her hand. 'You don't think he was being blackmailed, do you?'

Barbara snatched away her hand.

'How dare you suggest that? What a rotten thing to say.'

'Oh, let's keep our heads,' he pleaded. 'I'm trying to piece things together. Didn't you say Lady Marlay had been behaving queerly lately?'

'I shall hate you in a minute,' said Barbara. 'Talk like this is so—so disloyal. And it's so ridiculous, Douglas. It isn't as though Uncle John had been long in the flat. It says in the paper that he went there with the lift-boy.'

'So he did.'

'Well, then,' said Barbara, triumphantly.

'What time did he leave this house last night?'

'Just before eight.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, I asked him the time in the hall.'

'And what time was he due to dine with old Smythe?'

'Eight, I expect.'

'I wish we could make certain of that,' said Douglas, rising and walking slowly up and down the room. He stopped beside the writing table. 'How stupid of me, of course, his engagement diary.'

He reached out for the little black book lying beside the blotter, but Barbara dragged at his sleeve.

‘No one’s allowed to touch that.’

Douglas Helder put her aside, and picking up the book opened it and ran a finger down the list of John’s engagements for the previous day.

‘Here we are!’ he said. ‘Dine Professor Smythe eight-thirty.’

Suddenly Barbara found that she was trembling.

‘It wouldn’t take five minutes to drive to Westminster,’ Douglas went on. ‘One could walk in ten.’ Responding to a sudden impulse, he took the sheet of engagements between his forefinger and thumb and with his other hand upon the book made as though to tear it out.

‘Douglas,’ she cried. ‘You can’t, you mustn’t.’

For a moment they looked at one another, and in the silence that followed he realized the futility of any such action.

‘Perhaps you’re right, darling,’ he said, and tossed the book back on the table. ‘I expect you’re right.’

With a shrug of his shoulders he moved across to the fireplace and looked into the fire.

‘Douglas, what are you thinking?’ Barbara demanded.

‘I was thinking,’ he answered, ‘that John Marlay’s the best friend a man or a woman is likely to find, but, by God, Babs, I’d hate to have him as an enemy.’

Barbara sank into a chair and sat with her chin resting in her hands.

‘You’re always imagining things,’ she said, ‘always making stories out of nothing. That’s the worst of you.’

‘But you can’t fail to see——’ he began.

‘I see that Uncle John arrived half an hour too early for his appointment. I know you’re trying to make me believe that perhaps he saw the woman before he went to Doctor Smythe’s.’

‘I’m not trying to make you believe anything.’

‘Yes you are, Douglas. But it would be very easy to prove that you were wrong about that.’

He looked round expectantly.

‘Eh! how do you make that out?’

‘Because it’s ten to one he was taken to Smythe’s flat in the lift. Uncle John’s no fonder of stairs than anyone else.’

The expression of hope on Douglas’s face died away.

‘He didn’t go up in the lift, Babs,’ he answered. ‘The night porter was ill and the lift-boy didn’t come on duty till ten o’clock.’

Barbara felt as if the ground was giving way beneath her feet.

‘Douglas,’ she whispered, ‘the police—no one suspects Uncle John?’

‘Good God, no, dear, of course not.’

‘Then shut up,’ she said, swiftly, ‘do you understand, shut up.’

As she spoke John Marlay, tired and white, and still wearing the dress suit he had put on the night before, came into the room.

CHAPTER V

John had not expected to find anyone in the consulting room. He was carrying Faith's bag which he had picked up at Deborah's flat. Seeing Douglas and Barbara, the hand in which it was held went swiftly behind his back.

The two were standing by the fireplace, and as John approached to greet them, unseen by either, he tossed the bag on to the sofa.

Always quick to sense an atmosphere, he had an immediate impression that his arrival had provided a source of uneasiness. Instinctively he knew that he had interrupted a talk they were having about himself. There was something rather forced in the enthusiasm of Barbara's greeting, a conscious impulsiveness unlike her natural self.

'You poor darling, you've had an awful time.'

'Pretty hectic,' he agreed, accepting her kiss and patting her shoulder. Then moving to his writing table, 'I'm sure I'm very grateful to you, Douglas.'

Douglas Helder stared uncomfortably at the ceiling.

'I'm tremendously sorry, sir,' he began. John cut him short.

'Sorry, good heavens! Why? I thought you were very moderate. Some of the other papers are quite facetious about my mistake—if it was a mistake. I've half a mind to write and tell them that I expressed no opinion other than that the facts of the case spoke for themselves.'

'I'd do that, sir,' said Douglas eagerly.

John shook his head.

'You can do it for me if you like,' said he. 'I'm too old to bother about justifying myself.'

He seated himself at the table and for a few minutes scanned the correspondence which Barbara had arranged for him.

'These all the letters?' he asked.

Barbara nodded.

'What! No blank postcards this morning?'

He spoke lightly as though the inquiry were the most natural in the world. But Barbara and Douglas, sensitive to anxiety, detected a slight hesitation and a touch of bravado in the question.

Without waiting for a reply, John stretched out his hand and rang the bell. While waiting for Childers, he took Deborah's postcards from the drawer.

'I think,' he said, 'we might presume that this joke is ended.'

Removing the cap from his fountain pen, he proceeded to make a note in his engagement diary, but the pen was dry and with unusual irritability, he threw it down and reached out for a bottle of ink. An idea occurred to him and turning, he addressed Douglas.

‘Here’s a thought for you. If the cork is a stiff one the bottle is held in the left hand and the cork is drawn out with the right hand—thus—’ He suited the action to the word. ‘The reverse of course, would apply to a person who was left-handed.’

‘There,’ said Barbara, triumphantly.

‘If I were on the point of taking my life,’ John proceeded, filling his pen from the ink bottle, ‘do you think I’d care a tinker’s cuss from which hand I took the poison? My dear boy, such a thought would never enter a suicide’s brain.’

‘There goes the police theory,’ said Barbara.

But Douglas Helder was not so easily convinced.

‘It’s sound enough in its way, sir,’ he agreed, ‘but you have forgotten, that the stopper of the poison bottle was nowhere to be found in the flat.’

John did not reply and Douglas went on.

‘Besides, could a little stopper like that offer any difficulty?’

‘I merely threw it out as a suggestion,’ John replied. ‘If it’s any good to you, you can make use of it.’

Childers came in.

‘You rang, sir.’

‘Yes,’ said John, and taking the postcards he gave them to Childers. ‘Shove these in the fire, will you?’

‘Very good, sir.’

His eye fell on the cardboard box which Barbara had put on his table.

‘What’s this, Childers?’

‘Miss Barbara put it there, Sir John.’

‘Barbara dear—my birthday, of course,’ said John. ‘How sweet of you to have remembered.’

Barbara came to him and put an arm through one of his.

‘With many happy returns,’ she said.

‘All right, Childers, there’s nothing further for the moment,’ said John, opening the cardboard box and removing the tissue paper.

Childers didn’t move.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir John, but Miss——’

‘Have a heart, Childers,’ said John and held up the ties at arm’s length. ‘Ties—and not presentation ties, but wearable ties.’ He kissed Barbara’s cheek. ‘Lovely, my dear.’

For some obscure reason she clung to him tightly.

'I'm so fond of you,' she said.

'I was about to say, Sir John, that Miss Marlay is in the waiting room,' said Childers.

Barbara released her hold.

'What? Aunt Florence?'

'Yes, miss.'

'Here's a bad start of the day!' said John.

'She particularly asked to see you, Sir John,' Childers persisted. 'That is why she came so early.'

'What does she want?' Barbara inquired.

'My birthday, of course,' said John. 'Any signs of a parcel, Childers?'

'I didn't see a parcel.'

'No parcel, no interview,' said John.

'She told me she was very worried about the mistress,' said Childers.

A shade of doubt came into John's eyes.

'All right, Childers, bring her up,' he said. Then, with an effort to appear at ease. 'So they couldn't find the cork, eh?'

'No,' Douglas replied. 'They ransacked the place for it.'

John held up a tie to the light.

'Now that's a tasteful maroon, say what you will.'

A minute later Florence Marlay flounced into the room. It was evident that Florence was at the top of her form. She had emphasised the intrusive character of her features by wearing a wedge-shaped hat like the ram of a destroyer. Having secured an interview, she occupied the room as effectively as a victorious army, the whole atmosphere reverberating with her personality.

'So, John, I've caught you at last, have I?' she declared.

His reply, 'I was never actually in flight, Florence,' impressed her as being in bad taste. Nor could she understand the rider, 'Many happy returns, my dear.'

'It's not my birthday,' she announced, crisply.

'No, it's mine,' said John and introduced Douglas Helder. But beneath his humorous air, he was desperately anxious to hear the reason for her visit.

'The way your Uncle neglects me, Barbara, is shocking and disgraceful,' said she.

'Uncle John hasn't time to see people,' Barbara replied.

'And consequently he fails to see what is beneath his very nose,' she said. 'I came here this morning because I'm worried to death about Faith. The child is knocking herself to pieces. I told her so the other day and I repeat it to you now.'

‘We know she isn’t very well, Aunt Florence,’ Barbara began, but Florence Marlay did not allow her to complete the sentence.

‘Not well; her mind is all over the place. For the wife of a doctor to be allowed to get into that state is enough to wreck his practice.’

‘Aunt Florence,’ said Barbara colouring angrily, but John waved her to be quiet.

‘Not too loyal, Barbara darling,’ he begged, ‘it’s so boring. I’d like to hear what’s given Florence this idea about Faith.’

‘Her nerves are in shreds,’ the indefatigable lady continued. ‘She is unable to concentrate—unable to listen intelligently. Last night I told her an absorbing story about friends of mine who had had trouble with their servants and I don’t believe it left the slightest impression.’

The relief John felt on hearing the cause of Florence’s anxiety found expression in a laugh.

He had forgotten that Faith had promised to spend the evening with Florence and on being reminded, dread had possessed his mind that she had given herself away. It had not seemed to him possible that, having taken the life of a fellow creature, Faith could have behaved naturally at his sister’s house. That she had succeeded in keeping her secret was proof that no man ever knows what woman will do in any given set of circumstances.

‘All she talked of,’ Florence went on, ‘was the loss of a vanity bag—a trivial thing that could easily have been replaced.’

With an effort John wrenched himself away from his own thoughts and replied:

‘Wait a bit, Florence, I’d given Faith rather a large cheque which may have been in the bag.’

‘I don’t recall hearing her say so.’

‘Perhaps you weren’t listening.’

But Florence Marlay waved the suggestion aside.

‘It’s true I have very little patience with carelessness,’ she said. ‘In my own house I know to a hair where everything has been put.’

‘Bag?’ said Douglas Helder. ‘Would this be it?’

He picked up Faith’s bag from the sofa and brought it to the table.

With a smile of satisfaction John remarked,

‘Then apparently she didn’t lose it after all.’

‘There you are!’ Florence exclaimed. ‘It proves what I said about her mind being all over the place. She assured me that she brought it with her.’

‘One can make a mistake, Aunt Florence,’ said Barbara.

‘Not that kind of a mistake,’ was the reply.

It was then an idea flashed into John’s mind to turn his sister’s visit to account. He knew very well that her boasted efficiency was based on a

profound belief in herself.

‘I challenge you,’ he said. ‘I bet I could ask half a dozen questions about things you see every day and you won’t be able to answer one of them.’

‘I never heard anything so ridiculous,’ said Florence.

But he was not prepared to let her escape so easily.

‘How many steps are there to your front door?’ he demanded. ‘Where’s the nearest lamp post, left or right of your house? What did you have for breakfast yesterday?’ But to none of these questions was she able to give an answer, and without allowing her time for invention or evasion, he forced the final point in his interrogation. ‘I doubt if you can even remember the time that Faith called on you last night.’

‘Of course I can.’

‘Well?’

‘It was er——’ she hesitated. ‘The time was—er——’

‘Seven fifteen?’ said John. ‘Half past seven? Quarter to eight then? Come, come! my dear, eight o’clock, Florence? or was it eight-fifteen?’

He inflected the last suggestion temptingly.

‘Yes, it was,’ she said.

‘What makes you so sure?’

Once committed, Florence was determined to supply undeniable proof of accuracy.

‘Because I remember hearing the clock strike as I went to let her in.’

‘Let her in?’ said John. ‘Were there no servants?’

‘Yes—er no—there were, but they were out.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘My dear John, I’m not a fool,’ she replied. ‘I remember distinctly opening the door to Faith at eight-fifteen.’

Having once persuaded Florence finally to commit herself, John was confident she would never depart by one hair’s breadth from what she had declared. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of content.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I did you a grave injustice, Florence. You must forgive me.’

Medical evidence had proved that the murder took place between 9 and 9.30 P.M. He had secured from Florence as perfect an alibi for Faith as could be desired. He was congratulating himself on the success of this achievement when the consulting room door opened and Faith came in.

Seeing Florence, Faith withdrew a half-step, bit her lip, and forced a smile. She had not seen the papers and was not aware of the tragedy that had taken place in Beaufort Hall Court. But she was aware that John knew the truth, and on hearing that he was in the house she had put on a flimsy wrap

and hastened downstairs in the hope of a few minutes alone with him before his work began.

The platinum and onyx card-case she had bought at Asprey's was in the pocket of her wrap.

It was dreadful, dreadful to find all these people in the room, when with all her soul she wanted to be alone with John.

Florence's clattering inquiry after her health jarred her nerves desperately.

'I'm all right,' she said, 'quite all right.' Moving to John's side she put out a hand to him.

Never, never in all her life had she loved him better than when his fingers closed over her hand and held it tight.

'I wanted to catch you before your first patient,' she said. 'That's why I didn't stop to dress properly.'

'And here's the naughty bag you were so troubled about,' said Florence crisply.

Faith started and a look of perplexity wrinkled her forehead.

'Where was it?' she stammered.

Barbara told her that it had been lying on the sofa.

Faith shook her head and started to speak but was checked by the tightening pressure of John's hand.

'I think you must have left it there when I gave you the cheque last night,' he said. Then, to save her the confusion of replying, 'Florence has been giving me hell about you.'

'About me?' she answered, but her thoughts were centred on the mystery of how that bag which she had left in Deborah's flat could be lying on John's writing table.

'My neglect of you,' he said.

'And was I not justified?' demanded Florence. 'I insist upon your coming away with me to Sunningdale to-morrow. What you want is the society of a sensible and healthy-minded woman.'

Faith gave a wan smile.

'Babs, darling, take Florence along to your room,' she said. 'I'll join you presently. Please, Florence.'

With the greatest reluctance Florence Marlay rose from the chair in which she had enthroned herself.

'I shall refuse to take "no" for an answer,' said she, then turning to John, 'and it will be useless for you to try and impose your will against mine.'

There was something whimsical in his expression as he replied:

'Would I attempt to, Florence?'

'Eight-fifteen,' she rapped out emphatically.

‘What’s that?’ Faith asked.

‘The time you called on me last night.’

‘It was much later than that,’ said Faith. ‘I’m sure of it.’

But Florence would hear no denial, and had it not been for the prompt action of Barbara in taking her arm and leading her from the room, a vigorous argument would have arisen.

Douglas Helder followed them out, pausing at the door to ask if he might send in John’s theory about the stopper.

‘Yes, by all means,’ John answered.

The door closed and he and Faith were alone.

BOOK SIX

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CHAPTER I

For a moment John was silent, and because of his inability to find any words he put an arm round Faith, and drawing down her head, kissed her tenderly—devotedly.

‘Oh, my dear—my dear,’ he muttered, ‘what are we going to say to one another?’

‘You know, John?’ she answered.

‘I know,’ he nodded, ‘and in a way I suppose I understand, but the pity of it, oh, my dear, the pity of it.’

They were silent for a moment clinging to each other.

‘It’s your birthday,’ she said. ‘I haven’t forgotten your birthday. Whatever you may have to say to me, John, whatever you feel—let me start the day like—like this.’

He felt a small hard object thrust into his palm. Faith released her hold, and standing back from the table, watched him unfold the tissue paper in which her gift was wrapped. Presently it lay in his palm—the onyx and platinum card-case. His whole body became rigid.

‘Are you pleased?’ she asked.

‘Platinum and onyx card-case,’ he said huskily—then—‘Where did you get this, Faith?’

‘From Asprey’s.’

‘Asprey’s?’ he repeated. ‘They know you there?’

‘Of course.’

He was silent, so silent that she heard the tick-tick of the clock upon the mantelpiece. At last:

‘This is the end,’ he said.

‘The end? I don’t understand,’ she faltered.

She moved towards him but he scarcely noticed her. He was standing erect with his fists pressed against his forehead.

‘Hang on a moment, Faith, just a moment. Let’s face it.’

‘Face what?’

Her eyes looking into his were the most innocent eyes he had ever seen, and believing what he believed he felt there was something wicked, damnably wicked in their innocence.

Turning away he picked up the newspaper Barbara had been reading and put it in her hand.

‘Why have you given me this?’ she asked.

‘Read there,’ he said, and pointed.

Faith read in silence. Then a terrified cry cracked in her throat and the paper fluttered to the floor.

‘You, you,’ she said and shrank from him against the arm of the sofa.

‘I thought I had covered every trace and I left that bill, the most damning evidence of all.’

Faith buried her face in her hands.

‘Oh, John, you did it.’

‘What else could I do?’ he answered. ‘I’d no choice and I made a mess of it, Faith. My dear, why couldn’t you have trusted me? Yes, I know you were fighting on my side, fighting for me and you scattered the contents of your bag all over the floor of that woman’s flat like a signature. Here, stay here for a moment.’

He went quickly from the room, and leaning over the well of the staircase called:

‘Childers, I’ll see no one until I ring, you understand? I’m not to be disturbed.’

He returned to the consulting room and closed the door. Faith had sunk into the sofa and was sitting there with her eyes staring out before her—eyes filled with horror.

‘We must keep our heads,’ said John, ‘we mustn’t get the funks. Let’s try and reason out what the police will do.’

But Faith was long past reasoning. Her whole soul was racked with the tormenting knowledge that for her sake John had killed Deborah Kane and that, through her, his guilt would be discovered. In trying to protect his reputation she had destroyed him utterly.

He was talking on and on with that firm clear voice of his, but she was unconscious of what he was saying.

‘The police will go to Asprey’s directly they open. They’ll find out who bought the card-case—that’s inevitable. Then they’ll apply for a warrant, I suppose, and come here. Florence will swear that you were in her house at eight-fifteen. That’s a tremendous card in our favour.’ An idea struck him and he put a hand on Faith’s shoulder. ‘Did you pay for the card-case? Was that a receipt or a bill? It was a bill, wasn’t it?’

He had to repeat the question before she answered.

‘I owe for it. I hadn’t any money.’

‘Good!’ he exclaimed. ‘Then I shall be able to say that you gave the bill to me—yes, and that it fell from my pocket while I was examining the body. It’s not unusual for a man to pay for his own presents. If they accept that theory, you might be kept out of it altogether.’ He lifted a clenched hand to his head. ‘If anything happened to you, my dear, I should go mad, I should go mad.’ With an effort, he forced his mind back to the present emergency.

‘I threatened to take that woman’s life but nobody knows that, nobody heard.’

‘I heard,’ said Faith. ‘I was there in the other room—when you—threatened.’

John sank to the sofa by her side, and putting his arm about her held her tightly.

‘Oh, my dear!’ he said, ‘then it was I who prompted you.’

She looked at him bewildered.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, ‘nothing matters. It’s all on the knees of the gods now, Faith. With a little care they need never find out you went to the flat. With luck, even the part I played may remain a mystery. There’s not enough evidence to convict anyone, that I’ll swear. Suspicion may fall on me, but not the actual guilt. They’d want a motive to prove guilt, and thank God you took away the evidence.’

She said nothing and a new fear assailed him.

‘The letters, Faith, you found the letters in her table drawer, didn’t you?’

Faith was staring at him in bewilderment.

‘I have no letters,’ she said.

‘Of course not, you burned them,’ said he.

She shook her head and repeated.

‘I have no letters.’

‘Darling, my darling,’ he repeated, ‘everything depends on those letters being destroyed. Now take your mind back, if not for your sake then for mine. Let me help you.’ But Faith’s eyes were blank. ‘You must have burned them,’ he said, and then as he could wring no answer from her, ‘Let’s leave that for a moment and come to the poison, Faith. You took the poison from my laboratory—a small bottle of prussic acid that was in the cupboard.’

‘Yes,’ she cried, ‘to kill myself, and I wish I had, I wish to God I had.’

‘Faith, Faith, don’t say that.’

But Faith had found her voice and was giving vent to the whole torrent of emotions that had been pent up in her for the past week.

‘I should have killed myself, but he took it from me, he took the poison away from me.’

‘He! Who?’

‘I told him what I meant to do if ever you found out about us and he said, “Suicide is such a silly argument.”’

John’s brows straightened.

‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded, fearing that her mind was unhinged, ‘Who said this to you?’

‘Philip,’ she answered, ‘Philip Voaze. He found the prussic acid in my bag.’ She turned and threw out a hand with a despairing gesture, ‘but I never thought he would give it to you.’

John seized her hand and held it fast.

‘Philip Voaze gave nothing to me. I never knew the bottle had gone from the cupboard in the laboratory until I saw it in that woman’s flat. For God’s sake, Faith, why can’t you tell me the truth?’

But Faith had risen with her hands pressed to her breast and her eyes wide open.

‘John!’ she cried, ‘don’t you see? Philip!’

He, too, rose and taking her by the shoulders stared into her eyes and read the meaning in them.

‘Voaze did it.’ Then with an ecstasy of relief that robbed every nerve and muscle in his body of its strength—‘And I believed—and you believed—Oh, Faith, my sweet, my lovely one, forgive me, forgive me.’

With arms about each other, cheek to cheek, they stood in a rocking embrace. With the relief which sprang from the knowledge of each other’s innocence, all their fears, alarms, and difficulties faded to insignificance. At last John put her gently from him and crossing to his table, touched the bell. To Childers who answered it, he said,

‘I made an appointment last night with a Mr. Julian Ackroyd. I think it’s unlikely he will keep the appointment. I want you to ring up the Hotel—’ but without allowing him to finish, Childers said:

‘Mr. Ackroyd is here, Sir John, he is waiting.’

John’s eyes sought Faith’s.

‘Show him up,’ he said.

Childers hesitated.

‘At once.’

‘Very good, Sir John, I was wondering if you had forgotten you were still in evening dress.’

‘Show him up,’ John repeated.

CHAPTER II

The signature of death was scrawled on the face of Philip Voaze, as with uncertain steps he entered the consulting room. He had availed himself of the offer of Childers' arm to mount the stairs, but, save for the support of a stick, he walked into the room unaided.

The hollows of his eyes were purple black. High up on his cheek bones were two small patches of pink, in strange contrast to the parchment whiteness of his skin. His clothing and his linen were exquisitely correct and, as ever, the cynical, whimsical smile hovered around the corners of his mouth.

John Marlay offered no word of greeting and Philip Voaze waited for Childers to close the door before inclining his head in a slow, ironical bow.

'I have been waiting nearly ten minutes,' he said, 'Indeed, I had almost made up my mind to abandon any idea of this interview. I thought perhaps—' he paused—'your activity last night had interfered with your professional routine.'

John said nothing. Philip's smile increased as his eyes rested upon Faith.

'It's pleasant to find the house of Marlay presenting such a united front,' said he.

Until this moment John had been marvelling that this man was still alive.

'You won't mind Faith being present at this interview?' he asked.

'Mind?' said Philip with a deprecating gesture. 'It has never been my habit to object to feminine company.' A sudden flash of madness appeared in his eyes. 'When such an eventuality has arisen, I have taken steps to remove the cause for that objection.' He pointed at a chair with his cane. 'With your permission?' And seated himself. 'Really, Faith,' he went on, 'this husband of yours is a marvel. Since sentencing me to death, he has protected my life at every turn.'

'Isn't that dangerously like a confession?' said John.

Philip Voaze shrugged his shoulders.

'You have average intelligence, I presume. By now you will have suspected each other—discovered your mistake and divined who was responsible for removing the cause of your anxiety.'

Suddenly Faith cried out:

'And that was the way you kept your promise.'

Philip Voaze leaned a little towards her and traced the pattern of the carpet with the ferrule of his cane.

'Would it please you to think so, Faith—to assume that as an atonement for past misdemeanours, I performed that service in your honour?'

‘You must have been mad,’ she muttered, ‘mad, Philip.’

Vanity would not allow him to accept such an excuse.

‘On the contrary,’ he said, ‘I was sane; drunk, if you like, but sane.’

‘Drunk?’ John repeated.

‘Yes, I went because I was drunk, drunk with wine and self-pity. I went to the only woman who was willing to comfort me and who had not forgotten me.’

He spoke the word ‘forgotten’ with indignation and resentment.

‘And killed her?’ said John.

‘And killed her,’ Philip Voaze repeated softly. ‘A man under sentence of death has certain privileges. The woman interfered with my sense of refinement.’ Then, marking the turn of John’s head. ‘That surprises you, Marlay?’

‘Not altogether,’ was the reply.

‘I am glad. It would be unbecoming in your case to sit in judgment. An hour beforehand you threatened her life because she interfered with your personal advancement and peace of mind. You appointed yourself God’s executioner with a clear conscience. Marlay, would you deprive me of equal rights? No law could prevent her assault against your security, as no law could prevent her vulgarity racking my sense of refinement to the point of murder. You may say I had the advantage of you inasmuch as I could do what I liked, without fear of unpleasant consequences. Well, I did what I liked and I have no regrets.’ Once more he looked at Faith. ‘At least I have removed your cause for forgetting me.’

She took no notice. Feeling in his pocket, Philip Voaze produced a well-stuffed envelope and held it out to John;

‘Your fee, Marlay.’

John Marlay did not even look at the extended hand.

‘Perhaps Faith is not so squeamish,’ said Philip, and breaking the seal, took from the envelope a packet of letters and made a fan of them in his hand.

With a little sound, half a sob, half a cry, Faith moved swiftly across the room and took them—not knowing what to say. At last——

‘My love letters,’ she whispered, and shook her head and was silent again.

‘All that is left of a double tragedy,’ said Philip Voaze. ‘It’s curious to reflect what great issues arise from little causes.’

The odour of the scent in her hair drifted to his nostrils and half closing his eyes Philip Voaze turned away his head.

It was natural that Faith should have mistaken this action for sentiment.

‘So it was for my sake you did this? It was for my sake you did this dreadful thing?’

The quiver in her voice put a spell on him and for a moment he did not reply. Then, turning slowly to look at her his eyes fell upon John Marlay, a still, unemotional figure, a few feet away, watching and silent.

Even had Philip known the true motive which had driven him to kill Deborah Kane he could not have told it before this other man. It was as a cynic, a *flaneur* he replied:

‘Please don’t pin a heart to my sleeve, Faith. It’s true I was reading your letters when I killed her,’ he leaned back in his chair and smiled; ‘but I would have done just the same for a poem of Keats.’

Faith shrank back as in the old days she had shrunk from that cynical twist, which, with Philip Voaze, had ever stood like a sentry at the gates of sentiment. With a feeble gesture she offered the letters to John. But he only shook his head saying:

‘We don’t want another tragedy, my dear.’

Faith looked at him and understood the love and the jealousy which inspired his words. Never taking her eyes from his face she tore the letters, once, twice and again. Then, turning, walked slowly towards the door.

Philip Voaze knew that when the door closed she would have passed out of his life for ever; and all he had known of sweetness, gentleness, and purity would be lost to him. With a sudden emotion that even his cynicism could not control, he called out:

‘Faith, Faith! Would you have been glad if I had done this for your sake?’

Without turning she answered,

‘I thank God you didn’t.’

She closed the door silently after her. Philip’s chin sunk upon his breast, and for a while there was silence between the two men. He lifted his head with a start when John’s hand fell gently upon his shoulder.

‘Why did you do it?’ said John.

‘How can I say?’ he answered. ‘Why have I ever done anything? An impulse, I suppose. What’s it matter?’ He stopped, and a twist of pain came into his features. ‘Women hit hard, Marlay, even the gentlest of them.’

‘They defend themselves,’ John answered. ‘Do you wonder?’

Philip Voaze shrugged his shoulders.

‘Likely enough you’re right. That’s the price men of my calibre must pay for our easy victories. I’m not given to regrets, but I told Faith only yesterday I would give a great deal to win from her one of those old looks of admiration, and that was the truth. I was always on my knees to Faith. Even though I treated her as I treated the rest, I was on my knees.’

‘You chose the right place,’ said John. But there was no unkindness in his voice.

It was, perhaps, the lack of sting that fired a sudden resentment in Philip, a sense of being patronized.

‘Some men climb further upon their knees than others upon their feet,’ he said.

John Marlay made no reply. He perfectly understood what had inspired that retort. The challenge in Philip’s eyes resolved into an expression that was almost shamefaced.

‘I’m sorry, but I was always a cad,’ said he.

John put out a hand and took him by the wrist, his fingers pressing over the pulse. The barometer of Philip Voaze’s life had fallen very low.

‘Are you going abroad?’ John asked.

‘At once,’ was the answer.

John shook his head.

‘I shouldn’t cross the channel to-day if I were you.’

‘Looking for a safety valve?’

‘My dear fellow!’ said John, simply.

Philip nodded.

‘That was unworthy, too, wasn’t it? I think I could trust you not to squeal.’

‘You’re in no danger from me,’ said John. ‘I shan’t give you away.’

Philip laughed,

‘Marlay, the Spartan,’ he said. ‘That old sobriquet of the ‘varsity days. We used to be able to judge men when we were youngsters.’

For the first time John answered with a touch of resentment in his voice.

‘Don’t mistake my silence for cricket, Voaze. It’s common sense and jealousy. How could I give you away without the truth coming to light about myself and Faith?’

Philip nodded.

‘I see your point. Poor little Faith, such a muddler. You know, Marlay, if I thought it was—necessary, I’d give her the opportunity to divorce me, but you, as a doctor, will have realized that it isn’t necessary. Nature can be relied upon to give Faith her freedom more discreetly.’

John did not deny the implication of these words. He said:

‘I wonder if you’ve any idea how much I love that woman and how damnably jealous I am of you.’

CHAPTER III

There was no precedent for Childers to enter the consulting room when a patient was present without having previously been rung for.

His sudden appearance, unsummoned, and with every evidence of agitation was, therefore, remarkable. Without preamble, he hurried down to the table with the words:

‘A Police-Inspector Haynes is here.’

‘I’ve a patient,’ said John. ‘Tell the inspector he must wait.’

Before he had finished speaking, Haynes, accompanied by a detective sergeant in plain clothes, entered the room.

‘What the devil is the meaning of this?’ John demanded.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir John, but I must exercise the privilege of the law,’ was the uncompromising answer.

With the announcement that the police were in the house, Philip Voaze half rose in his chair, but at the entrance of the inspector he sank back into it again. His face, if possible, was a shade whiter, but in his eyes a light of eagerness began to dance, and turning his head he watched Marlay as a man in a theatre watches a character in a moment of supreme crisis.

‘I am engaged, inspector,’ said John.

Inspector Haynes made no movement to retire.

‘My duty must take precedence,’ he said, and moving to where Philip Voaze was sitting, added:

‘Would you be good enough to leave us, sir?’

Philip Voaze was charmed at the steadiness of his voice when he replied.

‘I’ve no intention of doing so. I have an appointment with Sir John Marlay.’

‘He may be able to see you later,’ said Haynes. ‘Come along, sir, please.’

John Marlay’s indignation was genuine.

‘I shan’t forget this, Inspector Haynes.’

The threat did not disturb the officer’s peace of mind one whit.

‘I’m waiting, sir,’ he repeated to Philip.

Philip Voaze rose to his feet and stood by the table. He was, at that moment, conscious of an overpowering curiosity as to his own reactions in the presence of a danger which he had never experienced before.

He did not doubt John’s promise of five minutes before, not to give him away; but with the slender tenure he had upon life, he was by no means certain of his own wish to seize this opportunity to escape. An impulse, half

quixotic, half egotistical, urged him to remain and shoulder the blame or credit for the whole affair.

Whatever other charge could be made against him, he was no coward. He had said he would do a great deal to win one of those old looks of admiration from Faith's eyes, and in saying so had spoken the truth. A woman's admiration and gratitude is fair company for a man to bear with him on his journey to the grave.

'Is it your wish that I should go, Sir John?' he asked.

John's unhesitating 'yes' with its guarantee of protection, persuaded him to burn his boats.

'One moment, inspector,' he said, and moving to John's side asked in a low voice:

'How long have I got?'

Then as John refused to answer:

'That tells me what I want to know. Thank God for it.'

His forefinger and thumb went to his waistcoat pocket and came out holding a small glass stopper. With a twisted smile he offered it to the inspector, saying:

'Is this of any use to you? I read in the papers that you spent some time last night searching for it.'

Inspector Haynes was not subject to surprise but his hands trembled as he took the stopper from Philip Voaze, extracted from his pocket the poison bottle which had been taken from Deborah's flat and found that the stopper fitted exactly.

'Who are you?' he demanded, slowly. It was John who answered the question.

'This gentleman is Mr. Julian Ackroyd.'

Philip shook his head and waved a forefinger negatively.

'I misinformed you, Marlay,' he said. 'I have no further wish to conceal my identity. My name is Philip Voaze, inspector.'

Haynes's heavy brows came down straight as a lance.

'Voaze! Letters written by a man of that name were found in the dead woman's flat last night, scores of letters.'

Philip could not resist smiling at John.

'I daresay. She had a tiresome habit of keeping letters.'

The door was thrown open and Faith, followed by Douglas Helder, came in. Faith was white and trembling—and on seeing the police officers her eyes opened wide in terror.

'Who is this lady?' Haynes demanded.

'My wife,' said John.

Haynes gave a nod of satisfaction.

‘Good. I was intending to see you, Lady Marlay, and you too, Mr. Helder.’

‘Faith dear, sit down, it’s quite all right,’ said John encouragingly, ‘some little misunderstanding, that’s all.’

But the expression on the inspector’s face did not encourage any such views.

‘What is this man doing in your house, Sir John?’ he demanded.

‘He came to consult me.’

‘Consult you about what?’

‘As a doctor, I oppose your right to ask questions regarding my patients.’

Haynes exchanged a nod with his subordinate who had disposed himself with his back to the door.

‘Very good, sir,’ said he. ‘Then here’s a question that has nothing to do with your patients. Last night a bill for a platinum and onyx card-case was found in the dead woman’s flat. Do you know anything of such a case?’

Sick with apprehension, Faith heard John answer.

‘Of course I do; here it is.’ He took the card-case from his pocket and placed it on the table.

This unhesitating admission was a surprise to Haynes.

‘You are aware that this was purchased by Lady Marlay?’ he asked.

‘Perfectly aware,’ said John, steadily.

‘Then doesn’t that look as if Lady Marlay was also in the flat, Sir John?’

He swivelled round and addressed his next remark to Faith.

‘Medical evidence proves that the woman’s death occurred at nine o’clock, or a little later. I should like to know where you were at nine o’clock last night.’

Faith half opened her mouth but without giving her a chance to reply, John said quickly.

‘That’s easily settled. Douglas, ask Florence to come here, will you?’

Douglas was gone in a flash.

‘Florence, Florence who?’ said the inspector.

‘My sister, Miss Florence Marlay.’

Unobtrusively Philip Voaze drifted by the chair on which Faith, shivering in every limb, was sitting.

‘Please leave this to us,’ he whispered.

Florence, followed by Douglas Helder, came into the room.

‘Florence,’ said John, ‘this is Inspector Haynes. He wants to know where Faith was at nine o’clock last night.’

‘But what right has the man to ask any such question?’ Florence demanded.

‘Never mind my right, Miss Marlay,’ said Haynes, ‘but please to answer it.’

‘She was at my house,’ said Florence.

‘Yours, Madam?’

‘And she arrived at eight-fifteen,’ Florence added crisply.

‘At eight-fifteen?’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, ‘and I shall go on saying that until I’m black in the face.’

Inspector Haynes was taken aback.

‘There’s no occasion for that, Madam,’ said he.

It was clearly evident that here was a witness whose testimony was unshakable.

‘But if Lady Marlay didn’t drop the bill, Sir John, who did?’

‘It must have fallen from my pocket when I was examining the body.’

‘Your pocket? But Lady Marlay bought the case.’

‘I bought it for his birthday,’ said Faith. ‘It’s his birthday to-day.’

‘If that is so, why was the bill in your pocket, Sir John?’ The inspector put the question with point. He was astonished at the ease displayed by John in replying.

‘It was a bill, not a receipt, inspector.’

‘What has that to do with it?’

John shrugged his shoulders.

‘You’re a lucky man if you don’t sometimes have to pay for your own birthday presents,’ he said.

It took Inspector Haynes a moment to appreciate the significance of this remark, but when it at last dawned upon him a slow smile spread over the lower half of his face.

‘I think that answer disposes of the bill,’ said he. ‘Then you maintain that it was a pure coincidence that you happened to be in the flat, Sir John?’

‘Obviously.’

Haynes fixed Douglas with gimlet eyes.

‘But it’s not so obvious why you were there, Mr. Helder. This woman rang you up?’

Douglas shook his head.

‘Not at all. She rang up my newspaper. If you doubt that you can easily verify what I say.’

A criminal investigator, however anxious he may be that justice and nothing but justice shall be done, is susceptible to chagrin when one by one the links of the chain he has forged snap under the strain of interrogation. Pointing at Philip Voaze, Haynes turned again to Marlay.

‘How long have you known this man?’

‘He came to me as a patient yesterday.’

‘Were you strangers until then?’

‘Practically, I met him once up at Cambridge, many years ago.’

‘Did you know of his connection with the deceased woman?’

John hesitated.

‘Anything I may know of him was told me in my consulting room and as such is not mine to repeat.’

Once more the inspector’s tone became threatening.

‘Silence may place you under suspicion, Sir John.’

‘I must risk that.’

John Marlay’s attitude was profoundly uncompromising and, as a student of psychology, Haynes realized that there was little likelihood of extracting information from him that he was reluctant to supply.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘It’s your own affair, if you choose to obstruct me in the exercise of my duty. And now for you, Mr. Voaze.’

‘I was wondering how much longer I was to be excluded from this conversation,’ said Philip. He shed a charming smile on Faith then his eyes sought Marlay’s. ‘I wouldn’t allow professional zeal to involve you in any personal danger. It’s foolish.’

Haynes produced the glass stopper and held it out in an open hand.

‘Where did this come from?’

‘That!’ Philip replied. ‘Haven’t you already divined? It belonged to a bottle of prussic acid that was emptied into the lady’s glass.’

The inspector’s eyes narrowed.

‘You admit it?’ he said swiftly.

‘Why not?’ Philip replied and heard a slow sigh of relief escape from Faith.

Something in the sound aroused in him a sudden malicious instinct and leaning forward, he added:

‘But don’t be too ready to believe all you hear, inspector. The bill for that card-case, for example, might have been dropped by Sir John on his *first* visit to the flat.’

He saw Faith spring to her feet with a hand pressed tightly to her mouth. John did not move but there came into his eyes an expression of loathing and disgust.

‘First visit! What do you mean by first visit?’

The inspector’s tone was eager and imperative.

Philip Voaze held up his hand in a deprecating gesture.

‘Have I said something indiscreet? Isn’t it generally known that he paid two visits to the flat? Ah! I see, of course, yes. He could hardly have mentioned that without a breach of professional etiquette.’

Haynes turned abruptly to John.

‘Is this true?’ he demanded. ‘Were you at the flat before you found the body?’

‘Yes,’ was the unhesitating reply.

From Faith came a stifled moan.

‘For what purpose, Sir John?’

‘I refuse to say.’

In the silence that followed, the air was electrical—charged with suspense and suspicion. Only one person seemed at ease, Philip Voaze, and he leaned back on the sofa, a smile playing about his mouth and the corners of his eyes.

‘He went to warn the woman,’ he said at last.

‘Warn her of what?’

Philip tapped his teeth with a finger nail.

‘Of her danger, I suppose.’

‘Her danger from whom?’ the inspector insisted.

Never in his life had Philip enjoyed holding so many people’s emotions in suspense. As an epicure in sensations he savoured the power it gave him to its fullest extent. Inspector Haynes put the question again.

‘Danger from whom?’

But Philip was watching Faith trembling on the brink of hysteria. Not until he realized that in another second, the last of her resistance would be broken down did he answer in the most engaging manner.

‘Danger from me, inspector. Whom else?’

And Faith, who a moment before was tall with apprehension seemed to shrink small with relief.

Philip Voaze, the *flaneur*, had played upon a woman’s nerves for the last time. Dropping his head, he began to speak very rapidly.

‘I called on Sir John Marlay, professionally, at six last night, when he made the rather startling announcement that I was going to die. On hearing that sentence, I determined to clear up one or two old accounts.’

Haynes interrupted him.

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because in your thick-headed way, you seem to be suspecting a number of people who are entirely above suspicion; and because a man with only a few days to live is outside the law. I gave Sir John Marlay some idea of my intentions, even mentioning the dead woman’s name and address which, I believe, he wrote on his blotting pad.’

‘It’s here,’ said Florence Marlay and pointed.

Inspector Haynes leaned over Florence Marlay’s shoulder and read,

‘Deborah Kane, forty-four, Beaufort Hall Court.’

‘He warned me against the danger of such a course,’ Philip went on, ‘but I’ve never listened to advice. Probably he guessed I should not when he paid that friendly visit to the lady to put her on her guard.’

His conceit was pathetic, for as he made this explanation, his eyes turned to Marlay in search of appreciation.

‘Then you confess to the murder?’ said Haynes. ‘I warn you, anything you say will be used in evidence.’

Philip Voaze gave a light laugh.

‘My dear inspector, let what I say be used as evidence *against me*. After all, I did it.’ A curious sense of pride stole over him as he made this confession.

‘And arranged things to look like a suicide, Mr. Voaze?’ said the inspector.

Philip nodded and flickered an eyelid at John.

‘Local colour,’ he said.

‘It seems strange, after taking all that trouble,’ said Inspector Haynes, ‘that you have given yourself away so completely now.’

‘It would be uncivil to disagree with you,’ Philip acknowledged, ‘but I suggest that rational motives seldom appeal to a capricious mind. The law may endeavour to rob me of my life, but I am still entitled to what I am pleased to call my sense of humour.’

Haynes nodded significantly at the door.

‘That’s all I want to know.’ Leaning forward he touched Philip on the shoulder. ‘Philip Voaze, I arrest you for the wilful murder of Deborah Kane. Come along, please.’

The sense of restraint put upon him by the touch of that official hand, for an instant, robbed Philip of his assurance. With an irritable gesture, he swept the hand aside and rose.

‘In my own time,’ he said. ‘I cannot bear to be interfered with, as the doctor, here, will understand.’

As he spoke he saw, with amazement, that Faith’s eyes were upon him with a look of something kinder than pity, almost of admiration, and in that moment there came to him an inspiration that here was an opportunity for the last and perhaps the one gracious flourish in his life.

‘So this is your wife, Marlay?’ he said, his eyes never for an instant leaving her face. ‘I congratulate you.’ Then holding out a hand to her — ‘May I?’

With a catch in her breath, Faith turned to John who nodded and with his consent and her own free will, she put both her hands into Philip’s extended palm. Bending his head, he brought them to his lips, and, for a moment, held them there. When he let them fall he did not raise his head, but stood staring

at the pattern on a carpet, which had become misty and vague. From a long way off, he heard Haynes give an order to the sergeant and was aware of rough hands passing up and down his clothing and tapping his pockets in search of concealed weapons.

It was strange that this formality aroused in John his first display of emotion.

‘Oh, God, is that necessary?’ he demanded.

‘I’m afraid it is, Sir John. We can’t afford to take risks in a case of this kind.’

The detective sergeant stood away and nodded reassuringly to his superior officer.

‘Quite all right, sir.’

Philip Voaze took three steps forward and his knees sagged beneath him. Douglas Helder and Haynes grasped him by the arms and prevented him falling. For a while he stood swaying and coughing, until the dullness cleared from his brain.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said to Douglas. ‘I think, if you would permit it, I should prefer your arm to the inspector’s. It looks better.’

‘Get him down to the taxi, Mr. Helder,’ said Haynes, who realized that here was a man too ill to provoke unnecessarily.

‘I commend your courtesy,’ said Philip, and saw for the first time Florence Marlay, standing a few feet away.

The habits of life do not readily expire, and with an expression at once whimsical, cynical, and captivating, he tapped his breast, and addressing her said:

‘For delivery to Bow street, marked fragile.’ Then, at the door, speaking over his shoulder—‘There will be no flowers, by request.’

Those who remained in the room, heard him laughing like a schoolboy as he descended the stairs.

Inspector Haynes watched his prisoner put into the taxi which was standing at the curb. Ordering the driver to wait, he returned to the consulting room.

‘If I might have a private word with you, Sir John,’ he said.

Florence Marlay had the tact to retire without waiting to be asked.

‘That’s a very ill man, Sir John,’ said the Inspector.

John Marlay was lost in his own thoughts. With difficulty he forced himself to reply:

‘You’ll never get him into court.’

‘It certainly looks that way to me,’ Haynes admitted. ‘Well, I must get his confession signed.’ He stood a moment scratching his chin with his

finger nail and glancing from John to Faith and back again, 'I don't suppose you want to be mixed up in this affair, sir?'

'It can hardly be avoided,' John replied.

But the inspector took a different view.

'In the case of an eminent man like yourself,' he began.

'You think so?' said John.

'I can't see why not. After all, your concern with the affair was purely professional.'

John said nothing.

'I'll talk it over with my chief and come and have a chat later on.'

'If you can do anything,' said John.

'Why not?' Haynes replied heartily.

He looked at Faith and thought how pale and ill she seemed to be. Obviously she would not want to be mixed up in a sordid affair of such a kind—a delicate, pretty creature like that. The chivalry of 'A' Division stirred with him.

'I reckon,' he said, 'we all aim at living our lives peaceably, without having 'em messed up by things and persons who have no concern with us.'

He was quite astonished at John's reply.

'There's a hell of a lot of truth in that.'

Inspector Haynes buttoned his coat briskly.

'Later on then sir.'

'I shall be here—and, Inspector——'

The officer turned at the door.

'Go easy with that poor beggar.'

'Leave it to me, sir,' said Haynes.

They shook hands.

Neither John nor Faith moved after the inspector went out. They heard the front door slam and the sound of the taxi moving down the street. John turned, then, and almost helplessly held out a hand to Faith—but her back was towards him, so she did not see the gesture.

With a movement of the shoulders he moved, like a tired man, to his writing table. After all, what was there that he could say to her? To take her in his arms at such a moment was cynical. She was not even his wife. He was not even the man who had brought about her salvation. If they were to find happiness in the future they would owe it to a blackguard, who had discovered the means to make himself unforgettable. A blackguard who, at the end, had proved himself a gentleman unafraid.

With one clenched hand resting on the table-top, John Marlay stared through the window into the future. He did not hear Faith move softly

towards him. Before she reached his side the door opened and Childers came in.

‘I thought I ought to remind you of that consultation at King George’s hospital this morning,’ he said.

John nodded.

‘I know. At noon, isn’t it? I must change and have a bath.’

‘Everything is ready for you upstairs, Sir John.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Will you want the car?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he answered, wishing that Childers would leave off asking him questions. ‘Of course.’ Then, ‘No, no, I’d forgotten, Fielding was up all night, wasn’t he? A taxi.’

‘Very good, Sir John.’

The door closed and once more he fell to staring at the pale winter sunlight on the roof of the opposite house. He did not look round as he felt Faith’s fingers creep into his hand. Slowly, slowly she lifted it until it was pressed tightly to her cheek, a cheek all wet with tears.

John Marlay closed his eyes and turning his head burrowed it in the crook of her warm, soft arm.

CHAPTER IV

‘How is it,’ said John Marlay, ‘how is it, my little Faith, that being with you is like being on an everlasting honeymoon, tell me that?’

‘But it is our honeymoon,’ she answered, ‘our first real honeymoon.’

He nodded and kissed the palm of her hand.

‘My sweet!’ he said, ‘Are you happy?’

‘Awfully, awfully happy.’

They edged closer to one another on the dust-coloured wall of age-old mud, their arms round each other’s waists like lovers.

Stretching before them was a field of emerald barley and beyond that the tawny horizon of the desert. The sun, a lump of old amber, was burying itself in the sand, its dying rays splashing with cinnamon the walls of the square-built oasis houses, which tier upon tier, rose up the jagged hillside like a village in Fairyland.

From a compound a hundred yards away came the roar and bubble of restless camels. Somewhere a piper was playing and a drum throbbed. Water from a hundred wells swilled out of goatskins into tiny reservoirs and ran clucking and trilling along channels down to the fields. The air trembled with the sharp music of squeaking well-pulleys.

Grave, bearded, wrapped in long white burnouses, the simple men of the oasis squatted in the market square, in open spaces and by the walls of the cemetery to watch the sun go down.

A quintette of dull-eyed Ouled Nail girls in coloured muslins, coin necklaces, with silk *mindens* upon their heads and jingling ornaments upon their ankles, paused to stare at the white man and woman who had no eyes for anything but each other. Someone called and, tittering like foolish birds, they scuttled away towards the narrow alleys of the Caspar.

As the sun rolled over the rim of the horizon, the voice of a priest rang out from a minaret calling the faithful to prayer. As if by magic, the chorus of the well-pulleys ceased its song and the white figures prostrated themselves, their foreheads resting upon the sand.

‘Allah Akbar,’ rang the voice. ‘There is one God.’

Faith, who had been told what the words meant, nodded, looked at John and whispered, ‘Love.’

Her eyes drifted to the little clusters of worshippers.

‘It makes one ashamed to sit here while they pray and do nothing.’ Her fingers slipped into his hand. ‘Why shouldn’t I pray too? If it’s only to say “Thank you.” Would Allah mind, do you think, John?’

‘I should think he’d be jolly glad, my sweet,’ he answered with a smile.

So Faith Marlay slipped from the wall and went down upon her knees and prayed.

Two Mozambites, their heads sunk, watched through meshed fingers this strange and improper sight. When the prayer was over, one said:

‘Are they so ignorant then, these English? Do they not know there is no place in Heaven for a woman and her prayers are wasted?’

But the other was dubious and shrugged his shoulders.

‘I have heard it said,’ he replied, ‘that a woman’s Heaven is in her own heart, and from the face of the white girl there, one might believe that this is a true saying.’

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

Punctuation has been changed silently to achieve consistency. An interpolated word, missing but needed for sense, is marked with { }. A word that is thought to have been inserted erroneously is marked with [].

[The end of *Interference* by Roland Pertwee]